

An Evaluation of the Impact of the Services and Programmes run by Let's Talk Reading

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Briefing Note: The Highlights

Let's Talk Reading: Transforming Lives Through Literacy

Let's Talk Reading (LTR) is a Ipswich-based charity with a bold mission: to eradicate low literacy across all age groups, particularly in disadvantaged communities. This independent evaluation reveals that LTR is not only achieving this mission; it is transforming lives, families, and communities through a holistic, relational, and deeply impactful approach to literacy.

LTR's strength lies in its lifespan model, supporting individuals from birth to adulthood, and its ability to meet people where they are, emotionally, socially, and geographically. Across all programmes, LTR fosters a love of reading, builds confidence, and removes barriers to access, creating a ripple effect that extends far beyond literacy alone.

Let's Talk Babies (LTB)

LTR's early intervention begins with *Let's Talk Babies*, a free, weekly parent-and-baby group for families in Ipswich's most deprived areas. These sessions combine story, rhyme, play, and peer support, gifting high-quality books monthly to build home libraries.

Key Impacts:

- Promotes early language development and school readiness.
- Builds parental confidence and wellbeing.
- Reduces isolation and fosters peer networks.
- Removes financial barriers to early literacy.

Parents describe the group as “a lifesaver,” with many attributing their child’s love of books and social confidence to LTB. The sessions also support mental health, routine, and connection during the often-isolating period of early parenthood.

Early Years Storytime Sessions

Delivered in 39 early years settings, these interactive sessions bring stories to life with props, songs, and shared reading. Mini-libraries and dual-language books are provided, and book packs are gifted throughout the year.

Key Impacts:

- Increases access to books, especially in English as an Additional Language (EAL) and low-income households.
- Supports language development and school readiness.
- Builds joy, belonging, and emotional connection through shared stories.
- Encourages family engagement and reading routines at home.

Practitioners report that LTR's support is “invaluable,” particularly when some children are more familiar with screens than books. The sessions reintroduce the joy of traditional literacy and help embed a reading culture in early years education.

Primary School Support

LTR works with Ipswich primary schools, offering book packs, library support, Irlen's screening, and targeted interventions. Through two case studies the depth and success of this work is demonstrated.

Key Impacts:

- Improved SATs results and Ofsted ratings (e.g., The Oaks rated “Outstanding”).
- Embedded reading cultures through classroom practice and curriculum integration.
- After-school interventions at Ranelagh led to measurable reading progress in 77% of pupils.
- Inclusive support for EAL, SEND, and FSM pupils.

LTR's long-term partnerships have transformed school environments and outcomes. Headteachers credit LTR with helping children become more proficient readers than their parents, a generational shift in literacy.

Adult Literacy – Let's Read Ipswich

This one-to-one coaching programme supports adults with low literacy through volunteer-led, relationship-based sessions. Using Shannon Trust manuals and flexible approaches, the programme empowers adults to read, navigate daily life, and support their families.

Key Impacts:

- Enables adults to read forms, signage, and medical instructions.
- Builds confidence, independence, and life skills.
- Supports parents in engaging with their children's education.
- Fosters trust, dignity, and personal growth.

Volunteers describe the work as “life-changing”, not just for readers, but for themselves. The programme has helped adults gain employment, citizenship, and self-belief, with ripple effects across families and communities.

Conclusion: A Quiet Force for Social Change

Let's Talk Reading is more than a literacy charity; it is a catalyst for community transformation. Its programmes are inclusive, relational, and deeply embedded in the lives of those it serves. From babies to adults, LTR is creating lasting change by:

- Tackling systemic inequalities.
- Promoting early and lifelong learning.
- Nurturing a love of reading.
- Building confidence, connection, and community.

Sustained investment and strategic development will be essential to deepen and extend this impact. LTR's work is not only valuable; it is vital.

Key Findings – An Executive Summary

Overview of Let's Talk Reading (LTR)

- LTR is a literacy-focused charity based in Ipswich, Suffolk
- LTR has demonstrated a profound and multifaceted impact on literacy development across Ipswich – addressing the needs of children, families, schools and adult learners through a holistic, community-routed approach.
- At the heart of LTR success is its commitment to early intervention, and provision of structured and nurturing environments from infants through to adult learners.
- Its mission is to eradicate low literacy across all age groups, particularly in disadvantaged communities in Ipswich.
- It also aims to increase books in all homes, particularly the most disadvantaged homes, to enhance the home literacy environment.
- It aspires to not just enable the mechanics of reading ability, but to foster a love of reading from an early age.
- LTR takes a holistic approach to tackling the multifaceted issue of literacy – it does this through programmes of intervention and support which span from birth to adulthood, targeting early years, school-age children, and adults.
- LTR operates with key stakeholders in partnership with schools, early years settings, the local authority and community organisations.
- Across all programmes, LTR's strengths lie in its adaptability, inclusivity, and relational ethos.
- The organisation's ability to build trust, respond to local needs, and foster long-term partnerships is central to its effectiveness.
- Let's Talk Reading is relatively small in both its geographical focus of Ipswich, and financially, the work has been able to achieve depth in its approaches to respond effectively and proactively to the needs of the local communities it serves.
- LTR is creating lasting change in the lives of individuals and the fabric of the Ipswich community.
- Sustained investment and strategic expansion of its work will be essential to deepening and extending this impact in the years to come.

Let's Talk Babies (LTB)

- LTB provides free to attend weekly parent-and-baby sessions for babies aged 0–15 months, focused on stories, rhymes, sensory play, and socialisation.
- The groups are targeted at the most deprived wards of Ipswich in order to target the most in-need families.

- LTB represents LTR focus on early intervention, providing rich early years experiences which support early language development and ultimately school readiness. Free, high-quality age-appropriate books are gifted monthly to build home libraries, and support reading at home, removing the financial barriers to early literacy experiences and enhancing the home literacy environment
- Baby bank provides clothing and essentials to families in need.
- The sessions include structured activities, storytime, song time and input run by a facilitator, with a strong emphasis on daily reading and singing nursery rhymes.
- The sessions also include unstructured free play with provided toys, books and resources.
- The groups allow parents to interact, discuss, and build important social networks.

Key Impacts:

- Promotes early literacy and encourages reading routines at home.
- Enhances infant socialisation and emotional development.
- Builds parental confidence in supporting child development.
- Provides inclusive, welcoming environments.
- Further benefits are parental confidence, mental health, and peer support networks, developed through attending a supportive and collaborative group.
- Financial barriers to attendance are removed by a universal free provision of access to the groups, free books at home which enhances the home-literacy environment.

Challenges & Recommendations:

- Some attendees are already well-resourced; outreach to more disadvantaged families is needed. The suggestion is to keep actively promoting the groups, but keep them a space for all. This therefore supports families experiencing hidden disadvantage.
- A suggestion for toddler follow-on sessions is recommended, however it is appreciated there is a large funding and resourcing implication to this.
- During the sessions - more explicit modelling and signposting of reading strategies and play-based learning is being introduced to which will enhance impact. This is something that is beginning to be introduced and it would be helpful to ensure inclusion of repeated nursery rhymes and stories.

- Benefits of play-based learning could be emphasised further with the use of sensory and open-ended resources – this could provide modelling for families of how to do this at home.

Early Years Storytime Sessions and Books into Homes

- Delivered in 39 early years settings for children aged 2–4.
- Sessions include interactive storytelling and songs.
- Parents are usually invited to attend the Storytime session to share books and experiences with their children.
- Mini-libraries and dual-language books provided to settings.
- Book packs are given out to all children at key times in the year.
- Aims to increase home literacy experiences and model good practice to both parents and settings staff.

Key Impacts:

- Increased access to books, especially in EAL and low-income households. This supports the home-literacy environment and addresses socio-economic barriers to having books at home.
- Demonstrates to parents and staff that children still love physical books and enjoy being read to.
- Supports language development, connection, and ultimately school readiness, and reading culture.
- Encourages family engagement and shared storytime experiences.
- Builds joy, belonging, bonding and emotional connection through stories.
- LTR's work in Early Years setting further builds a foundation, embedding a culture of reading through Storytime sessions, book gifting, and the establishment of mini libraries.
- The work is highly impactful but particularly in those settings with high numbers of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and those with limited book access.

Challenges & Recommendations:

- Parental engagement varies; barriers include time, confidence, and language.
- Early Years settings report technology is displacing traditional reading practices at home.
- Continued support for dual-language resources, but it is recognised there are funding and resourcing limitations.

- Flexible sessions are essential. Continue offering different sessions at different times of the day to encourage as much parental support as possible.
- Share good practice among volunteer facilitators – perhaps there could be a system of peer observation to support developmental practice and sharing of ideas.

Primary School Support

- LTR works with 33 primary schools, the depth of the work at each school varies depending on need.
- LTR offers book packs to the most disadvantaged, library support, and more recently Irlen's screening.
- LTR seeks to fund more in-depth work and targeted interventions with the most in need schools.
- Two case studies of its work are provided: The Oaks Primary (a reflection of 10-years of partnership) and Ranelagh Primary (focused on the current academic year 2024–25 intervention project).

Key Impacts:

- Improved SATs results and Ofsted ratings (e.g., The Oaks rated “Outstanding”), LTR had an important contribution in the school’s improvement plans through funding initiatives and interventions.
- Embedded reading culture through classroom practices such as “book nooks” and curriculum integration.
- Focused approach to enhancing whole school reading practices and developing love of reading at the core.
- After-school interventions at Ranelagh Primary led to measurable reading progress in 77% of pupils at the end point of the programmes. This represents significant improvement over the typical expected progress with children reading abilities raising by 2 or 3 sub-levels when typical progress without intervention would have been 1 sub-level or less.
- Support for EAL, SEND, and FSM pupils through inclusive resources and provision of books.
- In Primary schools, LTR’s partnerships have yielded measurable academic and cultural outcomes.

Challenges & Recommendations:

- Need for clearer communication and coordination of book pack distribution and taking on feedback for book pack contents particularly in relation to adult text content – This has subsequently been acted on
- Consider expanding eligibility for support beyond FSM to reflect broader disadvantage, where possible.
- Continued investment in reading environments and school-based initiatives to see if the work can be extended where funding is provided.

Adult Literacy – Let's Read Ipswich

- One-to-one coaching for adults with low literacy, delivered by trained volunteers.
- Uses Shannon Trust manuals and flexible, relationship-based approaches.
- Coaches work with learners weekly over a sustained period of time.
- Coaches meet learners, locally, in environments where they feel safe, and at individualised starting points, with a highly adaptable approach to adult literacy development.

Key Impacts:

- Enables adult to read forms, medical instructions, safety signage and travel information.
- Empowers adults with confidence, independence, and life skills.
- Enables parents to support children's education and engage in daily tasks. Demonstrative of inter-generational legacy and impact.
- Builds strong, trust-based relationships between coaches and readers.
- Volunteers report high satisfaction, purpose, and community connection.
- The relational and flexible model of support fosters trust and dignity, enabling transformative personal growth.
- Through one-to-one coaching the programme empowers learners to build confidence, navigate daily life and support their families.
- Barriers are overcome, not only to literacy but to wider society, which has a profound impact on learners' lives.

Challenges & Recommendations:

- Funding constraints limit scalability – see if there is further funding and support that can extend and deepen the work particularly in relation to funding the hire of spaces, or negotiating access to suitable spaces for training.

- Not enough 'Readers' come forward to ask for help. Need to build better relationships with agencies working with low literacy adults to identify readers and remove barriers to participation.
- Space limitations – continually seek new suitable spaces for coaching to happen
- Consider hybrid training models, blending opportunities for online and in person training of coaches.
- Continue with regular supportive coach meet ups to provide a space for reflection and shared experiences.
- Consider learner meet ups, if this would be something they'd consider.
- Consider ways to expand support for EAL learners.

Key Recommendations

Let's Talk Babies (LTB)

- Expand outreach to ensure the programme reaches the most disadvantaged families, not just those already engaged or well-resourced.
- Improve visibility of the programme through better marketing and community partnerships to reach underrepresented groups, as below:
- Continue to advertise the groups, but also look for further partnerships with professionals and communities in positions to signpost parents to the groups for support: For example: Family Hubs, Health Visitors and Midwives, Schools and Early Years settings (to target those with younger siblings), libraries and Civil Service officials.
- Consider (if funding can be sourced) developing follow-on sessions for toddlers (15 months–3 years) to maintain continuity and support developmental progression.
- Increase signposting during sessions to explicitly demonstrate how to use books, rhymes, and sensory play at home.
- Enhance resource variety by incorporating more open-ended natural, sensory, and homemade materials (e.g. treasure baskets, sensory bottles, story sacks).
- Signpost parents on how to use and source natural and sensory resources, how to make their own from everyday objects so funding high-quality play resources is not a barrier to early development.
- Support parental learning by modelling reading techniques explicitly and explaining developmental benefits during sessions.
- Particularly emphasise the importance of brain development through connection, story, song and interaction.

Early Years Storytime Sessions

- Continue and expand dual-language book provision, where funding allows. Especially for settings with high EAL populations and diverse linguistic needs.
- Continue to support early years staff with training or guidance on how to engage parents in connecting and supporting children's development:
- The PEEP training is a fantastic way to address the above point, so monitor the roll out of this and evaluate the impact of this model to see if this works as a good intervention.
- Continue to work to address barriers to parental involvement by offering flexible session times and formats (e.g. mornings, afternoons, different weekdays).

- Promote library use by consistently sharing information about local libraries and how to access them. Some families did not know how the public library works, and that it is freely accessible.
- Share good practices and ideas in the use of props and interactive storytelling techniques across all settings.
- Consider peer observation of storytime sessions to offer self-reflection and sharing of new ideas.
- Continue to monitor and evaluate the impact of book gifting and mini-libraries on home reading habits.
- Consider extending the work to school-based nurseries as funding and resourcing allows - this aligns with the government strategy for expansion to school nurseries and supports families experiencing deprivation who are accessing school-based nurseries.

Primary School Support

- Maintain and deepen partnerships with schools in areas of high deprivation, using data to target support effectively.
- Ensure clear communication with schools regarding book pack deliveries and programme timelines.
- Review eligibility criteria (if funding allows) for book packs and support to include families who may not qualify for FSM but still face disadvantages.
- Develop culturally sensitive adult book packs, avoiding overly complex or inappropriate content.
- Continue to support Irlen's screening and review based on this first trial phase.
- Invest in reading environments by helping schools refurbish tired library spaces and classroom reading corners.
- Encourage accountability by ensuring schools to report on the impact of LTR support, similar to the "Raising the Bar" model.
- As above, consider rolling out Storytime sessions to school-based nursery classes and reception classes if funding and resources allow.
- Consider deepening work that supports the transition from Primary to Secondary school (as funding allows).

Adult Literacy – Let's Read Ipswich

- Continue to review funding to ensure expansion of the programme where the need arises is possible.
- Improve access to coaching spaces by negotiating free or subsidised use of libraries and community venues.

- Expand training options with hybrid models (online and in-person) to support diverse volunteer needs and preferences.
- Explore partnerships with adult education providers, or other community groups to support EAL learners and those with additional needs.
- Promote the programme more widely through community partnerships to reach adults who may benefit but are unaware of the service.

Recommendations for Ongoing Evaluation:

Let's Talk Reading already collects information and data about the extent of the programmes and services and the level of reach they are having. Further analysis of these key data will

Subject to resource and funding capacity the following recommendations are designed to extend this evaluative work to assess the impact of programmes and projects on an ongoing basis. If funding and resourcing are limited it provides an ability to focus in certain areas.

- Implement pre- and post-programme surveys for parents, teachers, and adult learners to measure changes in confidence, habits, and literacy engagement.
- Track book distribution outcomes by collecting feedback on how books are used at home and their perceived value. Suggestion is to provide a QR code on a leaflet in the book pack itself that links to a form such as Microsoft Form.
- Use case studies and testimonials to capture qualitative impact and personal stories across all age groups. This is a time-consuming aspect that would involve resourcing.
- Establish a digital feedback loop (e.g. QR codes on book packs or session flyers) to gather participant feedback of all programme levels.
- Monitor attendance and retention data to identify trends, drop-off points, and areas for improvement.
- Consider implementation of in-person methods of feedback gathering, adopting a personal approach that is also considerate with appreciation of different literacy levels of the participants.
- Conduct regular impact reviews with external evaluators or academic partners to ensure objectivity and rigour. Particularly for bigger or longer-term projects.
- Use visual outputs for key metrics (e.g. number of books distributed, sessions delivered, volunteer hours) and share progress with stakeholders.

Introduction

Let's Talk Reading (LTR) (charity number 1180559) is a charity based in Ipswich, Suffolk with the purpose of eradicating low literacy rates amongst children and adults across Ipswich. In particular, LTR targets intervention programmes to improve child and adult literacy in the most deprived areas of Ipswich. This report arises from a commissioned research project by the University of Suffolk to conduct an independent evaluation of the impact of LTR's services and programmes.

The LTR website quotes that 1 in 6 adults in England struggle with reading; the figure for Ipswich is 7.6%, equating to 8,000 adults in Ipswich who cannot read, and a further 20,000 adults who struggle to read (LTR ND).

Let's Talk Reading's approach to tackling low literacy across Ipswich is multimodal and aims to address literacy 'from birth to adulthood' (LTR ND), they focus on the most disadvantaged wards of Ipswich (as provided by the Suffolk Observatory) to provide a wide range of programmes and services partnering with other organisation to target intervention in the most disadvantaged areas. A summary of some of their work that has been investigated as part of this impact evaluation is indicated below:

Programme	Age Range/Target Group	Identified Needs to Address
Let's Talk Babies	Birth to 15 months. A group for parent and babies to join together for weekly story, rhyme and playtime sessions. Every month participants also chose free age-appropriate books to take home and keep, to build up their personal libraries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents who do not read to their children.Families who do not have access to books at home.Loss of singing and nursery rhymes as baby development tools.Demonstrate and promote how to use books, stories, and songs with infants.
Let's Talk Reading – Early Years	2-4 years Volunteers run termly (or half-termly) sessions within 39 Early Years settings (e.g.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Parents who do not read with their children

	<p>Nurseries) for story and song time, parents invited to attend. Provides gifted books to children to 2-year olds and at Christmas time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homes without books for children. • Sharing stories and songs with nurseries. • Loss of nursery rhymes from the culture. • Provide role modelling to parents and EY staff • Encourage families to read everyday to children. • Provide books at homes. • Provide mini-libraries within settings, including dual language books.
Let's Talk reading – School Age	<p>5-16 years (but mostly Primary School age). LTR provides screening of key conditions that are a barrier to reading e.g. Irlen's, Dyslexia. Provision of gifted books into home. School library improvement plans. Working with and providing funding to schools to enhance their culture of literacy within the school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiming to get more books into homes • Enhance SATs results and literacy rates at age 11 in targeted schools. • Testing and screening to provide support for resources e.g. Irlen's glasses where necessary.
Let's Read Ipswich - Adults	Adult literacy intervention programme with weekly 1 to 1 coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance adult literacy. • Change the reading skills of each reader. • Enhance the quality of life of each adult reader.

Aims and objectives for this impact evaluation project

This project aimed:

- To provide evaluation and impact data/information to Let's Talk Reading about the programmes and how they are achieving their aims.

- To evaluate the impact the programme is having on the lives of the children/families; ‘impacts’ may look different for each family/participant but includes:
 - Improved reading skills including fluency and comprehension
 - Further engagement with reading at home
 - Further books available at home or borrowed from the library.
 - Enjoyment of story time and confidence in engaging with stories together.
- To evaluate if the programmes are reaching the target audiences effectively.
- To consider and reflect on the ways LTR currently evaluates its programmes.
- To consider the implementation of the programmes and ongoing methodology of obtaining feedback and evaluation.

Background Literature

Children's literacy is a critical issue in the UK, influencing both educational outcomes and broader social development. Literacy serves as a foundation for future learning, opening doors to educational success, economic stability, and well-being (National Literacy Trust 2021). Despite the UK's status as a developed nation, a significant number of children face literacy challenges, impacting their life chances and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Literacy is crucial not only for academic achievement but also for broader cognitive and social development. The ability to read and write proficiently equips children with the tools to understand complex concepts, communicate effectively, and engage critically with the world around them. Literacy is also linked to mental health and well-being. According to the National Literacy Trust (2021), children with poor literacy skills are significantly more likely to experience feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and long-term unemployment.

Research by Logan et al (2019) cited that a child read to once a day for their first five years of life are exposed to 1.4 million more words than their peers who are never read to. This is significant and is described as 'the million-word gap'; the impact this has is profound for children's early experiences, language development, and neurodevelopment. This is supported by research from the Department for Education (2020) which highlights that literacy is a key predictor of future academic performance and life success. Children who read frequently and have access to books at home are more likely to perform well in school, pursue higher education, and secure well-paid jobs later in life. A strong literacy foundation is also crucial in narrowing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.

Children's Reading Habits and Book Ownership

A report by the National Literacy Trust (2022) shows that while many children in the UK enjoy reading, there are disparities in access to reading materials and books at home. The 2022 survey found that only 26% of children aged 5-15 read daily outside of school, a sharp decline from 43% in 2015. Moreover, 10% of children aged 9-18 reported having no books at home, which has a profound impact on literacy development. Children from low-income households are disproportionately affected, with one in five children from disadvantaged backgrounds lacking access to books at home (National Literacy Trust, 2022). The impact of the family's Socioeconomic Status (SES) is also explored by Li, Peng, and Ma (2023) who found that SES had direct and indirect impacts on children's reading and linguistic abilities; this included impacting vocabulary and phonological awareness which then had subsequent impacts for children's reading fluency and comprehension. However, the impact of SES could be mediated by phonological awareness and other mitigations which can support lower SES families. This involves ensuring that all children have access to activities that support phonological awareness such as nursery rhymes, songs, stories, and rich literacy environments both at home and in early years settings.

Subsequently the National Literacy Trust (2023) found that 1 in 12 (8.6%) children aged 5 to 18 years do not have any books of their own at home, and this figure doubles for families who are claiming Free School Meals (the most financially disadvantaged). These statistics have increased year-on-year with the National Literacy Trust providing annual surveys. These statistics highlight a trend in declining reading habits and book ownership, especially among vulnerable children. Book ownership is particularly important as it fosters a reading culture at home, allowing children to develop a love for reading, improve their literacy skills, and gain access to a wide range of knowledge. Furthermore, the National Literacy Trust (2023) argue that book ownership is associated with reading enjoyment, frequency and confidence in literacy skills.

Research from the BookTrust (2023) found that whilst 95% of parents agreed that reading was important for their children, however, there were significant numbers of families that struggle to engage with daily shared reading. Daily shared reading peaks between the ages of 2-4 years where between 67-68% of children are being read with daily (BookTrust 2023). And this declines to approximately 54% in the 0-2 years and 4 years plus categories. The biggest identified barriers to parents engaging with reading with their children were: time 20% of parents say they do not read with their child due to a lack of time, and 28% of parents reported a lack of confidence in reading with their children (BookTrust 2023). The BookTrust (2023, p.3) further point to economic disadvantage as a key factor: “The growing disadvantage gap between children from low-income families and their more affluent peers starts in the early years and persists throughout childhood”.

Esmaeeli (2023) looked at the preschool Home Literacy Environment (HLE) and found it significant in impacting emergent literacy and subsequent literacy development. They discuss the HLE model and point to different aspects of the HLE. Formal HLE refers to active formal learning of literacy skills such as parents teaching phonics. Informal HLE is about storybook exposure consisting of shared reading experiences between children and adult, and the access to print, e.g. access to books at home (Senechal 2006, cited in Esmaeeli 2023). Senechal reported that the formal HLE was a predictor of children’s letter knowledge in kindergarten and reading fluency in the fourth grade, whereas storybook exposure (informal HLE) was a predictor of children’s vocabulary in Kindergarten and fourth grade reading comprehension. This American study can enable us to consider further how the HLE can influence children’s reading habits and abilities in their Early Years and beyond. A key area that Let’s Talk Reading targets and supports.

Literacy Intervention Programmes

To address these issues, numerous literacy intervention programmes have been established in the UK, targeting children at risk of falling behind in literacy skills. One example is the BookStart programme, run by the charity BookTrust. Bookstart provides free books to children in their early years, along with guidance for parents on how to engage their children in reading. According to the BookTrust (2020), children who participated in BookStart showed improved early language development, with 83% of

parents reporting that their child enjoyed books more after participating in the programme.

The Reading Recovery programme, which offers one-on-one literacy support to children struggling with reading, has also been shown to have a high success rate. A 2019 evaluation of the programme found that 79% of children who received Reading Recovery reached age-appropriate reading levels within 20 weeks (Reading Recovery Europe, 2019).

Let's Talk Reading aims to achieve similar results through localised intervention programmes targeting literacy and access to books. LTR aims to mostly target early years and primary age children with the philosophy of early intervention as being key to long-term change and success (see outline of programmes above).

Schools and particularly school libraries have an important role to play in addressing children's literacy and attitudes towards reading. Reading for Pleasure is defined as 'volitional reading in which we choose to engage' (Kucirkova and Cremin 2020, quoted in Merga 2022, p.59). Further discussed is that the Reading for Pleasure is not about the mechanics or abilities of reading but goes deeper than this and it's about a love of reading, enjoyment of stories and deep engagement in the world and making positive contributions to society (Merga 2022). Therefore, Merga argues that providing time to develop cultures of Reading for Pleasure should be a whole-school priority as the benefits extend beyond literacy-specific subjects. Schools are therefore central to the development of these attitudes and values to reading and so Let's Talk Reading also targets schools to help support the development of these reading cultures.

Overall, Children's literacy in the UK remains a critical issue, with a growing need to address disparities in access to books and reading opportunities. While many children benefit from intervention programmes, the statistics on book ownership and reading habits show that much work remains to be done, particularly in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Literacy intervention programmes such as BookStart, and Reading Recovery have demonstrated considerable success, offering a blueprint for continued efforts to improve literacy outcomes across the UK. This evaluation project therefore provides rigorous timely research into the work of Let's Talk Reading, to evaluate the local provision and offer of reading and literacy support and intervention.

Methodology

This impact evaluation project takes a multi-modal approach to evaluating and considering the Let's Talk Reading's programmes consider its impact and implementation. Qualitative methodology and analysis were used to evaluate the impact of the programmes. There are various elements evaluated, and participation was sought with key stakeholders including the schools, early years settings and parents as discussed below.

This evaluation adopted qualitative methodology including ethnographic approaches and semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Qualitative methodology plays a vital role in social research and therefore seemed to be the most appropriate methodological choice for this research. Qualitative research fits well to address the project aims which offers a way to explore complex human behaviours, meanings, and social phenomena. Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative approaches delve into the depth of human experiences, perceptions, and social contexts, enabling the gathering of rich data on the impact programmes like Let's Talk Reading is having on the lived experiences of its participants. Two main approaches adopted in this study are ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews/focus groups as outlined in the table below.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a research approach, focusing on the detailed, in-depth study of people in their natural environments. It often involves fieldwork, where researchers immerse themselves in the everyday lives of participants to observe and interpret social interactions, cultural practices, and behaviours. Ethnography is particularly useful for understanding social processes from the participants' point of view. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), ethnography allows researchers to capture the complexities of social life and the implicit meanings that people attach to their actions. The strength of ethnography lies in its ability to generate deep contextual understanding, but it also poses challenges. Researchers must navigate issues of subjectivity, researcher bias, and the potential influence of their presence on the participants (Bryman, 2016). Despite these challenges, ethnography remains a powerful tool for uncovering hidden patterns and social norms that might not be apparent through other methods. This research project *borrows from* the field of ethnographic research to conduct participant observation of the work of Let's Talk Reading, particularly around the programmes of classes and visits they conduct. This is outlined below. During ethnographic visits the researcher observed the reading sessions, and informally talked to the participants, this could include the setting staff (for example early years setting), the parents, and the volunteers from LTR. The researcher recorded how the session runs in terms of content, attendance, and engagement. Full consent was obtained prior to engagement with all parties concerned and ongoing consent was sought in discussions. Notes were made in a fieldwork journal and names or other personal identifying features were not captured as part of this.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are another widely used qualitative method. They provide flexibility in data collection, allowing researchers to explore specific topics while also giving participants the freedom to express their thoughts in their own words. This method combines the consistency of structured interviews with the adaptability of unstructured interviews, making it particularly valuable for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences (Kvale, 2007).

Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for exploring complex issues like attitudes, motivations, and personal experiences. They can reveal insights that might remain hidden in more rigidly structured formats (Silverman, 2017). Semi-structured interviews were used in this research both as individual interviews, or focus group interviews to interview key stakeholders such as school leaders/headteachers about the work of LTR and whether they have seen a benefit and impact for their settings.

Specific Approaches and Research Activities

The below table outlines and summarises the key research activities of this evaluation project and the methods/methodologies proposed that this proposal is seeking ethical approval for. This builds on the table above which provides an overview of LTR's work.

Numbered stage/ Element	Let's Talk Reading Programme Activity	Evaluation Activity and Approach	Number of Visits/Interactions
1	Let's Talk Babies (0-15 months)	Ethnographic participant observation of the sessions. Informal discussion with participants including parents, staff, and volunteers.	3 different classes visited twice each 6 visits total.
2	Let's Talk Reading Nursery/Early Years visits (2- 4-year-olds)	Ethnographic participant observation of the sessions. Informal discussion with participants including parents and volunteers, and Early Years staff. Observed set up of the setting, are they making use of mini library from LTR? Ask questions about what is observed.	5 different settings visited for a total of 5 sessions observed.

3	Primary Schools	<p>Case Study approach to 2 schools who have had support from LTR.</p> <p>Semi-structured interviews with leadership and staff team as appropriate.</p> <p>Observation visits to see LTR additions and support – e.g. tour of the school, interventions discussion/interview with librarian or relevant teaching staff.</p>	2 schools Interviews and visit/tour
4	Adult Literacy	Interview/Focus Groups with volunteer reading coaches.	2 interviews/focus groups with volunteer coaches

Analysis and Reporting:

Qualitative data analysis was carried out on the findings of this project discussed above adopting a thematic analysis of all interview transcripts and fieldnotes as indicated. Key themes were drawn from the data gathered to draw evaluative discussion of the impact of the programmes. The themes are produced as part of this report's findings. Furthermore, case studies were used in the reporting to provide rich narrative of the work and impact of the programmes

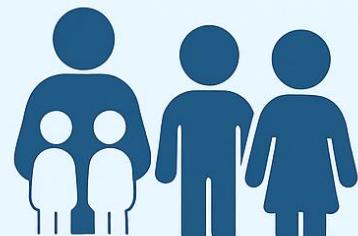
Findings

Over the next few sections, findings from evaluation of the key sections of Let's Talk Readings work is presented. Let's Talk Reading is a small local charity, that relies on grant funding and volunteers to maintain the depth and breadth of its services. Some headline figures which demonstrate the scope of work for the 2024-2025 year includes:

2024-2025 BENEFICIARIES SUMMARY



Let's Talk Babies reached
114 children and 107 parents/carers



Early Years Storytimes reached **1194 children and 240 parents/carers**



796 dual language books were provided



A total of **62 volunteers** provided **3381 volunteer**



15 adults experienced adult literacy tuition



55 children received Irlen's screening



A total of **11,617 books** were given out to babies, early years, schools, and adults.

Let's Talk Babies

Let's Talk Babies (LTB) is a structured, community-based initiative offering free, accessible parent-and-baby sessions with a focus on play, early literacy, and informal parenting support and socialisation. Let's Talk Babies operates parent and baby groups across Ipswich, but particularly targeting the most deprived areas of Ipswich (as identified by the Suffolk Observatory 2024), Gainsborough, Chantry, Whitton and Whitehouse. Sessions are held weekly in term time and each session lasts for 1.5 hours. The structure of the sessions typically includes around 20 minutes of structured activities, which includes stories, nursery rhymes with actions, sensory activities such as parachute games. Following this there is free play time for babies with a variety of different toys and resources available, alongside books. These often relate to a theme of the week, for example “farm animals”. This period of free-play also offers opportunities for parent-to-parent interaction, for parent socialisation. Free high quality and age-appropriate books are available for parents to take home and keep building a home library of literature. A baby bank is also provided so parents can access clothing and baby resources where needed. Parents were observed bringing some clothing their babies had grown out of and selecting some next size up clothing. The sessions are run by an experienced facilitator, volunteers from Let's Talk Reading also attend the sessions to assist with setting up the baby bank, books, registration, and providing refreshments.

The objectives of the LTB sessions are as follows:

- Parents to recognise that babies enjoy being read to.
- Parents are encouraged to read to their babies/infants every day.
- Parents recognise that talking/reading/singing to children is vital for their development and school success.
- To teach parents 5 or 6 standard nursery rhymes, with their original catchy tunes, so that they can use them at home.
- To give babies multi-sensory stimulation and indicate to parents how they can continue this stimulation at home.
- Offer parents and babies an opportunity to socialise.
- Give parents an appropriate free book at least once a month to build up a mini library at home and encourage the daily reading regime.
- Encourage parents to form peer support networks which can operate outside of and beyond the LTB sessions.
- Provide a baby bank of clothes.

- Share ideas about best practice parenting and feeding.
- To engage ALL disadvantaged new parents.

Operation of each session:

- Time for informal talking amongst parents and facilitator
- Reading a book; occasionally with puppets.
- Singing 2 or 3 nursery rhymes several times each to get them into the memory
- Stressing the key message of reading and singing daily.
- Finish with the mantra (to the tune of twinkle twinkle little star)

*“Reading with a child each day, helps the grow in lots of ways
 Choose a book and sit with me,
 Learn and bond so happily,
 Reading with a child each day, helps them grow in lots of ways”*

- More informal time with toys and books.
- Nursery rhymes and other books to be given away by LTR.

Analysis and Discussion:

This section of the report presents qualitative findings from discussion with parents attending *Let's Talk Babies*, a free community-based parent and baby group. The groups offer weekly sessions that promote early language and literacy through shared story, song, and social play, alongside peer connection and informal parenting support.

As discussed, the main methodological approach was ethnographic participant observations with discussion and informal conversation with the attending parents, and group facilitator or volunteers.

Findings show that the group has meaningful impacts on:

- Early literacy practices in the home
- Infant confidence and socialisation
- Parental mental health and peer support
- Access to early childhood enrichment regardless of income
- Parental confidence in supporting their child's development

These outcomes contribute to developmental success in the early years, ultimately school readiness, early communication skills, and strengthened parental wellbeing, factors which are known to reduce inequalities in the early years. Below outlines further the key themes emerging from discussion with parents and observations from field work. Quotes provided are from parents attending the groups and where indicated the group facilitator.

Theme 1: Fostering a Love of Reading from an Early Age

The discussions strongly suggest that *Let's Talk Babies* plays a significant role in embedding early literacy practices within the home environment. For many families, the opportunity to take, explore and keep a variety of high-quality, age-appropriate books was not only practical but supportive. These books served as a catalyst for regular reading habits, as well as a shared source of joy and connection between parent and child.

The group facilitator reflected on the long-term impact of the group on family reading culture, noting: *“One of the mum’s said that Let’s Talk Babies is why she feels her older child now loves books as much as they do, and she is bringing her younger child now.”* This underscores how early interventions can set enduring literacy trajectories for multiple children within a family.

Another parent observed: *“Every night she loves reading books, especially the touchy-feely ones, she loves exploring. It has been great to add to our books from the ones taken from here.”* This illustrates not just routine building, but a sensory and emotional engagement with books, which supports emerging literacy through tactile interaction and enjoyment.

The facilitator further noted that parents actively engaged with the books offered: *“I get a lot of parents say how much they enjoy the sessions, and in particular they will comment if they liked a particular book and will say ‘that’s a lovely book.’”* Such feedback reveals how the group not only supported reading at home but shaped parents’ understandings of what high-quality, appealing books for babies look like.

For some, the group filled a specific gap in available resources. One parent shared: *“I come with my foster child, and I really like it, it is supportive, and I couldn’t get proper baby books from the public library... Some of my other foster parent friends are going to bring their foster babies too.”* Here, the group serves a critical equity function, providing access to materials and spaces that mainstream services may not fully accommodate.

The ability to take books home was frequently mentioned as a highlight: *“We have really liked taking books home to enjoy together.”* This was echoed in the comment: *“We have collected lots of books from the groups, it is really good. We read all the time at home now. We read before naps and bedtime as a calm down and chillout time”* Reading was therefore embedded into everyday family routines further demonstrating the impact on the home literacy environment.

Parents often described their own reading histories and aspirations for their children, linking their motivations to their childhood experiences. As one mother explained: *“Reading is really important to me, I used to read lots as a child, I don’t get so much time now. But I really want [baby] to grow up reading lots, as it’s so important.”* This sense of continuity between generations positions reading not just as a skill but as a valued family identity and encourages reading for pleasure.

Similarly, a commitment to gender-inclusive reading practices emerged: *“I think it’s so important to read to him, and I make sure my partner reads to him too. I don’t want [baby] to think it is just a mum thing to read to them.”* This suggests an intentional effort to challenge traditional caregiving roles through promotion of shared literacy responsibilities within the household.

Perhaps most powerfully, several parents described their children’s increasing independence and enthusiasm for books. One noted: *“She goes and chooses books herself now and will bring it over for me to read to her”*, while another said: *“We read a lot at home but it’s been lovely to get quality age-appropriate books too.”* These, comments reveal the emergence of child-led reading practices and enhances a love of reading as an important milestone in early literacy development.

Repeatedly, parents reflected on how the group offered access to better-quality materials than other local services: *“It has been great to add to our books from the ones taken from here. Sometimes we go to the library, but they don’t always have baby books – and they’re not as nice.”* And: *“We read a lot at home. It’s really nice to take books home and build up a little library for my child, otherwise it gets very repetitive... I also found the library didn’t have many baby books, like board books, so it is lovely to get quality books too.”* This reinforces the group’s role not just as a social space, but as an alternative literacy resource hub.

Some parents shared that *Let’s Talk Babies* had helped them overcome initial uncertainties about how or when to begin reading with babies: *“We don’t yet read much at home, I often don’t get around to it, or not sure how to do it while [baby] is younger, but now she is sitting up I think I will do it more... Taking books home and coming here has helped, I have more ideas now.”* This illustrates the group’s developmental responsiveness, helping parents feel confident and capable as their babies grow.

Even for those who already had books at home, the group enriched their experience: *“We do have a lot of books at home, this was always important for me, but coming to the group and experiencing different books, and getting to take some home has really helped, especially when on maternity leave, books can be expensive.”* This suggests that the group enhanced not only access to books, but the diversity, quality, and variety of stories and formats available to families. The group made it affordable and accessible even for parents on leave from professional careers.

Overall, these parents describe the group as pivotal in cultivating a culture of reading at home. Taking home high-quality, age-appropriate books enabled regular, joyful reading routines that children began initiating themselves. The quote about the child choosing and bringing over books suggests a strong, developing sense of ownership and enjoyment. Parents valued not just the materials, but the *structure, ideas and modelling* that helped them understand *how* to read effectively with babies. The reference to library limitations highlights the *Let's Talk Babies* role in providing more accessible and suitable alternatives, especially for younger children.

Theme 2: Access and Affordability: Meeting Families Where They Are

Access to free, high-quality support emerged as a vital factor in enabling families to engage with early reading and social opportunities. Many parents spoke candidly about the financial pressure of maternity leave and the prohibitive cost of paid groups, even when they were otherwise well-informed or well-resourced. The group's free nature was not just a bonus, it was an absolute necessity.

This was reflected by the group facilitator: "*I think its really helpful for parents as it's a free session, and classes normally cost, they also get access to the baby bank and taking free books to keep home monthly...I think parents really appreciate that*". This facilitator insight sets the tone for how important free, accessible provision is for enabling regular participation. The mention of additional resources like the baby bank and take-home books highlights the group's broader support model.

Several parents made clear that their engagement would not have been possible had there been a fee: "*The fact its free is really important for me, we do one paid class a week, but we couldn't afford more on maternity pay*" and "*Being on maternity leave, it's hard, money is tight and its great this is free*". These comments reflect how maternity pay significantly alters families' disposable income and can lead to social isolation if support is only accessible through payment. LTB, in contrast, provides a no-cost, welcoming environment that parents could attend regularly and without stress.

It is particularly revealing that even those with professional backgrounds, such as a teacher, experienced the same constraints: "*I am actually a Primary school teacher, so I fully understand why reading is important. But on maternity leave pay it is not easy to always afford nice books. So that helps. Also, it is so nice to come here with my group of friends I have met and support each other*". Here, we see that knowledge alone is not enough, affordability is essential in being able to put this knowledge into practice. The social value of the group is also underscored; it's not only about access to books, but about connection and peer support during an often isolating period. An aspect explored more greatly in theme four below.

Parents repeatedly reinforced how costs, affected their daily routines and choices: “*I like to try and get out with [baby] everyday, but paid for groups get expensive, so coming to this is fantastic*” and “*I go to other groups too, but it isn’t easy as they cost so much money. This is a lovely group to come to and the fact its free makes it really accessible*”. The accessibility of this group becomes even more powerful when contrasted with paid alternatives, which many parents limit or avoid due to cumulative expense.

For some, the group served as an essential contributor for both parent and child wellbeing: “*Coming here has been a life saver, it is so good to socialise with other mums and the babies socialise too. The baby bank and books have been so helpful*”. This illustrates the compound impact of affordability: it not only increases access but supports emotional wellbeing, routine-building, and a sense of belonging. Wellbeing and socialisation are a reoccurring aspect further explored in themes 3 and 4 below.

Finally, the comment “*I love this group, especially that it is free. But don’t think it’s well known, its word of mouth*” points to the need for better visibility and wider promotion. Although highly valued, this support is not always widely accessed, perhaps due to limited marketing or overly localised awareness. Whilst it is good that word of mouth has spread awareness of the groups, and throughout the research the groups were largely well attended by both regular participants and new participants, there is a consideration of whether the ‘right’ audiences are being met. LTB has the aim of delivering groups to the most deprived areas in order to address inequalities and to ensure that socio-economic circumstances are not a barrier to engagement with early literacy. Some of the parents would not fall typically into this category, and disclosed professional careers in their day groups, such as the Teacher mentioned above. One key recommendation is to continue to develop strategies to ensure that those who need the group the most are aware of it, and able to attend, removing as many barriers as possible. Despite this, with these parents of young children often on reduced incomes due to maternity leave, these group provided vital support during a financially difficult period of life. Something they felt was essential especially given the cost-of-living crisis. The fact it is open to all who live within that postcode area also would then account for hidden disadvantages; even if someone is seemingly a ‘professional’ it does not mean that they are not experiencing a need, whether it is social, emotional, economic, or otherwise.

Collectively, these quotes and discussions highlight the transformative impact of universal, non-means-tested offers. Unlike targeted schemes, universal provision avoids stigma and captures a broader demographic, including those who might otherwise be overlooked. The group’s inclusive, no-cost format met families where they were, financially, emotionally, and socially; helping them engage meaningfully with early literacy and with each other and their babies.

Theme 3: Socialisation and Development for Babies

The groups played a vital role in supporting infants' confidence and social skills. Many parents described the group as instrumental in helping their babies engage with others and develop early social awareness. Regular attendance supported both infants and parents to build confidence in social settings, providing a gentle but meaningful way to experience community and routine outside the home.

"I first came alone and met some good friends here, now we meet up at other groups or the library with our babies, which is great to have a group of mum's friends with similar age babies for support" This quote illustrates how the group fosters not only socialisation for babies, but also enduring peer networks for parents (which is explored further in theme four).

Several parents drew connections between group participation and their children's emerging communication skills and social confidence. For example: *"I came to this group with my now 4-year old, he is a chatterbox; language and speaking is so good. I think it's because we talked and read to him. Now he passes his 'baby' books down to [younger sibling] and so we are hoping the same for him..."*. This observation highlights the perceived long-term developmental benefits of attending the LTB groups, not only for speech and language, but also for building family literacy practices, across siblings.

"It's great to have a routine of coming out, and I find she is sociable, she likes other kids at these groups" and *"[baby] has really got a lot of enjoyment from interacting with other babies, she loves it!"* These reflections from two parents suggest how early peer interactions, even in informal settings, can support young children's disposition to socialise, particularly when such interactions are part of a predictable routine.

Others reflected on the sensory and emotional stimulation their babies seemed to gain: *"[Baby] loves coming and has such a good time; I am always guaranteed they will have a good nap after!"* and *"I love bringing her to places like this, she just soaks up the interaction"*. These comments speak to how the group supports regulation and stimulation, offering babies opportunities to be engaged, observant, and active participants in these shared spaces.

For both babies and their caregivers, the group offered a site of connection and shared growth: *"Our babies are the same age, so it is really nice for them to see each other and interact, and it is nice for us mums to find someone in the same area. We now meet up outside of this group too."* and *"I love coming to this group, it is great for [baby] to play and socialise, and good for me to socialise too!"*. These quotes reflect the dual function of the group as a developmental and social anchor for families, helping to break cycles of isolation common in early parenthood. This is further explored in theme four, but it is important to note that the early interactions and experiences of babies can have impact

on them socially throughout early childhood. The groups offered dedicated time and space, not only for babies to interact with each other but also for dedicated time for parent and child interactions and connections, something that is vital for early development, especially brain development (Hodson, Timms, and Shahrokh, 2025).

The developmental benefits extended to nursery transitions, with parents identifying a clear link between group attendance and their baby's readiness for formal care: *"It's been really good for [baby] because he can see other babies, and like watching and interacting with them. Plus, he gets a change of scenery"* and *"[Baby] has now started some nursery days as I am going back to work. He has transitioned so easily to nursery, taking it all in his stride. I am sure it is down to this group. He has had so much time with other babies and is so confident to explore, I think it's really helped now he is doing nursery as well."*

Overall parents observed developmental changes in their babies' confidence, sociability and readiness for group settings, attributing these directly to their experiences at the group. The sessions appear to act as a gentle bridge between home and more formal settings like nursery, helping children get used to routines, shared spaces, and interactions. Peer interaction among babies was consistently framed as beneficial, with parents enjoying watching their child build early social skills through play and shared experiences. Therefore, the groups support not only child development, but also family wellbeing and connection. Ultimately these early social experiences build strong foundations throughout early childhood and into school start age, building confidence and social resilience in childhood from an early age.

Theme 4: Parental Wellbeing and Peer Support

This theme relates to the social and emotional aspects the parents found when attending the *Let's Talk Babies* groups. These powerful and honest accounts highlight the emotional and social challenges of early parenthood. For many, the group provided more than just activities for their babies, it offered a critical structure, social outlet, and sense of belonging. The tone of gratitude and relief is consistent throughout the data, with one parent summing up the group's value simply and movingly: *"Coming here has been a lifesaver."* This sentiment recurs, signalling the depth of support parents have felt during what is often an emotionally demanding life transition.

The group was repeatedly described as a key support for navigating the psychological impact of early parenthood. *"Becoming a parent was a much bigger transition than I thought, it has been quite isolating."* This quote captures the unexpected intensity of early parenthood, especially for first-time parents, and underlines how groups like this can function as essential social interaction and support. For many, the group offered a much-needed sense of solidarity and understanding, creating spaces to be emotionally honest

with others who “get it”. As one parent shared: “*It’s great to chat to other mum’s who get it, if you’ve had a bad night or something. We have a WhatsApp group now. So, if you are up at 2am you can message and you know someone else will be up. Feels less lonely*”.

Having access to consistent, low-pressure social contact had a preventative impact on parents’ mental health. As one put it, “*It is wonderful for us both and good for my mental health too.*” This wasn’t just about emotional expression, but about the structure and purpose that these groups added to daily life: “*It’s good to have a schedule... otherwise, the days can feel long.*” and “*Otherwise I feel like I’m staring at my four walls!*” Many described the group as breaking the monotony and emotional isolation of early parenthood: “*At home it can feel overwhelming at times; you look around and see all the toys everywhere and the housework that needs doing and it’s really hard to get anything done with [baby], so coming out to the group is a nice break for us both.*”

This emphasis on shared experiences and finding “someone in the same boat” reveals how these groups support not just the individual parent, but also the co-construction of community care and resilience. These are not just services; they are spaces where new networks of mutual support emerge. One mother noted: “*I have made some really good friends by coming to groups like this. I even found a friend who lives really close to me.*”

For some, especially parents who were isolated during the pandemic or didn’t have such spaces with their first child, the contrast was especially poignant. “*Being able to connect with other mums at groups like this has been so much better to when I had my first during Covid, I couldn’t do these things as we were isolating at home.*” Others described benefits to sustained group attendance, such as the mothers who returned with their second children: “*Thanks to this group I now have a group of mum friends, and we have stayed friends, and we meet up with our children. Our older children are now 2 or 3 years old.*”

The benefits of these connections extended beyond the parents to their children, with many parents observing how their child’s social development, routine, and enjoyment were tied to the structure of the group. As one parent noted, “*My baby loves to come and play at the session, and it gets us both out of the house. We both get a lot from it.*” Another reinforced the dual benefit: “*It is wonderful for us both, [baby] gets lots of stimulation and excitement, and I get a nice time and can catch up with fellow mums. It’s really good for us to get out the house and see other people*”.

The recognition of the group as a “break”, “a nice time”, and even “*our only time out of the house*” signals just how significant these sessions can be for wellbeing. Even when taking the first step felt daunting such as: “*This is our first time here, it can be a bit daunting walking into a group by yourself but it has been so good, everyone has been really welcoming*” the experience of warmth, connection and inclusion seems to consistently outweigh initial apprehension. This was a parent to a 8-month old baby who disclosed they had not attended any other baby groups up to now. So, it was not just the first time

at *Let's Talk Babies*, but at any baby group, with the parent disclosing feelings of isolation at home up until that point.

Finally, as several parents prepared to return to work, they reflected on the emotional importance of this time: "*I am heading back to work soon, I am really going to miss bringing [baby] to this group.*" These quotes capture a window of early parenting often overlooked: the temporary, emotionally intense period of maternity leave. The group helped transform this time from one of isolation into one of connection, shared joy, and affirmation.

Overall, this theme makes visible the essential, often under-recognised function of parent-and-baby groups as community-based mental health support. They nurture not only the developmental needs of children, but the emotional wellbeing of their caregivers, fostering networks of care that ripple far beyond the group itself. As per the discussion earlier, having these group be free-to-attend is vitally important to ensure that they are as accessible for as many parents as possible to receive these benefits.

Theme 5: Encouraging Confidence and Skills in Parents

The group played a crucial role in building parents' confidence as their child's first and most important educator. For many, this was their first structured experience of reading with babies, and it helped to reveal what early literacy can look like in the earliest months of life. Through observing facilitators, participating in sessions, and taking books home, parents developed not only practical ideas but also greater motivation and belief in their own ability to support their child's learning and development.

Several parents spoke about their own literacy histories, noting that their desire for their children to become strong readers came from personal gaps in confidence or experience. "*I want to encourage it because I'm not such a terrific reader myself, I have never read much personally. But I want my kids to be good readers. My older one is now reading fluently.*" This comment reflects a broader theme of aspiration: even when parents feel uncertain or lack confidence, they want better for their children, and the group gives them tools to support that goal.

Multilingual families also found value in the sessions. "*I'm from Italy and we are raising [baby] to speak both English and Italian, I really like coming here it helps my English and [baby's] to read stories in English, and take home English books.*" In this instance, the group not only supported early reading but acted as an informal space for language learning for both parent and child, highlighting the wider educational benefits of inclusive, well-resourced environments.

Several comments illustrate the importance of early modelling and peer learning, especially around when and how to start reading. One parent asked the researcher: "*I am*

not sure when to start reading to [baby]... should I be reading to him yet?" the researcher encouraged this and gave examples of building it into routines. Another parent commented: "*We don't yet read much at home... I have more ideas now.*" These statements demonstrated how the group helped bridge gaps in knowledge, normalising shared reading from early infancy and offering reassurance that it doesn't need to be formal or perfect to be valuable. This was demonstrated in a number of ways including with the group facilitator modelling and sharing how to engage with reading at home. Including using puppets or other props. Though it was felt there could be more explicit signposting to the parents to demonstrate skills.

Importantly, parents valued the balance between structure and flexibility. "*I have been to groups which are just free play, and I like the structured element of this, it provides good input and ideas of things I can do at home. I have also been to fully structured groups and that can be a bit daunting and formal especially if [baby] just isn't feeling like joining in.*" This balance supported parental engagement and confidence, allowing them to take away ideas without pressure of formal engagement, in a supportive, non-judgemental role.

The group also supported shared caregiving roles, as highlighted in "*my partner can sometimes come to these classes too, depending on work. So it's nice [child] gets time with Daddy at the class as well.*" Inclusive group environments like this not only promote early literacy but also encourage more equitable parenting involvement.

The importance of support emerged once again, particularly in relation to managing the everyday complexities of life with multiple children. "*I find it really hard to read with my younger one, the older one is at school now and they are obsessed with reading at school. So, I feel [baby] is taking a bit of backseat and I hate that.*" These reflections reveal the ongoing tension many parents feel in trying to balance attention between siblings, and the group offers a focused time to re-centre and connect with the youngest child's needs.

Parents also sought guidance and reassurance around developmental milestones and appropriate expectations. "*It is my first time here, I haven't been to any other groups yet. Everyone has been so nice, I like you can take books home too. I will definitely come back.*" and "*It provides good input and ideas of things I can do at home.*" These comments reflect how the group helps new parents orient themselves and gain confidence, not just in supporting reading, but in feeding, play, sleep, and developmental milestones. Informal discussions between parents showed them sharing key information and ideas about infant feeding, milestones, sleep patterns, ideas for things to do at home. This shared experience contributed to parents feeling empowered in supporting child development.

Through both structured activities and informal interactions with peers and the group facilitator, this group supports parents to feel more equipped, knowledgeable, and

confident. In doing so, it strengthens not only early literacy foundations, but also wider parental wellbeing and understanding of child development.

Theme 6: Structure and Atmosphere: Gentle Structure in a Welcoming Environment

Parents consistently highlighted the group's balance between structured activities and informal free play as a core strength. The quotes emphasise how this blend creates a calm and supportive atmosphere that feels welcoming rather than overwhelming.

"The group is great, the right balance of structured activities and free-play. The group is just nice and chilled and supportive." This comment captures the essence of the group's ethos, combining purposeful, guided interaction with the freedom for babies and parents to relax and explore at their own pace. The "nice and chilled" tone is key in making the sessions approachable, especially for parents who may be anxious about attending groups or navigating early parenthood.

The importance of offering varied sensory and interactive experiences alongside free exploration is also underlined: *"The group works really well, there is the right balance; they get the chance to listen and interact with the sensory parts and the story. Then get to freely explore the toys and books. It is a happy medium."* This balance ensures that babies are engaged with stimulating activities that support development, while also having the opportunity to develop social skills and autonomy through play. It also supports parents in learning how to read and respond to their child's cues in a natural setting.

A few parents pointed out a limitation regarding age groups, suggesting a desire for broader inclusivity: *"It's nice to come when my older one is at nursery, but it can be hard to balance the needs of two children, it would be great if my toddler could come to these classes too, or if there was one suitable for toddlers."* This reflects a common parental challenge in managing siblings of different ages and highlights the potential to expand or adapt group offerings to better support families with multiple young children.

For new attendees, the format provides a reassuring framework: *"Last week was my first time, I am really enjoying it. I like the structured part, it's not so much of a free for all!"* This shows how predictable routines and thematic sessions (such as weekly topics like 'farm animals') help parents and babies settle in, reducing any feelings of chaos or uncertainty. The group's structure gives parents confidence in how to engage their children meaningfully without pressure.

Finally, the social and practical value of the group is also evident for parents managing work and childcare: *"I am heading back to work next month, I am going to really miss the group. Luckily my parents will look after [child] on my workdays so they will keep bringing them to the group."* This illustrates the attachment and value families place on the group

as part of their support network and routine, reinforcing the importance of sustained access to such community spaces.

Overall, the gentle structure combined with informal playtime fosters a safe environment where both parents and babies can thrive. Thematic weekly sessions provide engaging, age-appropriate content that supports early literacy and development, while free play and social moments encourage peer support and friendship formation. This careful balance nurtures trust, routine, and belonging, making the group both enriching and accessible.

Summary and Conclusion: Impact of *Let's Talk Babies* Groups

The *Let's Talk Babies* (LTB) groups have demonstrated a significant and multifaceted positive impact on both infants and their caregivers, effectively addressing the core objectives of supporting early reading practices, providing resources like books and the baby bank, helping parents to form supportive peer networks and supporting early childhood development. The work was aimed to target the most deprived families economically and socially.

The evidence gathered from participant observation and parental discussions, highlights the groups as a valuable community resource that nurtures early literacy, socialisation, parental wellbeing, and family resilience.

Supporting Infant Socialisation and Development

One of the aims of LTB is to support infants' early social and communicative development, through interactive groups and supporting the home literacy environment to engage with early reading practices. The groups clearly provide a vital social environment where babies can experience peer interaction, develop early social skills, and gain confidence in shared settings. Parents consistently reported observing improvements in their children's sociability and even readiness for nursery transitions, attributing these gains to the exposure and routine that the groups offer. The groups function as a gentle bridge between the home and more formal childcare or education settings, helping babies acclimatise to routines, shared spaces, and social engagement in a calm, supportive atmosphere.

Beyond socialisation, parents also noted the sensory and emotional benefits for their babies. The opportunities for stimulation through stories, songs, and play contributed to babies' engagement and regulation, often reflected in positive post-session behaviours such as improved sleep. This highlights the group's role in supporting not only social but also emotional and developmental needs from infancy, with some parents connecting attendance to longer-term family literacy practices across siblings.

Enhancing Parental Wellbeing and Peer Support

LTB groups offer far more than developmental activities; they are crucial spaces of social and emotional support for parents navigating early parenthood. Early parenthood can be isolating and emotionally challenging, particularly for first-time parents. The groups provide a consistent, low-pressure environment where parents can share experiences, receive emotional validation, and build supportive peer networks.

The formation of friendships and community bonds through the groups is a clear indication of their social value. Parents emphasised how the group mitigated feelings of loneliness and provided much-needed breaks from the demands of home life. This reflects an important preventative function for parental mental health, illustrating how community-based parent-and-baby groups contribute to resilience and wellbeing beyond their explicit educational goals.

Building Parental Confidence and Skills

A key objective of LTB is empowering parents as their child's first educator, particularly in early literacy. The groups successfully foster parental confidence by modelling shared reading practices and offering practical, flexible strategies to incorporate early literacy into everyday routines. This could have been further demonstrated by the facilitator explicitly signposting what they are doing and how to replicate this at home. Parents expressed that the groups helped bridge gaps in their knowledge, normalise reading from infancy, and provide motivation to engage in literacy activities even when parents themselves felt uncertain or lacked prior experience.

The inclusivity of the groups also stands out, supporting multilingual families and encouraging shared caregiving roles, everyone was welcome: mothers, fathers, grandparents, and foster carers; thereby promoting equitable parental involvement. The balance between structure and flexibility was repeatedly praised, enabling parents to engage at their own pace and according to their family's needs.

Creating a Welcoming, Structured Environment

Parents valued the group's "gentle structure": a careful blend of thematic, guided activities alongside informal free play. This balance created a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere that encouraged participation without pressure or formality. Such an environment was especially important for new attendees, helping them settle in and gradually build confidence in both social settings and early learning practices.

The thematic weekly sessions provide meaningful content that supports developmental goals, while the free play and social interaction foster autonomy and peer relationships for babies. This design ensures that both children and parents find value and comfort in the sessions, reinforcing routine and belonging within a community space. Free-play elements encouraged parents to engage in interaction with their babies and provided ideas of resources and input their babies could engage with at home. Further

consideration of the types of resources provided could enhance this, for example providing natural resources, treasure baskets, story sacks, and more book-based resources, with explicit signposting from the facilitator could further enhance the building of parental knowledge in supporting children's development at home.

Broader Impacts and Sustainability

The groups' impact extends beyond immediate developmental and social outcomes. They function as community hubs where parent networks form, mutual support develops, and social isolation is actively challenged. This network-building is essential for sustained family wellbeing and child development.

Parents also repeatedly highlighted the importance of free access to these groups, which ensures inclusivity and allows families from diverse backgrounds to benefit. As some parents prepare to return to work, the group's significance as a supportive routine and social outlet is especially poignant, marking an emotionally important period of early parenthood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Let's Talk Babies* groups are an impactful successful, multifaceted intervention that meets and exceeds their intended aims. They effectively foster infant social, emotional, and cognitive development through early peer interaction and literacy exposure while simultaneously nurturing parental confidence and wellbeing. By providing a structured yet flexible and welcoming environment, LTB supports families at a critical life stage, helping parents build skills, form supportive social networks, and reduce isolation.

The groups' dual focus on child development and parental mental health highlights their essential role in early years support systems. They act not only as spaces for learning and play but as vital community spaces that promote resilience, connection, and shared growth. The consistent parental feedback underscores the importance of sustaining and potentially expanding access to such groups, particularly given the ongoing challenges of early parenthood and societal pressures. The focus on early reading experiences provides families with opportunities to understand and engage with early literacy bolstering the home literacy environment which is proven to be an important indicator of life-long engagement in reading practices.

Overall, *Let's Talk Babies* offers a model of inclusive, responsive early intervention that strengthens both children's developmental trajectories and family wellbeing, positioning it as a valuable component of community-based early childhood support services.

Early Years Storytimes

What are Early Years Storytime Sessions?

Storytime sessions are interactive sessions delivered by volunteer facilitators in early years settings with children aged 2 to 4 years old. Let's Talk Reading works with 39 settings across Ipswich and visit each one for a Storytime session at least termly. These sessions are designed to bring stories to life using props such as puppets, soft toys, or other engaging items that capture children's imaginations and encourage participation. Each session typically includes the reading of at least two rich, age-appropriate storybooks, chosen to promote language development and a love of reading. In addition to storytelling, volunteers lead the children in singing at least two nursery rhymes, incorporating actions to help the children engage physically and musically with the content. Parents are invited to attend these sessions, fostering family involvement in early literacy experiences. On some occasions, books are given out during the sessions, such as from Book Trust packs, and a selection of books is usually made available at the end for shared enjoyment between children, parents, and staff. These sessions not only promote early literacy but also encourage social interaction, imagination, and family engagement.

Aims of Early Years Storytime Sessions

Early Years Storytimes are a targeted initiative aimed at enhancing early language and literacy development, with a strong emphasis on parental involvement. A key ambition of LTR is to encourage early years settings and professionals working with preschool-aged children to embed a culture of reading and communication. This includes ensuring that every child has access to age-appropriate books at home from birth and that early year's settings and schools are equipped with adequate libraries. These libraries are expected to include books that reflect emotional wellbeing, empowerment, diversity, and offer dual-language options for families whose first language is not English.

LTR's work with Early Years settings focuses on building and sustaining strong relationships with all 39 early years settings involved in the programme. The goal is to promote greater parental engagement, in part by supporting settings to run groups for parents and children. LTR also aims to deliver one or two Storytime sessions each term per setting, totalling around 200 sessions per year. Book distribution is central to the initiative, with every child receiving a free book pack at Christmas, as well as additional books at Easter, bringing the total to 3,300 pa.

Mini-libraries have already been established in most settings and are updated each year. To support families with English as an additional language (EAL), settings collectively receive around 400 dual-language books per year, totalling 800 by March 2025. To support

transitions to school, each mini-library also receives “starting school” books, around five per setting.

Early Years Settings: The research approach

To understand how the Storytime sessions were delivered and experienced, the researcher attended five separate sessions held in five different early years settings. Some of these sessions were attended by parents, while others were not. During these visits, the researcher spoke with various stakeholders including volunteer facilitators, early years staff, and parents where they were present. The researcher adopted a participant observation approach, actively engaging in the sessions when appropriate. This included assisting with the use of props, singing songs, reading stories, and distributing stickers, leaflets, and book packs to families. This immersive method allowed the researcher to better understand the dynamics of the sessions and the roles of both adults and children.

Observation of the Sessions

Across the sessions, it was clear that many settings had visible and accessible book collections for parents and children to borrow, supported by LTR’s provision of mini-libraries. The children were highly engaged during the sessions, they listened attentively, joined in enthusiastically, and responding positively to the stories and songs. The use of props was particularly effective in drawing the children into the narrative. Facilitators skilfully used items such as puppets and toys to animate the stories and help children connect emotionally and imaginatively with the characters and events.

The volunteer facilitators demonstrated strong skills in maintaining children’s attention and knowing when to transition between activities. For example, they used lively action songs between stories to keep energy levels high and children involved. Facilitators employed a range of interactive techniques to secure children’s engagement, such as encouraging them to repeat key phrases or respond to specific moments in the story, for instance, by ‘booing’ the villainous ‘Evil Pea’ character in the Supertato story. Some facilitators enhanced the interactivity of the songs by incorporating fabric or Lycra as props. One particularly effective example involved a piece of blue Lycra transformed into a pond for the song “Five Speckled Frogs,” complete with frog and log props; then it was used like a parachute for games, and going back and forth for “Row, row, your boat!” This creative approach supported holistic learning by integrating counting, turn-taking, social interaction, singing, and language development. Sharing such creative techniques among facilitators could further strengthen consistency and enhance learning opportunities across sessions.

After the main activities, volunteers brought out additional books for shared reading, allowing parents or staff to sit with children and explore stories together. Some volunteers also provided information about public libraries, which was particularly beneficial and should be adopted more widely across all sessions. While some sessions had strong parental attendance, others had very few or no parents present. Continuing efforts to remove barriers to parental involvement and increase engagement would be valuable. Where parents were in attendance there was a mixture of family members, mothers, fathers, and grandparents attending the Storytime sessions. The children whose family members were in attendance were very excited to see them there, and joining in with activities at the setting, enriching connections between home and the early years environment.

A notable observation was the high number of families with English as an additional language. These families expressed appreciation for the Storytime sessions and the provision of book packs. Early years staff consistently spoke about the value of having access to dual-language books, which are often expensive and difficult for settings to obtain independently. The support provided by LTR in sourcing and supplying these resources was highlighted as especially helpful. Early years staff also expressed gratitude for LTR's overall support and were enthusiastic participants in the sessions.

Early Years Storytimes – A thematic Analysis

This thematic analysis is drawn from quotes and discussions from early years staff, parents and volunteer facilitators of the early years Storytime sessions.

Theme 1: Book Access and Affordability

A recurring and powerful theme emerging from the research is the lack of equitable access to high-quality children's literature, particularly age-appropriate and dual language texts. For both families and early years settings, the cost of books remains a significant barrier. This challenge is amplified in settings with a high proportion of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), where a wide range of languages is spoken and the need for inclusive resources is even greater.

Early years staff highlighted their dependence on external programmes like Let's Talk Reading to provide books that they would otherwise be unable to afford. One practitioner reflected candidly: *“Books are expensive, and we would really struggle to fund them ourselves”* (EY Staff). This financial constraint resonates across multiple settings, where staff are doing their best to maintain a supply of accessible texts, often through creative means such as borrowing and rotating stock: *“We have really appreciated Let’s Talk Reading helping with our library, we have a lot of children on roll, and keeping enough books topped up so families can borrow them is hard. We do lose a few books too; they*

are not always returned. But on the flipside, I hope they are being enjoyed still which is the main thing” (EY Staff).

The demand for dual language texts, in particular, places additional pressure on settings already operating under tight budgets. These books are not only more costly, but also more difficult to source in the wide range of languages needed to meet the needs of diverse communities. As one practitioner explained: “*Dual language books are expensive and harder to get, it has been great to have help with this*” (EY Staff), while another emphasised: “*We have 13 different languages spoken here, foreign language books are expensive, and it would be hard for us to afford them all*” (EY Staff). In contexts of growing linguistic diversity, this demand often far exceeds what is financially viable, especially amid a wider funding crisis in early years education.

From the perspective of families, the emotional and practical value of receiving books was evident. The provision of book packs, via Let’s Talk Reading was highly appreciated by receiving families. One parent, upon receiving a pack, asked: “*This is to keep? Oh, thank you!*”; the parent was visibly emotional during this exchange demonstrating the depth of feeling. Another parent shared: “*I’m beginning to collect more books for her shelf at home, so this [book pack] really helps*”, indicating the long-term impact of even small book donations on the home literacy environment. Several other parents expressed their appreciation in similarly heartfelt ways: “*We have loved the books at home, thank you!*”; and “*The book pack was fantastic we are still reading those books all the time*”; further: “*Thank you for this [book pack] it is wonderful*”.

Staff also noted how parents appreciated the intentionality behind the selections: “*Parents appreciated having age-specific books in the pack and new books they hadn’t heard of*” (EY Staff). This suggests that curated, quality literature tailored to developmental stages can help bridge access gaps, particularly when families may not have the time, knowledge, or resources to select books themselves.

This quote further encapsulates this: “*Parents were so appreciative of the book packs given at Christmas, I think some of them do not have many books at home*” (EY Staff), parents expressed the gratitude felt and the underlying issue: for many children, these gifted books may be among the few they own. Further one practitioner noted “*I’d estimate only about 50% of our families read regularly with their children*” (EY Staff). This shows that there is a need to reach these families who are not engaging with reading at home or have limited access to texts in the home learning environment.

Overall, this theme highlights a troubling reality: book ownership cannot be taken for granted. In communities facing socio-economic challenges, limited public resources, and high linguistic diversity, both families and early years settings are struggling to secure the books they need. Programmes like the book packs and Storytimes provided by Let’s

Talk Reading are essential interventions helping to redress a deeply embedded inequality in access to early literacy resources.

Theme 2: Engagement and Barriers to Parental Involvement

A central theme emerging from discussions with key stakeholders was the uneven levels of parental engagement with early reading and related activities. While some families were described as highly enthusiastic and actively involved, practitioners consistently reflected on the difficulty of reaching others. Not all children are experiencing reading regularly at home, and for many families, systemic and structural barriers impede involvement in early years literacy initiatives.

Practitioners noted “*some parents are really diligent in reading, and some are just not*” (EY Staff), with another adding: “*It is harder to engage with some parents, the engaged ones will always engage, but it’s harder to reach others*” (EY Staff). This persistent disparity underlines the challenge of ensuring all children benefit equally from home reading. It also echoes broader research that highlights the impact of socio-economic factors, time poverty, and parental confidence on engagement with early literacy.

Parents themselves shared honest reflections about the realities of trying to incorporate Storytime at home. One parent said: “*We try and do a bedtime story, but some nights it gets too late*”, while another explained: “*I really try and read at home, but it’s difficult and can do it only occasionally [child] is the youngest of 6*”. These testimonies emphasise how competing demands and responsibilities can impact even well-intentioned efforts to support children’s literacy, and for some it is not a priority. As one practitioner noted: “*I think parents are just busy and tired now. Life is different than it was 10, 20 years ago. They’re exhausted and opt for technology instead of Storytimes*” (EY Staff).

Engagement is also shaped by wider socio-emotional and cultural factors, especially in the post-COVID context. One practitioner reflected: “*We have definitely seen a change, post-COVID. Parents seem less engaged and lack social networks...it could be due to their lack of confidence*” (EY Staff). This points to an emerging trend of social withdrawal and disconnection, which may particularly affect families who already felt marginalised or unsure of their role in their child’s early education.

Language barriers and inflexible work schedules further exacerbate these issues, making it difficult for some parents to attend events or take part in Storytime sessions. Practitioners reported this as a consistent challenge: “*We have tried different times of day for the sessions, to encourage more parents to join, but it’s tricky for them around work*”, and “*Next time we will try a different day, to see if we can get more parents to join*”. Let’s Talk Reading has responded actively to these challenges by varying the timing and structure of sessions to accommodate different family routines, with one practitioner noting: “*We have tried different times to encourage parents to come to the sessions, we now get some parents, and some grandparents too which is lovely*”.

Despite these efforts, the emotional impact of uneven parental participation on children was acknowledged: “*It’s hard because when some parents join in, but others don’t, that can be upsetting for the children*”. For those who are able to attend, the experience is clearly valued by both children and their caregivers. One parent remarked: “*Coming along today was great, it was nice to see [child] at nursery and they love it if I can come*”, while another shared: “*It was lovely to join in, and see [child] enjoying the story and songs*”.

At the same time, some settings reported more positive patterns of engagement: “*We get really good turnout of parents for Storytime sessions*”, and “*We do try and get parents to come to the Storytime sessions, it means a lot to the children when they come*”. These successes often reflect the cumulative impact of sustained outreach and the gradual building of trust, especially where relationships between staff and families are strong and welcoming. But the differences could also reflect differences of parental cohorts at different settings, for example if some settings are predominantly accessed by working families, that may impact the ability of parents to attend.

Overall, this theme speaks to the complex interplay of logistical, emotional, and cultural barriers that limit some families’ participation. While some parents are clearly invested in supporting their child’s reading at home, others face very real obstacles, including long working hours, language barriers, lack of time, and social isolation. Let’s Talk Reading is responding constructively and flexibly to these challenges and seeking to overcome these for the Storytime visits.

Theme 3: Language, Literacy, and EAL Support

Multilingualism was a defining characteristic of all participating early years settings. Across discussions, staff consistently described high numbers of children and families with English as an Additional Language (EAL), many of whom spoke a diverse array of home languages. This linguistic richness brought enormous value to the settings, but it also posed significant challenges for literacy provision, particularly in sourcing, funding, and circulating appropriate dual language materials.

The need for multilingual resources was clearly articulated by staff: “*So many of our children have EAL, today it was only 1 out of 22 who has English as a first language*”. In such environments, providing language-appropriate books is not a niche concern but a core necessity. Yet the practicalities of doing so are difficult: “*We have such a wide range of home languages here; it would be really challenging for us to source dual language books for all. So, we have been so grateful of Let’s Talk Reading’s support in that*”. Settings are already under considerable financial pressure and cannot afford the wide and diverse range of books needed to reflect their communities. “*To get the full benefit of dual language books, we would love to have enough that we could send them home with the parents to then be brought back. But it does mean relying on parents to bring them back*

in good condition. So, this is also a barrier sometimes”. This was further echoed by: “*Language is definitely a barrier for some of our families, we help them with paperwork and forms and making appointments*”, this demonstrates that the settings built bonds with their families and supporting them. They are therefore well-placed in conjunction with LTR to further supporting them with reading and book access.

Despite these challenges, there was strong appreciation for the inclusive approach of LTR and for the principle that language should never be a barrier to early reading. “*EAL can be a big barrier for our families, they are not confident in reading to their children in English. It is great to offer dual language books to support this*”. One practitioner captured this ethos powerfully: “*We have been provided with some foreign language books; this has been great for our EAL families who are not comfortable with reading in English. The language doesn't matter, reading and enjoying stories is important*”.

This perspective was echoed by parents themselves, who expressed gratitude and creativity in supporting their children’s literacy development. “*They [LTR] helped me get some books my language, I am not so good to read English*”, shared one mother, while another explained: “*We are Kurdish, and they [LTR] helped us with using the library to get some books*”. Even when dual language resources were limited, families found workarounds: “*My older children, they can read, they can speak English well. I use Google Translate*”. Another parent highlighted the role of siblings in bridging language gaps at home: “*Older brother now reads to [child] which is good, my English is not as good*”. These examples demonstrate the important intra-sibling and peer-based strategies that multilingual families employ to foster literacy in the home.

Staff were also keen to stress that EAL status did not equate to a lack of engagement. On the contrary, many EAL families were highly motivated and enthusiastic: “*We have a very high proportion of families with EAL, but they are so engaged and supportive*”. Another practitioner noted the additional importance of stories for children navigating both EAL and speech and language challenges: “*We have a lot of children with EAL or struggling with speech and language difficulties. So, stories are so important*”. In this context, books serve not only as literacy tools but as vital supports for communication and connection.

What emerges across this theme is the recognition that EAL families are doing their best, often with limited English, to support their children’s early reading. While the linguistic diversity of settings is a strength, it also demands tailored resources and sustained support, which most settings simply cannot afford without external input. The work of Let’s Talk Reading in supplying dual language materials and respecting home languages is essential. It empowers parents and enables children to see their language and culture reflected and valued from the very beginning of their literacy journeys.

Theme 4: Technology vs Traditional Literacy

Across all settings, there was a clear and growing concern that children's increasing exposure to digital technology is reshaping their early literacy experiences, often in ways that displace traditional book-based interactions. Many Early Years staff described how some children arrive at nursery more familiar with touchscreen gestures than with the basic mechanics of holding or navigating a book. As one early year's practitioner put it: *"Technology has played a factor I think, some children will flock to me when I try and take the register on the iPad and will try and swipe on it because they know how. Yet, struggle with holding a book or turning pages."* Another noted that *"Children are more likely to know how to use a device like a tablet, than turn a page in a book or pick up a pencil and do some mark making"*.

The consequence of this can have real impacts, it can affect children's fine motor development, their understanding of narrative structure, and their ability to engage in sustained joint attention of stories, all of which are crucial for school readiness. In some cases, settings were even having to adapt the types of books provided to accommodate children's lack of experience: *"We found children don't know how to use and respect books properly, we had to switch to use hard back board books and build up to paperbacks or 'lift the flaps' because they'd get ripped."* One staff member recalled: *"I have seen so many times, children trying to swipe books like they are a tablet! Because they don't have books at home but have seen the technology."* These stories point to a shift in how very young children interact with texts, with screen-based habits replacing tactile, book-based ones for some in the home environment.

From the staff perspective, the issue extends beyond just motor skills to attention span and sensory expectation. As one observed, *"Technology is 'quick' compared to reading a book, I think children get used to the instant gratification."* This can affect how children respond to the slower, more immersive pace of shared reading and storytelling. Meanwhile, practitioners raised concerns about how technology is replacing not only books but the social and emotional routines around them, particularly bedtime stories. *"I've spoken to a few parents to encourage bedtime reading, and they say they put something on their phone for them, like a video of someone reading. But that's very different, moving pictures is not the same as a bedtime story."* Another added: *"It is a shame, and really sad parents do not read as much, it is important bonding time and so valuable."*

These observations were echoed by family members too. A grandparent shared a poignant reflection: *"It was different in my time, there was less technology, I think people read less at home because they are too busy on their tablets and phones."* This sense of loss of shared Storytimes, of the quiet connection that reading allows, was felt across

generations and raised wider questions about how the digital age is reshaping early childhood itself.

Within this context, the role of *Let's Talk Reading* was described not simply as helpful but essential. One practitioner put it plainly: "*I honestly think it's such an invaluable service.*" By providing physical books, tangible, tactile, and designed for shared reading, LTR is reintroducing many children to the pleasures and developmental benefits of traditional literacy. These are not just books, but tools for reconnection: between children and stories, and between children and the adults who read to them.

The theme of technology versus traditional literacy therefore cuts to the heart of early development. It highlights the need to protect and promote book-based experiences in the early years, especially in communities where access to books is already limited. Without this work, there is a real risk that some children will enter school without the foundational experiences of story, attention, and turn-taking that come from being read to, not just by a screen, but by someone who knows and loves them.

Theme 5: Joy, Belonging, and the Value of Shared Storytimes

Amid challenges related to access, language, and technology, what emerged powerfully across discussions was a deep appreciation for the joy and connection created by shared Storytimes sessions. Staff, parents, and LTR facilitators consistently described these sessions not only as educationally valuable but as emotionally resonant and socially enriching. Storytimes were framed as powerful and impactful encounters.

Staff described children's reactions in strikingly positive terms, with several noting how the sessions brought excitement, novelty, and deep engagement. "*The sessions are just so full of joy, it is a real wow moment for our children.*" The presence of an external facilitator was especially welcomed, with one setting commenting: "*The children love [facilitator] coming and reading stories with them. They particularly love that it is a fresh face, and they have different books and resources to us.*" This novelty, new stories, new voices, new props, seemed to spark heightened levels of attention and focus, even among children who often struggled in typical group activities. "*It was amazing to see [child] engage with the session today; they do not normally sit still long enough for us!*"

Importantly, this joy was not one-sided. Parents and carers also expressed delight at being included in these sessions and seeing their children engaged. One parent said, "*The session was very good, I am very excited and she's very excited.*" Another added, "*It is a really good initiative, and so important.*" These shared moments of excitement were about more than just stories; they were about togetherness and connection.

In many cases, settings already prioritised shared reading as part of their daily routines: "*We all sit down and read stories together regularly throughout the day, you could see that*

when the session started they all knew what to do”, but the addition of an external, dedicated Storytime brought something extra: energy, variety, and a chance to make Storytime special. Props and storytelling resources provided by LTR were particularly valued: *“The children love the sessions, they love all the props and resources”*, and *“I noticed that they were so interested in the story, they were fixed looking at the book, which was great to see.”*

The sessions helped to foster a sense of community and connection between families. One facilitator recalled: *“Two mums met each other at one of the sessions, and they were both Polish; they made friends swapping ideas and where the best Polish shops were.”* These kinds of encounters were meaningful to build social networks among families, this highlights how literacy initiatives can also serve as platforms for social inclusion and parental support, particularly for families who may otherwise feel isolated.

What this theme makes clear is that *Let’s Talk Reading* is not simply delivering literacy activities, it is creating spaces of joy, belonging, and relational warmth. In doing so, it supports early development not just cognitively but emotionally and socially. These moments matter. They shape children’s attitudes towards books, strengthen bonds between parents and children, and build relationships between families and settings. In communities where language, resources, and time can be barriers to connection, LTR offers something rare: a moment to slow down, to sit together, and to share a story.

Theme 6: Reading Culture, Routine, and School Readiness

Across all participating settings, there was clear evidence of a growing reading culture, one that extended beyond the boundaries of individual sessions and began to embed itself in everyday routines, curriculum planning, and school readiness work. The presence and support of *Let’s Talk Reading* (LTR) has enriched these practices and provided ongoing support for embedding literacy in Early Years curricular.

For some practitioners, books and stories were described as a cornerstone of their educational approach. One staff member shared: *“Books and reading are central to our curriculum; we often theme our activities around a book of the week and will revisit familiar stories again and again.”* This integration of reading into curriculum design signals a pedagogical shift towards viewing books not just as tools for literacy, but as springboards for holistic learning across all areas of development.

LTR has also supported settings in building more structured routines around reading, especially through the development of lending libraries and book exchange systems. As one setting reflected, *“We have really developed our library of books, and now each week parents and children swap out their books for new ones.”* This kind of weekly rhythm not only encourages regular reading at home, but also close working between families and settings.

The presence of a wide and varied book stock, supported by LTR, allowed settings to align books with topics like transition to school, an area where parents often seek guidance. *“Let’s Talk Reading have supported us with books on starting school, that’s been so helpful to supporting school readiness.”* These targeted resources play an important role in preparing children emotionally and practically for the next stage of their education. Familiarity with the structure of stories, the act of sitting and listening, and the routines around sharing and returning books all contribute to a broader sense of school readiness.

However, facilitators also raised concerns about disparities in home reading experiences. *“I am certain that some of these children are not read to at home.”* For these children, LTR’s Storytime sessions and the embedding of reading routines within the setting become especially critical. They may represent a child’s primary, and perhaps only, consistent exposure to stories. The initiative’s value, then, lies not just in what it offers to already engaged families, but in how it quietly and persistently builds reading habits among the most vulnerable.

LTR’s influence extended to modelling good practice. For example, one facilitator reflected on using the book *Supertato* with children: *“We are reading the Supertato book because it is in the BookTrust pack and shows parents what they can do with it. It’s quite a long, complicated story, and some children struggle to listen so we will adapt it as we go.”* This kind of flexible, responsive practice is rooted in modelling and co-learning, it enhances parents knowledge and skills to replicate reading activities at home and how they can be adapted, even when books may seem too complex.

In this way, Let’s Talk Reading is not just increasing access to books; it is shaping the culture around how books are used, valued, and shared. It supports the creation of environments where reading is embedded in daily life, where Storytime is a routine rather than a one-off, and where transitions to school are scaffolded through story. The result is potential for a significant shift: from isolated literacy activities to a sustained, embedded culture of reading.

Conclusion: Embedding Equity, and Enriching Childhoods through early Literacy

The findings presented across the six themes of the evaluation of Let’s Talks Readings work with Early Years settings, offers a compelling, detailed picture of how Let’s Talk Reading is making a measurable and meaningful difference in the lives of young children, their families, and the early years settings that support them. From improving book access and addressing affordability, to shaping long-term reading culture and school readiness, the work with Early Years settings is more than a literacy programme, it is a vital intervention embedded in the everyday lives of diverse communities, meeting them where they are.

A central thread running through this is inequality of access, to books, to reading opportunities, to shared moments of literacy and connection. The high cost of high-quality and dual-language texts is a significant barrier, both for individual families and underfunded early years settings operating amid financial precarity. This challenge is magnified in settings where many languages are spoken, making it challenging for practitioners to resource appropriately without external support. The books and resources provided through LTR are not just appreciated; they are often essential. Families receiving books express heartfelt gratitude, and settings rely on this external input to keep reading materials in circulation. In this context, LTR is actively redressing systemic inequities, not only through provision but through empowerment

Beyond material access, LTR is also tackling the more hidden but equally persistent barriers to engagement: time poverty, confidence, and language. The programme's flexible approach, offering sessions and modelling inclusive, joyful Storytime practices, is hugely beneficial. Critically, it offers a judgment-free space in which all families, regardless of background or ability, are welcomed into the shared experience of storytelling.

Where technology has displaced traditional reading practices in some homes, LTR offers a counterbalance. Practitioners and parents alike observed the shift in children's behaviours and attention spans, with many more familiar with swiping a screen than turning a page. LTR restores the tactile, relational, and imaginative dimensions of early reading, creating moments of stillness, connection, and cognitive engagement that screens cannot replicate.

At its core, LTR is fostering something far more profound than literacy alone, it is cultivating a culture of belonging and joy. The emotional resonance of shared storytimes, the social ties formed between parents and children. Volunteers are not only delivering books and sessions; they are building trust, modelling good practice, and shaping literacy behaviours that ripple through families and communities.

Moreover, the programme is having a systemic influence. It is supporting settings to integrate reading into curriculum planning, to build lending libraries, and to scaffold transitions into school with confidence and care. Where once some children may have entered school without ever owning a book, they now come with stories shared, routines practised, and a foundation for learning laid.

Overall, LTR is not simply delivering outcomes, it is changing the conditions under which early literacy can flourish. It is attempting to reach the families who need it most, supporting practitioners, and bringing story into the heart of early childhood. As the pressures on early years provision continue, and as inequalities widen, this work is not only valuable, but also vital.

Primary School Support

Let's Talk Reading work with around 33 Primary Schools across Ipswich with varying degrees of engagement and differing levels of support for the schools. Particularly Let's Talk Reading aim to ensure that every child leaving Primary School is a competent reader and they aspire towards a goal of 100% success in the Key Stage Two (KS2) Reading SATs (Standardised Tests). They ask schools to undertake a 'reading pledge' to put emphasis and commitment towards these goals. Let's Talk Reading additionally target the most in-need schools based on KS2 SATs results and will therefore deepen their work with these schools. Presented here are two school case studies, the first, The Oaks is a longer-term view of work that Let's Talk Reading has conducted in partnership with the school over a ten-year period. The second school is Ranelagh Primary School, and focuses on the support work conducted in the academic year 2024-25.

Case Study 1: The Oaks Primary School and Let's Talk Reading: *A Decade of Partnership*

School Context

The Oaks is a two-form entry primary school located in Chantry, one of the most deprived areas of Ipswich. Over the past decade, The Oaks has undergone significant transformation, moving from an "insecurely good" Ofsted rating to "Outstanding." A key part of this success story is the longstanding partnership with Let's Talk Reading (LTR), which has supported the school in embedding literacy and stories across the curriculum and engaging families in developing a culture of reading.

Research Approach

The study involved a comprehensive visit to The Oaks primary school, including a tour of the school, library spaces, and classrooms to observe literacy resources. In-depth discussions were held with the Headteacher and the English lead to understand how literacy and storytelling are embedded throughout the curriculum and to understand 10 years of support from Let's Talk Reading.

Observational Findings

- The Oaks is a relatively large two-form entry school located in Chantry, one of Ipswich's most deprived areas.
- Let's Talk Reading (LTR) has partnered with the school for around 10 years through various literacy projects.
- Over this period, SATs results have increased significantly, with LTR initiatives contributing to this improvement.

- The school's Ofsted rating has risen from 'good' (described by the headteacher as an 'insecure good') to 'outstanding'.
- The reception area includes a book borrowing scheme.
- The library is well stocked with books for all age groups, something LTR supported and continues to support.
- A recent example: LTR provided the school with board books to better support nursery children who struggled with traditional picture books, addressing unexpected developmental needs that the school budget could not cover.
- Every classroom contains a book area, a dedicated area with quality books and quiet reading spaces, and there are several 'book nooks' in shared spaces across the school
- Bilingual texts are something the school and community really values with LTR supporting their provision.
- Funding from LTR's 'Raising the Bar' initiative enabled systemic changes supporting the school to embed literacy at the core of school life.

Background and Partnership Development

The Oaks and Let's Talk Reading have collaborated for around 10 years on various literacy projects. This partnership has provided vital resources, expertise, and systemic support for literacy, helping the school overcome challenges related to socio-economic disadvantage and diverse learner needs. As the Headteacher reflected: *"We have worked with Let's Talk Reading for around 10 years, and have really appreciated the support over this time."*

LTR's input has ranged from providing targeted resources such as board books for nursery children, to strategic initiatives like using the "Raising the Bar" funding, which enabled the school to introduce the Power of Reading programme, create high-quality library spaces, and book areas in every classroom, quiet areas stocked with quality books that remain central to school life years later.

Targeted Support for Families and Learners

A consistent theme throughout the partnership has been support for families and children who face multiple barriers to literacy. The school noted that many families do not have books at home and some parents have limited literacy skills themselves. The school serves a growing population of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), especially in the nursery, where 60-70% of children currently speak other languages.

The support from LTR has helped address these challenges in practical and meaningful ways:

“We identified a need to stock the library with some board books to support our nursery children as this was a particularly low cohort. We had a bit of crisis; this wasn’t something we could easily provide with budgets already set. Let’s Talk Reading were able to help with this, and we now have a box of quality board books to support our nursery children and their families.”

These included “*touchy feely books, flap books and high-quality texts you would want at home with your own children*,” which the school was proud to offer to families who might not otherwise afford them. Bilingual texts have also been prioritised, helping to bridge language gaps for EAL learners.

Embedding Literacy at the Heart of School Life

The partnership has gone beyond resource provision to include training, systemic planning, and accountability structures. The school purchased “Power of Reading” training through LTR funding support, which profoundly influenced their English teaching:

“We bought the power of reading training with the funding, 10 years ago, which took our English planning and teaching a long way and put books at the heart of what we were doing. We also bought interventions to support children’s reading.”

The school continued to use Power of Reading for 8 years before being able to move away from it with the principles fully embedded. Books remain central not only to English lessons but across the curriculum. The impact has extended to writing:

“We also saw impact in writing, the quality of writing, the kinds of writing children were experiencing. It encouraged us to consider using a wide range of inspiring, diverse texts. With engaging books being at the centre of teaching writing and ensuring there was a focus on understanding and using ambitious vocabulary and language structures when writing.”

The school has maintained a rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact of LTR-funded initiatives:

“There was a really tight system of stating what you are going to spend the money on, what will the impact be and how will you measure it. We reported back to Let’s Talk Reading.” Furthermore, “We went to termly meetings, where we’d share what we had been doing, where we spent the money and the impact it was having. The English leads and librarians from local schools were there, and we had the opportunity to exchange ideas.”

Supporting Disadvantaged Pupils

Recognising that many children at The Oaks face disadvantage regardless of official eligibility for funding, the school has worked closely with LTR to provide book packs to pupil premium children and other vulnerable groups. This support has been warmly welcomed by families, though it has required careful management to avoid feelings of exclusion among pupils:

“They gave our pupil premium children book packs also, I know this was really appreciated by the families.”

However, they also noted:

“It is difficult to manage why some groups of children get books and others do not, we have to manage it carefully, so no one feels singled out or left out.”

“There is a sense for us, that one of our driving forces is that everybody is disadvantaged.. This is a school that serves an area of relatively high deprivation and all of our children live within this community. So, we don’t tend to treat ‘pupil premium’ children differently.”

“The gap between a child who’s triggered the pupil premium and one who hasn’t is so small, there is no gap. Some people trigger the extra funding and some don’t. For example, some of our EAL families are working three jobs, but they are not triggering the funding because they are not taking benefits”

Therefore, this may offer a point of recommendation and development to consider whether it is feasible to amend the targeted areas for support going forward, considering the need to extend and deepen the provision.

The school has also used LTR support to trial Irlen’s screening for children experiencing visual stress, training their SENDCO and securing resources such as overlays to meet identified needs sustainably:

“Now they have supported us with Irlen’s screening trial too... What is really important to us is that our SENDCO is being trained in the screening now also. This means for years to come we can screen our own children.”

They also appreciated the follow up support to fund resources, such as tinted glasses and overlays for those children subsequently diagnosed with Irlen’s.

Outcomes and School Development

The long-term effects of the partnership are clear in both quantitative and qualitative measures. The school has seen a significant increase in SATs results over the 10+ years, which staff attribute in part to the enriched literacy provision supported by LTR. Pupil

numbers have grown from around 300 to 450, with the school now oversubscribed in Reception each year, a testament to its improved reputation and outcomes.

The Headteacher emphasised the profound cultural impact: “*One of the hardest things for schools to do is reading, we teach them to read, but instilling a love of reading that’s more challenging.*” Most profound is the impact of the following statement from the headteacher:

“*It’s not unreasonable to assume that a child leaves here at the age of 11 as a more proficient reader than their parents.*”

Staff recognise that raising reading’s profile, improving access to books, and engaging families are crucial parts of this success:

“*Let’s Talk Reading has helped with the battle of trying to engender a love of reading. Firstly, it has raised the profile of reading. Secondly with the book packs that are sent home to disadvantaged families, meant that there are books in the household because that is not always the case.*”

Challenges and Reflections

While overwhelmingly positive, it is not been without challenges. Communication around some initiatives (e.g., unplanned arrival of book packs) caused minor issues for managing expectations:

“*We haven’t always known in advance when things are going to happen, like when book pack bags turn up to send out to disadvantaged pupils, though of course it’s a laudable and lovely thing.*”

The school also noted as above the complexity of distributing resources equitably without alienating children or families:

“*A couple of times we have had to vet the books also, because the books contained words we wouldn’t want a nine-year old coming home with.*”

Therefore, there are some key learning aspects to take forward into future initiatives and consider how to overcome.

Looking Forward

The Oaks continues to value the relationship with Let’s Talk Reading and recognises the need to maintain communication and awareness within the parent community about ongoing local initiatives such as Let’s Talk Babies:

“*We don’t always hear about the other things they are doing, like Let’s Talk Babies right here in the community room. We should get some information out to the parents.*”

They also advocate for sustained accountability to ensure ongoing impact:

“Schools should definitely have to report their impact back to Let’s Talk Reading when they have received support, a bit like raising the bar.” The school therefore valued the opportunity to demonstrate the impacts they were having and saw this accountability a key aspect of partnership with an organisation like LTR.

Summary

The decade-long partnership between The Oaks Primary School and Let’s Talk Reading illustrates how targeted, sustained community-school collaboration can transform literacy outcomes in a challenging context. Through strategic funding, resource provision, training, and family engagement, LTR has assisted in embedding a culture of reading that is visible throughout the school, from nursery board books to enriched writing in Year 6. The impact is not only academic but deeply cultural, fostering a love of reading that equips children to exceed the literacy levels of their parents and thrive as lifelong learners. Therefore, LTR has had a profound impact on the school and the wider community.

Furthermore, this extends beyond this one school. The influence of The Oaks approach to primary education, alongside transformative leadership extended beyond on the individual school. The Oaks is a leader in a multi-academy trust of 16 schools and is highly regarded and influential as a high-quality primary school.

Case Study 2: Ranelagh Primary School: An Evaluation of the Impact of Let's Talk Reading Interventions

School Context

Ranelagh Primary School is a moderately sized, community-based primary school situated in the heart of Ipswich. The school operates with a Published Admission Number (PAN) of 45, which presents logistical challenges as it necessitates the use of mixed-age classes. Currently, the school is undersubscribed, with availability across all year groups.

The school implements *continuous provision* up to and including Key Stage 1 (KS1). This pedagogical approach, typically associated with Early Years education, allows children to direct their own learning through play-based environments rich in resources. At Ranelagh, this approach has been extended beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to meet the developmental and linguistic needs of their diverse intake. Continuous provision supports exploration, play based, child-led learning, and language development, which are an essential consideration in a school where over half the student population are learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

EAL pupils make up 52% of the school population, which is more than double the national average for mainstream primary schools in 2023/24 (22.8%) (DfE, 2025). The school community speaks 23 different languages, with a large Romanian population and a recent increase in African nationalities and languages.

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) provision is also a critical concern, with 35% of pupils identified as having SEND. Many pupils have both EAL and SEND, complicating diagnosis and access to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Funding and recognition for the need for support for these pupils has been a significant barrier due to difficulties in recognising underlying SEND needs where EAL was the initial focus.

Persistent absence is another challenge, with the school reporting a rate of 30% in 2022/23, almost double the local authority average of 15.9% (DfE, 2025). Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) stands at 35.8%, significantly above the national average of 25.9%, indicative of a high proportion of families experiencing socio-economic challenges.

Academic outcomes remain a concern. In 2024, only 19% of pupils met the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths at KS2, compared to a local authority average of 58% and a national average of 61% (DfE, 2025). While these statistics highlight the school's challenges, it's worth noting that Ofsted rated Ranelagh 'Good' across all areas in May 2022 (Ofsted, 2022), recognising its nurturing and inclusive ethos. The school is

warm, inviting, holistic and inclusive. The school's non-affiliation to a multi-academy trust means support structures and funding are solely managed in-house.

A further barrier to sustained academic impact is pupil transience. Some pupils join across different year groups and only remain at the school for 1–2 years, making it difficult to implement long-term interventions or include their progress in key performance data.

Research Approach

Two site visits were made by the researcher. The first included a full school tour with a focus on library and classroom reading spaces. Discussions were held with the acting headteacher (formerly deputy head), who shared candid insights into the school's challenges and how LTR's support was helping address them.

The researcher also observed afterschool reading intervention groups over two separate days, enabling insights into different age groups and pedagogical strategies.

The LTR Project: Afterschool Reading Interventions

LTR funded a series of afterschool reading interventions targeting pupils with lower reading ability. The choice to run sessions after school was driven by several factors:

- *Improved attendance:* Previous attempts at before-school sessions had poor uptake.
- *Protecting curriculum time:* Particularly crucial for EAL pupils, for whom every minute of classroom immersion is vital.
- *Qualified delivery:* Teachers, not teaching assistants, led the sessions.
- *Unfunded by the school:* LTR's support made the initiative possible. This was not something the school could afford to fund independently.

Sessions began in mid-November 2024 and continued until Easter 2025, with assessments at February half term and end-of-term reviews. Each intervention involved groups of 4–5 pupils, led by teachers who were compensated for both teaching and preparation time (45-minute sessions, and paid for an hour).

In total, 44 pupils participated. The demographic breakdown was as follows:

- *EAL:* 26 pupils (59%)
- *SEND:* 4 pupils (9%)
- *FSM:* 14 pupils (32%)
- *Gender:* 23 boys and 21 girls.

Outcomes at February Half Term

- 77% (34 out of 44) of children made measurable progress in reading scores:
 - +3 points: 4 pupils (9%)
 - +2 points: 11 pupils (25%)
 - +1 point: 19 pupils (43%)
 - No progress: 6 pupils (14%)
 - Backward progress: 1 pupil (attendance issues)
 - Insufficient data: 3 pupils

Outcomes at End of the Programmes a

At the end of the programme data was shared by the school demonstrating data from 74 children, to include all across KS1 and KS2 those who took part in both after school and before school provision. Final results demonstrate:

- 77% (57 out of 74) of children made measurable progress in reading scores:
 - +3 sub levels: 6 pupils (8%)
 - +2 sub levels: 16 pupils (22%)
 - +1 sub levels: 35 pupils (48%)
 - No progress: 12 pupils (16%)
 - Backward progress: 2 pupils (SEN/EAL)
 - Insufficient data: 3 pupils

Significance:

The expected level of progress would be 1 sublevel in a term (January to April). For some children it will be even less, especially if they are EAL or SEN. The movement of 3 or 2 sublevels in the same period of time demonstrates accelerated progress even with the usual interventions that the school provides. Therefore this represents significant improvement over the typical expected progress with children reading abilities raising by 2 or 3 sub-levels when typical progress without intervention would have been 1 sub-level or less. The reading lessons and interventions after school were therefore a big success.

Classroom Practice and Pedagogy

The structure and delivery of the afterschool intervention groups reflected Ranelagh Primary School's existing mixed-age class model; a necessity given their 45 PAN intake which leads to vertically grouped classes. Intervention groups similarly combined year groups, such as Years 3 and 4 or Years 5 and 6 allowed for differentiated learning, peer support, and pedagogical flexibility. Sessions were delivered by qualified teachers rather than teaching assistants, enabling consistent high-quality instruction and intentional alignment with classroom practice. Each group observed had a different focus, for example reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. Across all sessions observed, teaching was highly scaffolded and differentiated to support the diverse needs of learners. This included children with EAL, those with identified SEND, and pupils with intersecting disadvantages (e.g. FSM and EAL). Teachers adapted their instructional approaches responsively within small groups of 4–5 children, allowing for individualised feedback and targeted support.

Shared and Supported Reading

In each session, shared reading formed the central activity. Pupils took turns reading aloud, with frequent pauses for decoding, phonics reinforcement, and discussion of vocabulary. For example, in a Year 3/4 group, children were encouraged to break down multisyllabic words phonetically with the teacher guiding pronunciation and understanding. Teachers modelled segmenting and blending strategies in real-time, embedding phonics within authentic reading experiences rather than isolated drills. This was particularly beneficial for EAL pupils who were developing fluency and prosody alongside decoding.

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary enrichment was a strong feature of the sessions. Unknown words were highlighted during reading and collaboratively explored using dictionaries. Teachers modelled dictionary use explicitly, showing pupils how to locate different word forms (e.g., verb vs. noun) and contextualise definitions. In one session, the word 'investigator' prompted a group discussion and dictionary exploration, reinforcing morphological awareness and deepening conceptual understanding. This supported both receptive and expressive language development.

Use of Collaborative Tools and Engagement Strategies

Teachers used simple but effective engagement techniques, such as allowing children to write answers or questions on the board. This tactile and participatory approach fostered a sense of agency and ownership among pupils. Writing on the board proved especially motivating for lower-attaining groups, helping to build confidence and positive associations with reading activities. Praise and encouragement were consistently and meaningfully used to sustain motivation and attention, particularly important for pupils with limited concentration or confidence.

Curriculum Linkages and Cultural Capital

In upper KS2 groups, non-fiction texts were chosen that connected to classroom learning. For example, a Year 5 group engaged with a text about Queen Victoria. The teacher drew from a recent class trip to Christchurch Mansion to make connections between the reading and pupils' lived experiences. This helped to build schema, contextualise new vocabulary (e.g., "republic"), and deepen comprehension. Such cultural capital-building activities are particularly valuable in communities with lower levels of educational attainment at home.

Observations on Pupil Engagement

Levels of engagement varied across groups. In most sessions, the majority of pupils were attentive, enthusiastic, and responsive. However, in each group, at least one child required more prompting to remain focused, perhaps reflecting broader SEND or emotional needs. Teachers handled this sensitively, using redirection strategies and peer support where appropriate. The small group size allowed for quick identification and response to disengagement, minimising learning loss.

Pedagogical Responsiveness

Teachers demonstrated high levels of professional skill in adapting content in the moment to pupil needs. For instance, in lower-attaining groups, comprehension questions were scaffolded through oral discussion before being answered. Teachers frequently rephrased questions, offered sentence starters, and dictated phrases when needed. These approaches supported working memory and language processing while ensuring all pupils could participate meaningfully.

Conclusion

Overall, the afterschool intervention sessions were characterised by high-quality, responsive teaching underpinned by inclusive, child-centred pedagogy. The sessions were well-managed, and teachers effectively differentiated their approaches. The integration of reading with vocabulary, curriculum content, and pupil interest fostered deep engagement and contributed to measurable progress for most participating children. The small group format, led by qualified staff, allowed for sustained attention to individual needs, something that would be difficult to replicate at scale without dedicated funding such as that provided by LTR. The overall success and impact of the interventions are clear from the results which demonstrate 77% of pupils had made progress at the halfway point. The school were thrilled with the progress the pupils made, and grateful to LTR to be able to fund such interventions. They expressed it would be something they would like to continue but this is problematic due to funding constraints.

Wider Impacts of LTR's Involvement with Ranelagh Primary School

Book Packs for FSM Pupils and Parents

LTR provided book packs for children eligible for FSM, many of whom reportedly had no books at home. The inclusion of adult books for parents was well-intentioned and generally appreciated, though some parents raised concerns about the content. This highlights the need for cultural and content sensitivity in adult selections.

Dual Language Book Provision

Given the high EAL population and linguistic diversity, dual language books were seen as critical. Although the school had some such texts in its library, coverage was incomplete, especially for newer languages the school was experiencing. LTR's support was praised, but at the time of the visit, some books had not yet arrived. Furthermore, some families in some communities (e.g., Roma) have low literacy levels even in their home languages, further complicating reading at home. The school noted the importance of continuing to expand this provision to support reading in multilingual homes.

Adult Literacy and Family Support

The school runs parent-child English literacy classes and communication workshops on Saturdays. These are well meaning but underfunded. Staff expressed interest in LTR supporting their adult literacy work, particularly a potential post school-drop-off morning session. Feedback suggested this could be an accessible and valuable addition, though there was appreciation of the limitations of LTR funding.

Library and Reading Environments

The school library was relatively well stocked and a valued space in the school. Each classroom had a dedicated reading corner. However, some of these spaces were tired and would benefit from refurbishment and updated books, as well as more integration into classroom practices. A lunchtime reading club offered universal access and was positively received by pupils.

Irlen's Screening Trial

LTR also funded Irlen's Syndrome screening, which led to a high number of positive diagnoses. Two staff were trained to continue screening, and whole-school training was delivered to raise awareness. Resources for diagnosed pupils were provided by LTR, again, something the school could not have afforded independently. This element of the programme was widely praised and had a clear impact on pupil wellbeing and access to learning.

Conclusions and Impact Assessment

LTR's involvement at Ranelagh Primary School has delivered targeted, high-quality reading interventions and supplementary support that the school would otherwise have been unable to provide. Notable outcomes include:

- *Positive academic impact:* Over three-quarters of children in the programme made measurable progress in reading by mid-project.
- *Equity of access:* EAL, FSM, and SEND pupils were well represented, addressing barriers in multiple domains.
- *Teacher-led pedagogy:* Qualified staff tailored approaches for small groups, enhancing learning.
- *Broader community support:* Book packs, dual language resources, and Irlen's screening extended benefits to families and improved inclusion.

Despite these gains, areas for further support could include:

- Timely delivery of dual language books
- Careful curation of adult literature
- Expansion into adult literacy provision
- Refurbishment of reading environments

Ultimately, LTR's partnership has significantly enhanced the school's ability to provide inclusive, high impact reading support to a disadvantaged and linguistically diverse community. The school's strong ethos and leadership, combined with targeted external support, offer a model for collaborative, responsive intervention.

Adult Literacy – Let's Read Ipswich

Context and Background of Let's Read Ipswich

Let's Read Ipswich forms part of the broader *Let's Talk Reading* programme of initiatives and is a locally administered adult literacy programme. Initially launched with support from *Read Easy UK*, the programme eventually separated from the national organisation to better serve local needs more flexibly and sustainably. Operated entirely by volunteers, the programme has a small budget and relies on the dedication of its volunteer reading coaches who are largely retired professionals who bring a wealth of life experience and a strong sense of civic responsibility to the role.

The core model of *Let's Read Ipswich* involves one-to-one coaching sessions between volunteer coaches and adult readers, typically conducted weekly in public spaces such as libraries or community institutes. This format is crucial for maintaining safety and confidentiality while building meaningful rapport. Readers often arrive with vastly different starting points and personal motivations, ranging from wanting to support their children's education, to managing everyday paperwork, or regaining lost confidence from negative school experiences.

Readers engage with The Shannon Trust manuals, working through them at their own pace, supported by a flexible and relationship-driven coaching style. Coaches supplement this with additional games, books, and creative literacy resources. A four-part training programme ensures coaches are equipped with foundational knowledge about phonics, learner support, coach-reader relationships, and learning difficulties like dyslexia.

Approximately 50 adults have been supported over the seven years the programme has been running, with some coach-reader partnerships extending over several years, demonstrating the programme's long-term, personalised approach. The following thematic analysis draws from interviews and focus groups with volunteer coaches to explore the lived impact of the programme.

Thematic Analysis of Impact - Volunteer Coach Perspectives

Theme 1: Personal Growth and Empowerment of Readers

One of the most consistently articulated impacts of the Let's Read Ipswich programme is its transformative effect on learners' confidence, self-belief and personal empowerment. As volunteer coaches highlighted, while the programme is built around improving literacy, the outcomes stretch far beyond technical reading skills. They touch core aspects of identity, dignity, and autonomy.

As one coach reflects, “*It gives them so much more than an ability to read, it gives them confidence and self-esteem*”. This idea is echoed throughout the reflections of other coaches, pointing to the psychosocial growth that readers experience. Volunteers clearly perceive a shift not just in what their readers can do, but how they see themselves.

Another volunteer stated: “*The confidence level they achieve after working with their coach is massive...Some of them really change their lives.*” Therefore, in many cases, the acquisition of literacy unlocks new pathways. It restores agency and empowers readers to navigate everyday tasks and aspirations with a renewed sense of self-worth.

One especially powerful example comes from a story of a learner overcoming her fears and social anxiety:

“One reader really lacked confidence, when she started, she was scared of getting on a bus in case she got the wrong one. She worked really well with her coach and when she finished the programme and received her certificate she gave a speech in front of a whole room of people. That shows how much her confidence had grown.”

The contrast between being unable to face a bus journey and standing in front of an audience to give a speech captures the personal development the programme can enable. Literacy, in this context, acts as a scaffold for broader growth and social confidence.

Empowerment is also seen in the subtle but significant shifts in independence and autonomy in day-to-day life. As one volunteer describes:

“Building confidence is so great, one of my readers recently bought an old car, he came to me with a form to enter the car in a car show and he wanted my help to fill in the form. I said to him, ‘you don’t need me, you can read this’. And he sat down, and we went through it and he realised that yes, he can read and complete the form.”

This moment reveals how confidence and skill go hand in hand, not only could the learner read, but he could trust in his ability to read. That sense of achievement, of no longer relying on someone else is deeply empowering.

For others, literacy opened new employment, educational and citizenship opportunities, often fundamentally altering life paths. One coach noted, “*One reader completed the programme and then was able to get a job! That really was life changing for them*”. For many adults, lacking literacy is a persistent structural barrier to employment. Here, the programme becomes an agent for economic empowerment and self-sufficiency.

Another story charts a trajectory of empowerment and integration:

“Another reader originally came from [country] she was working as a hairdresser but couldn’t read. Over time she worked with the coach and used a variety of methods including the manuals. She now manages the whole salon, had a child and gained her UK citizenship. Reading has a massive impact on her life.”

This highlights how the programme contributes not only to the learner’s self-development but to their capacity to contribute to their family, community and society.

Similarly, another coach shared:

“My reader has now achieved a qualification in English, she is really working on her career development and joining a professional training course. So, I would say this has had a profound impact.”

This illustrates how the programme doesn’t stop at basic functional literacy, for some, it is a springboard to higher qualifications, career pathways and professional advancement. These ripple effects speak volumes about the scope and depth of the programme’s impact.

At the heart of many of these stories is the programme’s ability to counteract the damage done by earlier negative schooling experiences. Many adult learners carry emotional scars and internalised labels. As one coach observed, *“So many of our readers think they are ‘stupid’. We work hard with them to undo this.”* Undoing these labels and fostering a new, more positive identity is therefore fundamental to meaningful and lasting progress.

Another coach captured this issue more broadly: *“Many readers did not have good experiences at school... That’s why our one-to-one model works well.”* The trauma of schooling, whether from punitive discipline, undiagnosed learning needs, or stigma, is still challenging for many. The personalised, patient and non-judgemental approach used in Let’s Read Ipswich provides a safe space for learners to rebuild their relationship with reading and with learning itself.

Overall, these stories reveal that the impact of Let’s Read Ipswich goes far beyond the mechanics of reading. For many adult learners, it provides confidence, dignity, and the belief that change is possible, no matter their age or history.

Theme 2: The Transformative Power of Relationships

While the Let’s Read Ipswich programme is underpinned by a structured approach to literacy, what emerges is the importance of relationships and connection is the foundation of success. The transformative outcomes described by coaches are consistently tied to the quality of the interpersonal relationship they build with their readers. Empathy, patience, trust, and mutual respect are vital for effective support.

As one volunteer explained, “*We always make the point that we are not teachers here, we are coaches. It is very different*”. Positioning themselves as coaches rather than teachers allows volunteers to sidestep the power dynamics that many readers associate with formal education. For many adults who have experienced shame, failure, or punishment in school, this reframing creates a safer and more empowering space. The word “coach” suggests encouragement, partnership, and personalised support, rather than judgment or correction.

Another volunteer further clarifies the dynamics of this relationship: “*Rapport is therefore key and crucial...You definitely have to adapt to your reader, they are the ones in charge...*”. This quote points to a deeply learner-centred ethos that runs through the programme. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach, coaches respond to the individual pace, goals, and preferences of their readers. Importantly, it also signals a shift in agency: the reader is “in charge”. This inversion of traditional pedagogic roles is particularly significant for adults who may never have felt a sense of control in previous educational settings.

The power of this relational model is most fully realised in long-term coaching relationships, where trust and mutual understanding are built over time. One volunteer shared: “*I have been working with my reader for 3.5 years now. She is coming to the end of the programme, so we are now working on spelling and writing.*” This long-standing partnership highlights the depth of commitment from both coach and reader. The progression from basic reading to spelling and writing is not just a marker of technical skill but of a sustained emotional journey, made possible by consistency and support.

These relationships often evolve into deeply meaningful connections, enabling emotional as well as academic growth. Another coach described:

“*My reader now, writes down what happened in her life, and she is trying to write a short story. She now gets books out of the library to read too. It is amazing really how far she has come from not being able to read at all.*”

This is a powerful example of how the support readers receive fuels not just literacy, but imagination, creativity and confidence. Another poignant story discusses the impact on their families:

“*My reader had a son, and he really wanted to read him a bedtime story but couldn't. He used to make up stories according to the pictures. After he'd been working with me a while he read a children's book and said, that's a lot easier than the stuff you give me. He'd not realised how much progress he had made.*”

This example highlights both the motivation for learning (wanting to connect with a child) and the power of realisation that comes from being gently supported and challenged. The

informal reflection and recognising that children's books now feel easy, points to a growing internalised sense of competence. The coach's role here helped the reader recognise and celebrate progress achieved.

Another coach shared an interaction that encapsulates the emotional vulnerability many readers carry into their first session: "*The first thing one reader asked me, was 'are you going to test me?... This is the depth of feeling and fear they can have left from school.*" The quote underscores the residual anxiety that formal education has left in its wake. Many adult learners associate learning with humiliation, punishment, or failure. This underscores the need to build trust and rapport to dismantle fear before any meaningful learning can take place.

Across all these examples, it becomes clear that Let's Read Ipswich is not just a literacy intervention, it is a pedagogy, built on care, patience and respect. The personal growth and breakthroughs described by readers are not the result of structured framework alone; they emerge from building relationships and connections.

Theme 3: Life Skills and Daily Functioning

While reading is often framed as a cognitive skill, the accounts shared by volunteers in the Let's Read Ipswich programme reveal that literacy is a life skill, deeply woven into everyday functioning. For many adult learners, improving reading is not just about decoding text, it is about reclaiming the ability to manage day-to-day tasks independently and with dignity. The programme's impact is felt not just in academic terms, but in the small, routine moments that make up everyday life.

As one volunteer explains, "*It is more than reading, it is also life skills. I've helped readers with adding attachments to email.*" This highlights how the programme moves beyond traditional conceptions of literacy as limited to reading books. Instead, it responds to the real, practical needs of adults navigating a digital world, skills vital for success and interaction in contemporary society.

Another coach reflects on the shift from dependency to autonomy: "*I had a reader who would bring me personal letters, like medical letters or council letters, they felt embarrassed they couldn't read it themselves. But by the end they could.*" This transition marks a profound change in self-sufficiency and confidence. Letters from official bodies often carry important information or decisions; not being able to read them creates vulnerability, anxiety, and reliance on others. The reader's ability to eventually manage such practical reading signals not only improved literacy but a renewed aspect of independence.

A seemingly small but meaningful moment is captured in this quote: "*I met with one of the readers here [Ipswich Institute], and they were so proud to tell me about all the*

pictures on the walls because he had been reading the plaques." On the surface, this may appear minor, but it speaks to the reader's newfound engagement with the world around them. Literacy allows access to public and cultural spaces in ways that were previously closed off or intimidating.

Another coach shared: "*Another reader was so proud to tell me one day - I read the football results myself!*" Again, this is a moment of deep personal relevance. Football, for many, is part of everyday conversation and identity. To be able to read the results directly, without reliance on others, restores not only independence but also a sense of inclusion in social life. Such moments are rich with emotional meaning, offering a sense of normality and participation in the flow of daily routines.

The impact of these gains extends beyond the individual to their families, particularly in the context of parenting. As one coach described: "*My reader has a couple of children, and she has been really keen to support them at school.*" Literacy enables parents to engage more confidently with their children's education, from reading school letters to helping with homework and positions them as active, capable caregivers. Another coach discusses further: "*It has a ripple effect, because now she is reading to her three children, the older one is in school, and I can see how that will benefit them too.*" This "ripple effect" is central to the broader value of the programme. Intergenerational benefits of literacy through bedtime stories, modelling, and support, has long-term implications for children's academic success and emotional security.

Together, these examples make clear that the impact of improved literacy is both practical and emotional. The ability to complete a form, understand a letter, or read football scores contributes to a broader sense of participation in life. Moreover, the programme builds a bridge not only between readers and text, but also between generations, enabling parents to pass on not just knowledge, but a culture of literacy and learning. Let's Read Ipswich therefore strengthens both individual autonomy and family life.

Theme 4: Volunteer Impact and Motivation

While the primary focus of the Let's Read Ipswich programme is on supporting adult learners with literacy, the experiences of volunteer coaches reveal that the programme also generates significant meaning and fulfilment for those delivering it. Coaching is described as a deeply relational and enriching experience, which provides volunteers with purpose, connection, and a sense of shared benefits.

One volunteer commented, "*It's a really meaningful part of my week, it is nice to feel like I am doing something good, even in a small way.*" This statement speaks to the intrinsic motivation that underpins much of the voluntary work in the programme. It also shows

how contributing to something with visible, real-world outcomes enhances volunteers' sense of meaning and contribution.

Another said, "*It is very rewarding doing the coaching and I find that hour just slips by.*" This quote also highlights how the coaching process is not experienced as laborious or burdensome, but rather as enjoyable, something that enhances the volunteers' own wellbeing and sense of satisfaction.

The emotional and practical support offered by the organisation was also emphasised: "*I felt really supported, they take a lot of care to look after both the readers and coaches.*" This reflects a culture of care embedded within the programme. It also suggests that the wellbeing of both reader and coach is recognised as crucial to the success of the work. Beyond the coach-reader relationship, the community of practice among coaches also emerged as a valued element. One volunteer said, "*It's very rewarding for me also, I have met lots of different people and made friends with the other coaches.*" This affirms the social capital created through the programme expands social networks and fosters new relationships. This was echoed by another volunteer: "*Us coaches sometimes get together socially also, like for a catch-up and cake, and it's really nice.*" This evokes a picture of community, where mutual support extends beyond the sessions themselves.

Several coaches spoke to the sense of belonging the programme fosters: "*It's nice to feel part of a group [of coaches] too, because you don't feel like you are out there on your own.*" This reinforces the importance of peer connection in sustaining volunteer motivation. Literacy coaching, although delivered one-to-one, is not done in isolation, it is embedded within a wider network of people who share similar values and commitments and reinforces the idea that individual efforts are part of a shared, wider mission.

Finally, this sense of appreciation is affirmed in the simple but powerful comment: "*I feel really valued as a volunteer.*" Feeling "valued" is key not only to volunteer retention, but to the emotional reward of the role.

Therefore, the programme is not just transformative for readers, it is mutually enriching. Volunteers describe enhanced purpose, joy, social connection, and community engagement. In recognising and nurturing the experiences of volunteers, Let's Read Ipswich not only sustains its workforce but deepens its ethos as a relational, caring, and empowering initiative.

Theme 5 – Flexibility, Adaptation, and Barriers

A key strength of the Let's Read Ipswich programme, as emphasised by coaches, is its flexibility and learner-centred ethos. This adaptive approach enables volunteers to tailor sessions around the individual needs, pace, and preferences of each reader, an ethos that directly counters the one-size-fits-all approaches often associated with institutional education.

One coach commented, “*You definitely have to adapt to your reader, they are the ones in charge... I’m a firm believer that once you finish the manuals, then reading starts; it doesn’t stop there.*” This quote captures the idea that literacy development is not linear but instead a lifelong process that evolves with the learner’s confidence and goals. The notion that “they are the ones in charge” affirms a respectful, partnership-based model where readers have agency, voice, and ownership over their learning.

Another coach said, “*We try not to reject anyone and meet them where they are,*” pointing to an inclusive ethos. This inclusivity is supported by an unpressured approach to progress, as another volunteer put it: “*The speed in which readers progress can vary, we work at their own pace with no pressure.*” This model supports emotional safety, allowing readers to re-enter learning on their own terms, free from the expectations that may have undermined previous efforts.

The personalised methods used by coaches further reflect this flexibility: “*We’ve now been playing scrabble, and we are making rude words! She loves it and it’s really worthwhile.*” Humour, games, and learner-led content not only sustain engagement but also reframe reading as joyful, social, and empowering. By working with the interests and personality of each reader, coaches create a meaningful learning environment that feels relevant and affirming.

Despite these strengths, coaches were candid about the structural and logistical challenges that can constrain the programme’s impact. One noted: “*The biggest barrier is probably the logistics of when and how to meet.*” this volunteer-led model must navigate the complexities of adult life such as work schedules, childcare, and transport. Related to this are challenges around spaces:

“Finding suitable spaces to do the coaching can be tricky, you want a space which offers some privacy but is still a public space. We use rooms in libraries or here at the Ipswich Institute. But some libraries have started to charge us to use their spaces, so it presents a bit of a barrier.”

The charges represent a barrier to this organisation due to budgetary constraints and the requirement for both safety and discretion adds complexity, coaching cannot be done just anywhere.

Funding limitations were further raised, with one coach saying: “*Funding is challenging, it is such impactful work and with more funding perhaps it could be expanded.*” This comment is particularly significant as it draws attention to the practical challenges of such work and the limitations of charity-sector grassroots provision.

Volunteers also spoke to the emotional and logistical demands of maintaining reader engagement over time. As one said: “*It can be a long commitment for the readers, and it can be challenging so they need to really want it.*” This acknowledges that learning to read

as an adult is a slow, effortful process that requires considerable motivation and resilience. This was reflected in discussion of drop-out rates: “*We do have readers that drop out after a few months too; life circumstances or mental health can be big factors.*” This quote reveals the precariousness of many learners’ lives, where education competes with housing insecurity, employment demands, mental health struggles, or caring responsibilities. Rather than viewing attrition as a failure, the programme take a non-judgemental stance, recognising that disengagement often reflects external factors beyond a reader’s or coach’s control.

Finally, working with readers who speak English as an additional language adds further complexity: “*We do have to be careful when English isn’t their first language... we really need them to understand English first.*” The programme is not designed for English teaching directly, and so supporting readers with emergent English skills may require additional training, resources, or programmes. It raises a tension between inclusivity and capacity: the programme wants to support all who need help but also recognises the limits of its scope.

Overall, this theme highlights the adaptability of Let’s Read Ipswich and its commitment to meeting learners with empathy and creativity. To ensure sustainability, these insights could represent a call for policy-level recognition of the real costs of inclusive adult education and the need for better material support and coordination across community, voluntary, and statutory sectors.

Theme 6 – Training and Support

Another theme emerging from discussion was the vital role that training and ongoing support play in preparing volunteers to take on the complex and relationally intensive work of literacy coaching. Volunteers widely expressed appreciation for how the training was delivered. One participant shared, “*The training was gentle, not too onerous, they took it nice and steady.*” This description conveys an approach that mirrors the programme’s wider ethos of empathy and inclusion, not just for readers, but for volunteers as well. The language here reflects a non-intimidating entry point that invites participation and builds confidence, especially for those new to teaching roles or volunteering in literacy.

Another coach reflected on the practical value of online formats, stating: “*The training sessions were over Zoom and they were really helpful for getting a feel of how to approach it.*” This suggests that remote learning offered accessible, time-efficient preparation for volunteers, especially those balancing other responsibilities.

However, others noted some of the limitations of online-only formats. As one person suggested, “*Since Covid, we have been doing the training in one-hour sessions online, it works well is convenient for everyone. But we could do a half day on a Saturday or something. Would be nice to do it in person.*” While online sessions support flexibility and

efficiency, in-person training may foster collaboration, and a more immersive understanding of the coaching process. This could be particularly important for volunteers who learn best through social interaction or hands-on engagement.

Volunteers described the thoughtfulness and care embedded in the organisation's wider culture. As one coach put it, *"All our coaches go through training to ensure that they understand the programme, how to support their readers, but also to make sure that professional boundaries are in place."* This highlights a strong ethical and safeguarding dimension. It reflects an awareness of the emotional vulnerability of adult learners, and the need to support them within clear, respectful, and appropriate frameworks while also keeping the volunteers safe. This culture of respect, care, and professionalism appears to be a defining feature of the programme's ethos. As one volunteer noted, *"I think it's lovely the amount of enthusiasm and hard work and thoughtfulness everyone puts into it."* This statement speaks to a broader sense of community and shared purpose among coaches.

Together, these accounts illustrate that training in Let's Read Ipswich is a key component in the successful delivery of the programme. It inducts volunteers not only into *what* to do, but also *how* to be with their readers, with one another, and as part of the shared mission. The feedback also opened a conversation about how training and support structures might evolve to better serve a growing and diverse cohort of volunteers. Hybrid models combining online convenience with in-person community building may offer a way forward, ensuring both accessibilities. Continued development in volunteer engagement, reflective spaces, and peer learning could also strengthen practice and retention.

Conclusion

Let's Read Ipswich stands out as a powerful example of community-led adult literacy support. The impact extends far beyond the technical ability to read, it touches on identity, confidence, intergenerational change, and social belonging. Volunteer coaches are central to this success, offering not just instruction, but care, continuity, and belief in learners who have often been let down by traditional systems.

Despite its profound outcomes, the programme operates with minimal resources. More sustainable funding, space access, and volunteer recruitment would allow this highly impactful work to reach more people. Reaching more potential learners and removing the barriers for more learners coming forward to support is a key area for future development. One coach summarises the wider impacts the work can have:

"It has given her the opportunity to work towards the professional career route she wants. That has a positive impact not just on her, but she can make a wider contribution to society also."

Therefore, Let's Read Ipswich has profound impacts on the lives of the readers it supports which extends beyond the reader themselves. It is more than an adult literacy programme, it is a quiet, powerful force for social transformation.

Overall Conclusions

Let's Talk Reading (LTR) has demonstrated a profound and multifaceted impact on literacy development across Ipswich, addressing the needs of children, families, schools, and adult learners through a holistic, community-rooted approach. This evaluation reveals that LTR's range of programmes, which span from infancy through to adulthood, has been impactful in tackling barriers to literacy, fosters a culture of reading, and promotes social inclusion, wellbeing, and educational outcomes.

At the heart of LTR's success is its commitment to early intervention. The Let's Talk Babies (LTB) programme illustrates this: offering a combination of structured and nurturing environments where parents and infants engage in shared reading, songs, and play. These sessions not only support early language development and ultimately potentially lead to school readiness but also enhance parental confidence, mental health, and peer support networks. The provision of free, high-quality books and baby bank resources further reduces financial barriers, ensuring that families from all backgrounds can access enriching early literacy experiences, and understand the important of the home literacy environment in encouraging children's love of reading from the youngest of ages.

LTR's work in Early Years settings further builds on this foundation, embedding a culture of reading through volunteer-led Storytime sessions, book gifting, and the establishment of setting-based, mini-libraries. These initiatives are particularly impactful in settings with high numbers of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and limited access to books. The provision of dual-language texts supports linguistic diversity and fosters a sense of belonging. Moreover, the sessions promote joy, imagination, and family engagement, reinforcing the emotional and social dimensions of literacy and again encouraging more families to participate in Storytimes at home, further underscoring the importance of children's home literacy environments.

In primary schools, LTR's long-term partnerships have yielded measurable academic and cultural outcomes. The case study of The Oaks Primary School illustrates how sustained collaboration, targeted funding, and strategic literacy initiatives can transform school environments, raise attainment, and embed reading at the heart of school life. Similarly, the afterschool interventions at Ranelagh Primary School demonstrate how focused, responsive, teacher-led support can accelerate reading progress among disadvantaged pupils, particularly those with EAL and SEND. The work of Let's Talk Reading has been fundamental in funding these enriching initiatives and programmes; something that schools really struggle to do in the current funding landscape.

LTR's adult literacy programme, Let's Read Ipswich, further extends its impact by addressing the needs of adults who have previously been excluded from educational success, or for a variety of reasons lack ability in reading. Through one-to-one coaching,

the programme empowers learners to build confidence, navigate daily life, and support their families. The relational, flexible model fosters trust and dignity, enabling transformative personal growth. Volunteers also report high levels of fulfilment and community connection, underscoring the programme's reciprocal benefits. This work with adult learner has generational and societal benefit as many of the learners are parents themselves and once the barriers to their own literacy are overcome, they are better placed to support their children in the education system.

Across all programmes, LTR's strengths lie in its adaptability, inclusivity, and relational ethos. It meets people where they are, emotionally, socially, and geographically. The charity offers non-judgmental, accessible support that respects the lived realities of its participants. The organisation's ability to build trust, respond to local needs, and foster long-term partnerships is central to its effectiveness. Whilst Let's Talk Reading is relatively small in both its geographical focus of Ipswich, and financially, the work has been able to achieve depth in its approaches to respond effectively and proactively to the needs of the local communities it serves. The grassroots approach to the charity, offers a real strength of the programmes it runs, local knowledge, contacts, and partnerships play an important role that enables personalised and targeted success.

In conclusion, Let's Talk Reading is not just a literacy charity, it provides opportunities for community transformation. By addressing systemic inequalities, promoting early and lifelong learning, and nurturing a love of reading, LTR is creating lasting change in the lives of individuals and the fabric of the Ipswich community. Sustained investment and strategic expansion of its work will be essential to deepening and extending this impact in the years to come.

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