

READING WALES'S FUTURE

How the next Welsh Government can
unlock every child's potential through reading



Photo: Elena Heatherwick/Save the Children

READ ON
GET ON

Helping children read

Every child deserves a fair start in life. Yet, today in Wales too many children are being allowed to fall behind at every stage of their learning and development.

Growing up in poverty is one of the main reasons children are not getting the fair start they deserve.



'READING WELL' IS A SKILL THAT UNLOCKS OPPORTUNITIES AT SCHOOL AND IN LIFE

Children who read well do better at school, better in the workplace and are better placed to give their own children the best start in life. It gives children the best chance of a bright future; one in which they have the confidence, freedom and opportunities to reach their full potential.

A good education is of course about much more than just reading. But being able to read well is the foundation on which so much else depends. And for our poorest children reading well is one of their most effective routes out of poverty.

Over the course of the next Welsh Assembly we estimate that, unless increased action is taken alongside the current initiatives already in place, nearly 26,000 children in Wales will leave primary school not reading well, including over 10,000 children living in poverty.¹ Until we succeed in giving every child the basic skill of reading, thousands of children will continue to struggle through their education and have limited opportunities to learn and succeed. It will make it harder for Wales to close the attainment gap that exists between children living in poverty and their peers. Unless urgent and decisive action is taken, they will start secondary school already behind, with dismal consequences for their futures.

Children leaving school unable to read well bear a heavy individual cost, and the scale of the issue will continue to have a significant cumulative cost to our nation. Low levels of literacy have long-term consequences for the resilience of our communities, the capacity of our workforce and our national economy. They also contribute to the entrenched inequalities in our society between poorer children and their peers. Children not reading well is a key driver of the persistent educational divide in Wales, which sees thousands of children from low-income homes not fulfilling their potential.

Changing the story for children living in poverty requires a national mission in which everyone plays their part. By harnessing our collective energy, as parents, communities, teachers, government, charities and businesses, we can take transformational steps towards our shared vision of a fairer, more prosperous Wales. Government has a crucial role to play in stimulating the society wide change needed, through political leadership, significant policy changes and investment, along with supporting and improving existing provision that helps children learn to read.

That's why we are calling for every political party to sign-up to our ambitious goal to get every child reading well by the time they finish primary school, by 2025.

Committing to this goal would publically demonstrate that ambitious and decisive action is being taken to improve all children's learning and to boost the life chances of the thousands of children living in poverty in Wales. To achieve the goal, over the course of the next Welsh Assembly, we need to redouble efforts to support all young children in their early years, particularly those living in poverty.

I. AN AMBITIOUS VISION FOR ALL CHILDREN READING WELL IN WALES

Our ambition is for a Wales in which all children, irrespective of their background, can achieve their full potential.

Reading well is the keystone of a good start in life. And it is essential to tackling the effects of poverty on children. That's why we want to get all children reading well by the time they finish primary school. This is a challenging, concrete ambition. But, with the right action it can be achieved. By setting an ambitious goal, and working together to achieve it, we can ensure all children are reading well by 2025.

One of the reasons achieving this ambition has so much potential is that the goal we are setting is not simply basic literacy, it is much more demanding.

Reading well

'Reading well' means understanding the meaning behind words. It means children are able to understand the purpose of text, and are then able to talk about what it means to them. It means having an appreciation for language and how different words can communicate different feelings to a reader. Reading well is an essential life skill; it provides children with opportunities for the future. It is:

- the level of reading necessary to succeed, thrive and get on – not just get by;
- the level of reading children need to have by the end of primary school in order to have the best chance of obtaining good qualifications at 16;
- the level that ensures social inclusion as an adult.ⁱⁱ

This ambitious goal is within our grasp if we focus our efforts and speed up the recent rates of improvement for the poorest children.ⁱⁱⁱ

Everyone has a part to play: parents, grandparents, nursery staff and teachers, businesses, celebrities, media and the government. The Read On. Get On. campaign is about bringing the nation together to make this happen. The campaign has already secured broad support across Wales for greater political focus on improving children's reading skills, in particular, doing more to help the poorest children. The National Assembly for Wales elections present a momentous opportunity to add to this broad support and galvanise action to reach our goals.

Getting all children reading well is the best way for the next Welsh Government to make rapid progress in further closing the education attainment gap. It will help make sure children living in poverty have as bright a future as their better-off peers.

2. WHAT THE GOAL WILL DELIVER

Taking action to ensure all children are reading well at age 11 will:

Open doors for children

Every child deserves the chance to experience the enjoyment, confidence, freedom and opportunities that come with being a good reader. Children first learn to read; then they read to learn. Reading can fire children's imaginations and expose them to new worlds, cultures and ideas. In school, reading well allows children to access the broader curriculum and so discover and nurture their own particular talents and interests.

Ensure no child is left behind

For too long the poorest children have been allowed to fall behind in reading. Around one in four children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales are not reading well at age 11. This is compared to fewer than one in ten children from more advantaged backgrounds.^{iv}

The hard truth is that children in Wales who grow up in poverty are still being left behind. This is a national scandal that we need to work together to address. Children not reading well is a key driver of the persistent educational divide in Wales, which sees thousands of children from low-income homes not fulfilling their potential. Individually, this limits children's life chances as they move towards adulthood, employment and starting their own families. Nationally, the collective impact of thousands of poor children being left behind will be calamitous for Wales's prosperity.

Give children the best chance of a bright future

Child poverty lands a double blow; it damages childhoods today and harms children's prospects for the future. We want a future in which all children have a good childhood and the best chance in life. Education is one of the most powerful levers we can use to open up bright futures for our poorest children. To access and make the most of full education children must be able to read well.

Until we succeed in equipping every child in Wales with the skill of reading well, thousands of our children will continue to struggle and have fewer opportunities to learn and succeed. The impact of a child not reading well by the time they leave primary school can last a lifetime; they will be far less likely to have good literacy as adults, resulting in the risk of severely constraining their lives, as:

- basic literacy is still the skill employers most often cite as being of concern when they are recruiting;^v
- not reading well makes social mobility less likely;^{vi}
- on average, adults with functional literacy (just below our definition of reading well at 11) earn 16% more than those without this level of literacy.^{vii}

Make Wales a fair and prosperous nation

If our children are unable to read well this will have a heavy cumulative cost to our economy. Low levels of literacy are linked to a lower-skilled and lower-earning workforce – a drag on Wales's economic potential. The World Literacy Foundation has estimated that illiteracy costs developed countries 2% of their GDP.^{viii} The loss to the UK economy due to workforce illiteracy is projected to be £81.312 billion each year.^{ix}

As well as an economic threat it is also a social issue, as parents who are unable to read are less able to support their children's learning. This recurring cycle of poverty is not inevitable. We can, and must, do more to equip children with the skills they need for a brighter future. To achieve our national mission of all children reading well, we must prioritise those children at the greatest risk of falling behind.

3. THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Wales has a good education system that works well for the majority of children. However, too many of our children continue to fall behind. In particular, we are concerned about the significant literacy gap that exists between children living in poverty and their peers.

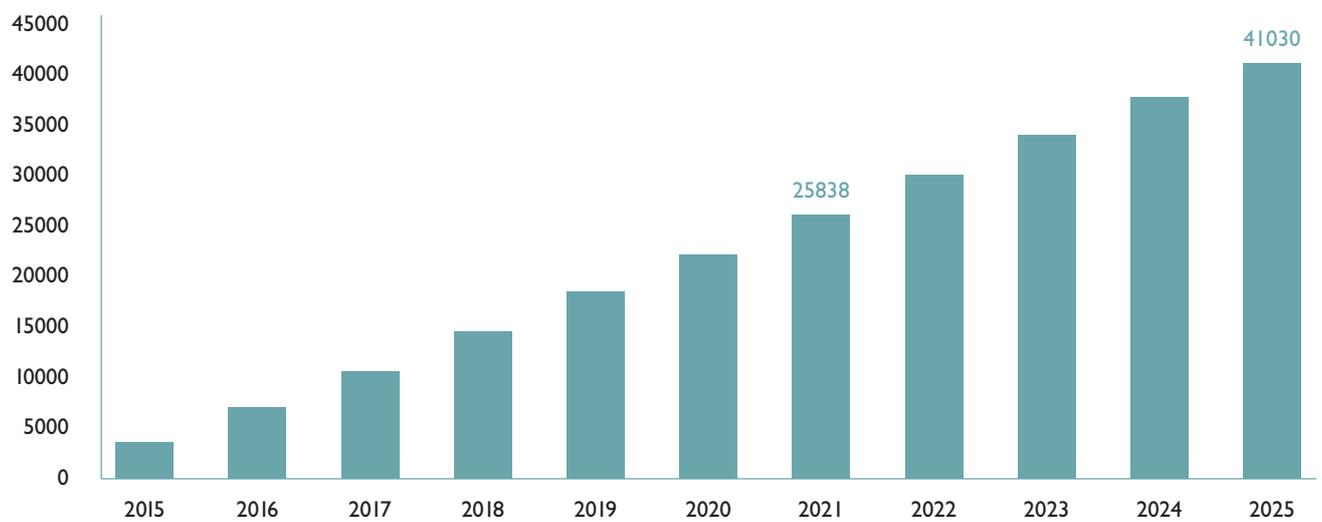
In 2014, one in eight children (12%) in Wales were not reading well by the end of Key Stage 2.^x Children growing up in disadvantaged families are most likely to struggle to read well. They are twice as likely as their peers to struggle to read well – with one in four (24%) not reading well.^{xi}

Our calculations^{xii} in Figure I show that if nothing is done to improve children’s reading, there will be dismal consequences for thousands of children across Wales:

By 2021, **25,838** children will be unable to read well, **10,257** of which are children living in poverty

By 2025, **41,030** children will be unable to read well, **16,288** of which are children living in poverty

Figure I. Projected number of children having left school unable to read well if attainment does not improve



4. PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS: CLOSING THE GAP EARLY

Whoever forms the next Welsh Government must act quickly if they are to instigate the changes necessary to close the reading gap in a decade.

Much good work is underway and many current initiatives are effective and promise improvement, but we want to see this continued and built upon. Our goal is ambitious, but achievable, and it will unlock the potential of thousands of children, giving them the fair start they deserve. We know that rapid progress can be made in the next five years.

Responding to the scale of the challenge will require comprehensive and sustained action across a number of fronts relating to the contexts in which children learn to read: in the community, before starting school, at school and in the home. There are a number of actions that can be taken within schools that can help improve children's achievement and close the attainment gap, including strong leadership and engaging parents to support learning at home. These are vitally important and can support real improvements in children's reading skills.

However, it will only be possible to achieve our goal to get all children reading well if we start early on in the education system. By focusing our efforts over the next few years on the early years, before children start school, we can ensure all children are starting school with good language skills and are in a strong position to learn to read well.

To achieve the goal, we need greater focus and investment in the early years. The gap in reading skills between the poorest children and their better-off peers opens up in the early years of a child's life and, without the right support, will persist. Learning to read well starts early in a child's life, and good early language skills are the vital stepping stone. If children do not learn to understand words, speak and listen from an early age, they will struggle to learn to read well when they start school.

Research commissioned by the Read On. Get On. campaign^{xiii} from UCL Institute of Education shows the extent to which children's early language skills affect their later ability to read, and the impact that poverty has on their language development:

- a child with weak language skills at the age of five is much less likely to be a strong reader at the age of 11 than a five-year-old with strong language skills.
- a child who has experienced poverty persistently and has below-average language skills scores 35% less on reading tests at age seven – and 22% less on comprehension tests at age 11 – than a child who has never experienced poverty and has above-average language skills.

Without an increased commitment to children's early language development, particularly for the poorest children, we will not achieve our goal of all children reading well by age 11, by 2025.

5. AREAS FOR ACTION

Read On. Get On. partners are already delivering support to children and families to boost their early learning and develop a love of reading. From book bags in the home to family engagement in libraries, we are working hard to reach all children, especially those in low income families.

Everyone has a part to play, and we need the next Welsh Government to commit to build on existing initiatives and take increased action to make sure all children in Wales are reading well by the time they leave primary school.

The Read On. Get On. campaign has set an interim goal for the next Assembly: that every child in Wales will have good language skills by the time they start school, by 2021.

To help achieve this interim goal we have identified three priority areas for the next Welsh Government, designed to help parents and professionals do even more to support the youngest children, especially those living in poverty.

1. Invest further in the quality of the early education workforce

- a) Ensure staff and parents in all early years settings have access to at least one member of staff holding a graduate-level qualification providing expertise in early language development, by 2020.
- b) Adopt a robust, systematic and consistent approach to assessing the demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual early years provision.

2. Strengthen support for parents

- a) Ensure early years and childcare staff have the necessary skills to support parents with their children's early language development, particularly those parents living in poverty.
- b) Assess how many children are living in poverty but outside of Flying Start areas. Then, commit to actions to ensure these children are able to access the quality support they need for good speech and early language development.

3. Strong and ambitious leadership for children

- a) Appoint a children's minister to provide strong leadership and ensure all children in Wales are able to reach their full potential. This would allow for consolidated governance and policy making across children's early years and education, and would pave the way for improved outcomes for children.

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- ⁱ Please see section 3 for full details of the projections and methodology. In Wales, eligibility for Free School Meals is used as a proxy for measuring numbers of children living in low income families.
- ⁱⁱ Allen, G. (2011) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, London: Cabinet Office
- ⁱⁱⁱ Statistics for Wales (2015) *Achievement and entitlement to free school meals in Wales, 2014*. Statistics for Wales: Cardiff. Available: <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2015/150128-academic-achievement-free-school-meals-2014-en.pdf>
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v CBI (2014) *Gateway to Growth: CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2014*, London: CBI
- ^{vi} Levy, R., Little, S., Clough, P., Nutbrown, C., Bishop, I., Lamb, T. and Yamada-Rice, D. (2014) *Attitudes to Reading and Writing and their Links with Social Mobility 1914-2014: An Evidence Review*, Sheffield, Book Trust
- ^{vii} Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2001
- ^{viii} Wales does not have its own GDP as it does not collect income tax or VAT separately.
- ^{ix} World Literacy Foundation (2015) *The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy: A snapshot of illiteracy in a global context*.
- ^x We measure reading well as achieving Level 4 in English at Key Stage 2.
- ^{xi} Statistics for Wales (2015) *Achievement and entitlement to free school meals in Wales, 2014*. Statistics for Wales: Cardiff. Available: <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2015/150128-academic-achievement-free-school-meals-2014-en.pdf>
- ^{xii} The calculations are based on Key Stage 2 attainment data from 2014 and population estimates from the ONS publication *Annual Mid-Year Population Estimates* using figures from the principal projections. The figures were calculated based on no change in the attainment data.
- ^{xiii} Finnegan, J. and Warren, H. (2015) *Ready to Read: Closing the gap in language skills so that every child in England can read well*. London, Save the Children. Available: <http://readingagency.org.uk/news/Ready%20to%20Read%20report%20Read%20On%20Get%20On.pdf>

Further detail on our research is in our Ready to Read report, available to download at readongeton.org.uk.

Find out more and join the campaign at savethechildren.org.uk/reading/wales.



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