Children and young people's engagement with comics

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Comics and graphic novels have long been a popular part of many children and young people's reading lives. Combining visual storytelling with written text, they span a wide range of genres and formats, from traditional comic books and graphic novels to manga and webcomics. Indeed, comics and graphic novel sales reached £78.7m in 2025, with the sale of children's comics and graphic novels reaching £25.9m (NielsenIQ, 2025). As the popularity of graphic novels and manga has continued to grow, comics have attracted increasing attention from researchers, publishers and educators as a meaningful route into voluntary reading.

Research has highlighted a range of ways in which comics and graphic novels can support children's reading experiences. Previous studies have suggested that they can promote reading motivation, support comprehension through the integration of words and images, and provide engaging reading experiences for children with diverse interests and reading preferences. National Literacy Trust research has also consistently shown that comics or graphic novels are a popular reading choice for many children and young people (Clark et al., 2023). Across our research over the past two decades, we have argued that comics and graphic novels are an important part of children and young people's reading lives and should be recognised alongside other forms of reading. Our *Future of Literacy* (2025) report reinforced this message, highlighting the importance of offering a diverse range of texts and formats that reflect children's interests, identities and ways of engaging with literacy.

Despite this growing interest, relatively little research has explored why children and young people choose to read comics or graphic novels or what they value about the format. Understanding these perspectives is important for schools, families and organisations seeking to engage more children and young people with reading.

This report explores children and young people's engagement with comics and graphic novels in 2026. In our survey, children and young people were asked about "comics or graphic novels", and all findings in this report therefore relate to this combined category. For readability, we use "comics" as shorthand for "comics or graphic novels" throughout the remainder of the report. It looks at who reads comics, how comic reading has changed over time, and, through children and young people's own words, what they enjoy about comics and why.

What we did

This report draws on findings from our Annual Literacy Survey, which we have conducted each year since 2010. The survey collects information about children

and young people's reading, writing and listening, alongside their home learning environment and access to resources.

The report combines quantitative findings from the survey with qualitative insights from children and young people's own comments. It explores trends in comic reading over the past decade, with a particular focus on findings from 2026. It also draws on responses to an open-ended survey question from more than 58,000 children and young people in 2025 about why they do or do not read in their free time. More than 700 of these responses mentioned comics or graphic novels. These comments were analysed thematically to better understand the role comics play in children and young people's reading lives.

What this report shows

Comic reading continues to be a significant part of many children and young people's reading lives. Notably, in 2026, comic reading has reached its highest level since 2017, increasing across all demographic groups, with the biggest increases in the youngest (8 to 11) and oldest (16 to 18) age groups, and the gender gap reducing by half. Children and young people's comments suggest that comics appeal not because of any single feature but because they combine engaging stories, visual storytelling and accessible formats in ways that reflect their interests and create enjoyable reading experiences. Rather than being seen as simply another type of reading, for many, comics offer a unique and distinctive way of experiencing stories.

The percentage of children and young people reading comics is at its highest in a decade:

- In 2026, almost 1 in 2 (45.7%) children and young people told us they read comics in their free time at least once a month.
- This represents an increase of 7.5 percentage points over the last year, and is also the highest percentage of children and young people reporting reading comics since 2017.
- Among comic readers, print was the most popular format, with 3 in 5 (59.8%) reading comics this way, while 1 in 4 (24.6%) read comics digitally and around 1 in 6 (15.6%) across both formats.

More boys, younger children and children and young people receiving free school meals (FSMs) read comics in 2026. However, comic reading increased across all demographic groups, with every group reporting its highest level since 2017:

- More boys than girls reported reading comics in their free time in 2026 (49.9% vs 40.7%).
- Reading comics declined with age, with 3 in 5 (60.0%) 8- to 11-year-olds reading comics compared with 1 in 3 (33.5%) of those aged 16 to 18.

- Slightly more children and young people who received FSMs than those who did not (48.6% vs 44.3%) said they read comics in their free time.
- These patterns reflect trends since 2017, which also show that:
    - The gender gap has halved over this time (decreasing from 18.2 percentage points to 9.2 percentage points), driven by a rise in girls reading comics.
    - The biggest increases in comic reading since 2017 have been among the youngest (those aged 8 to 11) and oldest (those aged 16 to 18) age groups.

Analysis of more than 700 comments showed that children and young people valued comics for much more than simply being 'fun'. Five main reasons emerged for why they enjoyed reading comics:

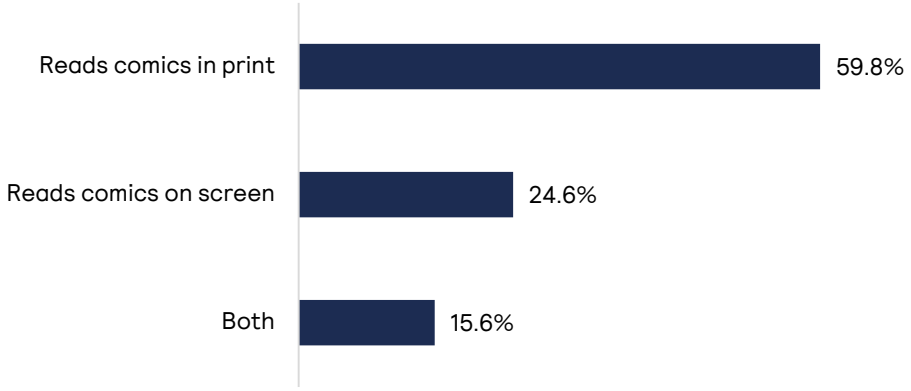
- **Comics reflect children and young people's interests.** They enjoyed comics because of the stories, characters and genres they contained, and they valued being able to choose reading material that aligned with their personal and cultural interests. Comments included, "*I like reading comics and mangas because they have fun and cool characters and stories" and "I enjoy reading … manga/comics because it is fun to read the book and watch the show and compare the two together."*
- **Comics bring stories to life visually.** Illustrations helped children and young people understand, imagine and connect with stories, highlighting the benefits of combining visual and textual information for supporting comprehension, while many also appreciated comics as a visual art form. As one young person said, *"I enjoy reading comics as I view them as art."*
- **Comics create immersive reading experiences.** Children and young people described becoming absorbed in comic narratives and feeling transported into different worlds, suggesting that for some readers comics can facilitate deep engagement with stories and characters.
- **Comics can make reading feel more accessible.** Many described comics as easier to read and understand than traditional books, with shorter sections of text and visual supports reducing barriers to reading, making it feel more manageable. Comments included, *"… the pictures give me a better understanding of what's going on"* and *"I mostly choose comics because they have little story and they are really quick and easy to read."*
- **Comics can help children and young people's emotional wellbeing.** Some described comics as helping them unwind, reduce stress and escape everyday pressures. In the words of one respondent, *"I like to read because it is relaxing to just escape into a comic and read."*

These findings highlight the important role that comics continue to play in many children and young people's reading lives. Offering a distinctive reading experience that appeals to many children and young people, comments show that comics combine qualities that include subject matter that reflects their interests; a visual, aesthetic and immersive format; and a more accessible reading experience, while for some they are a way to relax and unwind. With levels of comic reading now at their highest since 2017, it is important to recognise the growing appeal of comics and their role in supporting reading engagement across children and young people of all age groups, genders and backgrounds.

Children and young people's engagement with comics in 2026

In 2026, 45.7% of children and young people told us that they read comics in their free time at least once a month, either in print or on screen. Of those who read comics in their free time, paper was the most popular format, with 3 in 5 reading comics in print, 1 in 4 reading comics digitally, and around 1 in 6 reading comics both in print and digitally (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Children and young people's engagement with comics in 2026 by reading format



After changing little between 2022 and 2025, comic reading increased sharply in 2026 (see Table 1), increasing by 7.5 percentage points in the past year alone. Indeed, in 2026, the percentage of children and young people reading comics across all formats was the highest since 2017.

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Comic reading increased across all formats over the past year. The biggest increase was in reading comics only in print, although increases in reading comics only on screen and in both print and digital formats show that the increase was not limited to a single format.

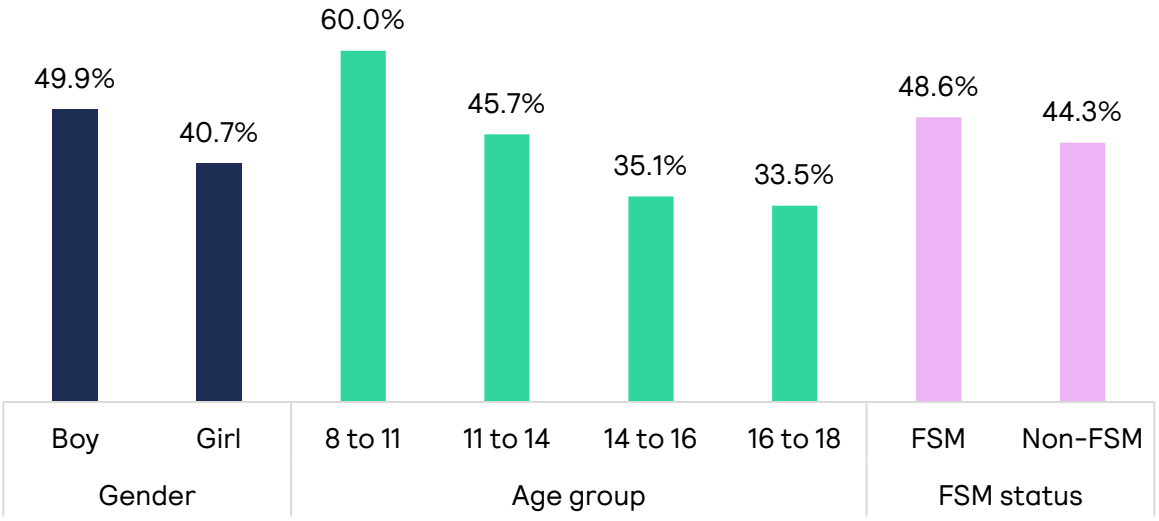
Table 1: Children and young people's engagement with comics between 2017 and 2026 overall and by reading format

Year	Overall	Only in print	Only on screen	Both
2017/18	39.9%	26.7%	7.7%	5.5%
2019	36.7%	22.8%	9.3%	4.5%
2020	37.7%	24.0%	9.5%	4.2%
2021	37.2%	20.1%	12.6%	4.4%
2022	40.8%	23.3%	12.4%	5.1%
2023	40.3%	23.4%	11.6%	5.3%
2024	39.7%	24.9%	9.9%	4.9%
2025	38.2%	23.9%	9.0%	5.2%
2026	45.7%	27.3%	11.2%	7.1%

Who read comics in 2026 and what has changed over time?

There were some differences in comic reading by gender, age and free-school-meal (FSM) uptake in 2026 (see Figure 2). Age showed the biggest differences, with comic reading declining as children got older. While 3 in 5 children aged 8 to 11 read comics in their free time, this almost halved to 1 in 3 among those aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18. More boys than girls read comics, with 1 in 2 boys reading comics in their free time compared with 2 in 5 girls. Differences by FSM uptake were smaller, with slightly more children and young people receiving FSMs reading comics than those who did not.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people who read comics in their free time in 2026 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake



These patterns reflect longer-term trends (see Table 2). Trends since 2017 show that the gap between boys and girls has halved, decreasing from 18.2 percentage points to 9.2 percentage points in 2026. This is largely because of an increase in the percentage of girls reading comics over time. However, in 2026, comic reading increased sharply among both boys and girls, with both reaching their highest levels since 2017.

Trends since 2017 also show that comic reading has increased across all age groups. While the biggest increases were among the youngest children (aged 8 to 11) and the oldest young people (aged 16 to 18), children and young people of all ages were more likely to read comics in 2026 than at any point since 2017.

Consistently more children and young people who received FSMs reported reading comics compared with those who did not receive FSMs. In 2026, the gap was 4.3 percentage points in favour of those who received FSMs, slightly larger than in either 2025 or 2017. Both groups also reported their highest levels of comic reading since 2017. The consistency of this pattern suggests that comics appeal to children and young people regardless of socioeconomic background.

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Table 2: Children and young people's engagement with comics between 2017 and 2026 by gender, age group and FSM status

Year	Gender		Age group				FSM uptake	
	Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
2017/18	49.4%	31.2%	46.7%	40.5%	30.6%	20.3%	41.9%	39.2%
2019	43.1%	29.8%	39.6%	38.1%	29.1%	23.3%	38.3%	36.2%
2020	45.7%	30.3%	46.1%	38.7%	26.7%	23.0%	41.1%	37.0%
2021	43.1%	30.8%	42.0%	39.0%	31.5%	27.8%	40.6%	36.2%
2022	45.5%	34.3%	45.9%	41.9%	33.9%	30.6%	43.4%	40.0%
2023	44.6%	34.8%	49.7%	40.5%	31.4%	32.1%	42.3%	39.2%
2024	43.9%	34.6%	46.8%	41.5%	32.3%	29.8%	41.9%	38.3%
2025	42.2%	33.3%	50.2%	38.7%	28.3%	29.5%	40.2%	37.1%
2026	49.9%	40.7%	60.0%	45.7%	35.1%	33.5%	48.6%	44.3%

Reading comics in 2026 by geographical location

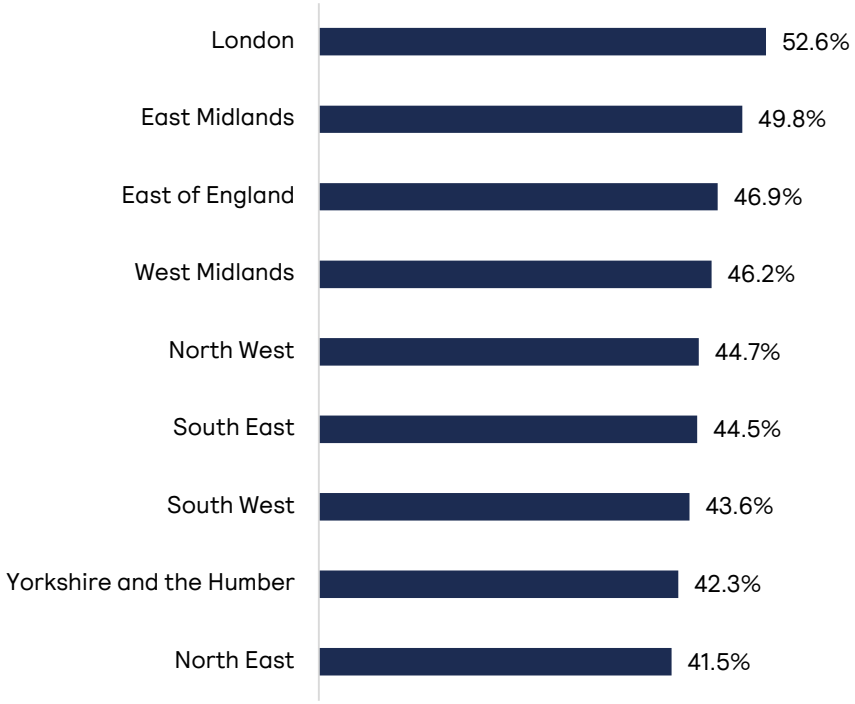
As shown in Figure 3, Scotland and England reported similarly high levels of comic reading in 2026, followed by Northern Ireland, while Wales had the lowest percentage of children and young people reading comics in their free time.

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people reading comics in 2026 by nation



Across the English regions (see Figure 4), comic reading was highest in London and the East Midlands, where around 1 in 2 children and young people reported reading comics in their free time. By comparison, lower levels of comic reading were reported in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber, where around 2 in 5 children and young people read comics.

Figure 4: Children and young people's engagement with comics in 2026 by region in England



Having looked at who is reading comics and the trends in reading comics since 2017, we were then interested in exploring in more depth why children and young people might enjoy reading comics. The next section looks at responses to an open-ended question in our 2025 survey inviting children and young people to tell us why they might or might not engage with reading in their free time. 711 comments related to comics and graphic novels, and these were then analysed thematically.

Why do children and young people enjoy reading comics?

Children and young people described a wide range of reasons for enjoying comics that extended beyond simply finding them 'fun'. Their comments highlighted how the format, content and reading experience of comics shaped their enjoyment, making reading feel more engaging, accessible, immersive and enjoyable. Five broad themes emerged from their comments.

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Comics can capture children and young people's interests in a way that conventional books may not

Many children and young people described comics as more engaging than traditional books because they featured stories, characters and genres they enjoyed. Rather than expressing a dislike of reading itself, several explained that comics were more likely to hold their interest than conventional books, particularly when they included favourite characters or fast-paced, humorous or action-filled stories, including superheroes, manga, comedy, mystery and adventure, explaining that these stories made them want to read:

"I love to read comics because I feel other books aren't right for me, so I think comics are very fun!"

"I like reading comics and mangas because they have fun and cool characters and stories."

"I like reading comics and learning more about the comic character/story."

Some children and young people contrasted comics with books that they felt they were expected to read at home or at school. While they described traditional books as something they associated with school, parental expectations or genres that did not appeal to them, comics were often described as a reading choice that reflected their own interests. These comments suggest that, for some children, comics represented a form of reading they actively chose because it aligned with what they enjoyed:

"I don't massively like reading as I generally associate it with school. I do like comics though."

"My parents force me to read only novels and I struggle to read sometimes so I like comics."

"I read a lot of comics but not many books since I have yet to find a genre I enjoy."

Several also described how comics complemented their wider cultural and media ecosystem. They described enjoying comics alongside television programmes, films or online content, while others explained that comics allowed them to engage more deeply with stories and characters they already enjoyed. These comments suggest that comics were not viewed in isolation but as part of a wider interest in particular fictional worlds, genres and franchises:

"I enjoy reading some types of books like manga/comic because it is fun to read the book and watch the show and compare the two together."

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"Another reason why I like manga is because it feels like I am watching the show but in reality I am actually reading the book."

"I like comics because they sometimes add on to what happens in films."

"I enjoy reading because I can read things online from fandoms I actually like."

Comics bring stories to life visually

Another common theme was the visual nature of comics. Children and young people said that illustrations helped them follow the story, understand what was happening and connect with the characters, with some saying that the visual support of pictures made it easier for them to imagine the story:

"I do enjoy graphic novels as the pictures give me a better understanding of what's going on."

"They give me more of an image in my head."

Some children and young people also appreciated comics as a visual art form. Rather than simply helping them follow the story, they described enjoying the artwork, graphic style and illustrations in their own right. Others explained that comics inspired their own creativity or helped them develop artistic skills, suggesting that the appeal of comics extends beyond reading alone:

"I enjoy reading comics as I view them as art."

"I really like the artwork in the comics."

"I like reading comics because they teach me how to draw."

"I enjoy reading Korean comics (manhwas) and like the graphic style."

Comics create immersive reading experiences

Many children and young people described comics as helping them become immersed in the stories they were reading. Some explained that comics allowed them to picture what was happening in the story more easily by, for example, helping them to imagine characters and events more vividly than in traditional books:

"I especially like comics... I prefer reading a book with at least a few illustrations so it gives me a brief idea what a character looks likes."

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"I find it very hard to find a good book for me and one I can easily imagine... I find that comics counter those two problems with reading a book so I find it fun and exciting when I read comics (I love when there are good drawings)."

Others said they felt transported into another world or as though they were part of the story itself, suggesting that some children experienced comics as a format that allowed them to become absorbed in the story:

"It's like I'm experiencing another world."

"I really like the illustrations and the way they express their feelings."

Comics can make reading feel more accessible

Some children and young people explained that they found comics easier to read and understand than traditional books. They described how illustrations helped them follow the story and picture what was happening, while others said comics felt easier because they contained less text or were better suited to the way they preferred to learn. Several children who described finding reading difficult also explained that they preferred comics for these reasons:

"I struggle to read sometimes so I like comics."

"I'm more of a visual learner so I enjoy reading mangas and comics."

Some children and young people explained that comics suited the way they preferred to read. Rather than focusing solely on the stories, they described how the format of comics – including shorter sections of text, illustrations and the flexibility to read at their own pace – made them more enjoyable than longer text-heavy books. Others explained that comics felt less overwhelming or easier to return to, suggesting that the format matched their individual reading preferences:

"I mostly choose comics because they have little story and they are really quick and easy to read."

"I don't enjoy reading big, chunky books, as I don't have the patience to sit and read a book."

"Big books with long texts make me bored and so I prefer comics or manga."

Comics can help children relax and unwind

Some children and young people described reading comics as a way to relax and unwind. They explained that reading comics helped them feel calm, take their mind off everyday worries or reduce feelings of stress. Others described turning to

comics when they were bored or wanted something enjoyable to do, suggesting that comics can provide a positive way to spend their free time:

"Comics make me relaxed."

"Reading comics and manga helps me relax."

"I do like reading because it would take my mind off of things, like a whole new world without any worries or problems... I've always taken a liking to [Marvel] comics! It makes me less stressed all the time."

"I enjoy reading because it really helps me to calm down and just makes me relax. I really like reading comics."

"I like to read because it is relaxing to just escape into a comic and read."

Several children described reading comics before bed or when they wanted to unwind, suggesting that comics offered not only enjoyment but also a way to relax and switch off from everyday life.

Overall, these comments suggest that children and young people value comics for multiple reasons. They are drawn to stories and characters that reflect their interests, appreciate the visual nature of the format, and describe comics as easier to read, more immersive and, for some, provide a way to relax and unwind. Rather than simply describing comics as 'fun', many children explained how the unique combination of images and text offered a distinct, and highly valued, reading experience.

Discussion

Over the past decade, the number of children and young people reading comics in their free time has increased steadily, from fewer than 2 in 5 in 2017 to almost 1 in 2 in 2026. This increase was driven largely by growth in reading print comics, possibly due to a rapid increase in reading manga (see, e.g., Hayley, 2026), something we hope to explore in future research. The percentage reading comics digitally has remained comparatively stable.

These findings highlight the continued importance of comics within children and young people's reading lives, and contrast with broader changes in children and young people's reading habits, including declining engagement with fiction reading in print and changes in the types of reading materials they choose in their free time (Picton et al., 2026).

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Children and young people's views and perspectives provide vital insights into what makes comics such an enduring and appealing format. Rather than simply describing comics as 'fun', children and young people explained that comics appealed to them for a range of reasons. They valued stories and characters that reflected their interests, appreciated the visual nature of comics, described them as easier to read and understand than many traditional books, and explained how comics could draw them into stories and help them relax and unwind. These findings suggest that children and young people value comics not because of any single feature but because the combination of images and text creates a reading experience that feels engaging, accessible and enjoyable.

Some children and young people also distinguished comics from traditional books. Rather than expressing a dislike of reading itself, they described comics as better reflecting their interests or as a preferred way of reading. Some contrasted comics with books they associated with school or parental expectations and felt that comics allowed them to choose reading materials that reflected their own interests. Many children also felt more able to follow or become more immersed in reading comics in a way they were not when reading conventional books. While these comments should not be interpreted as evidence that comics increase reading engagement more broadly, they highlight the importance of providing children and young people with reading materials that reflect their interests, preferences and motivations.

Our research has shown consistently that children and young people value opportunities to choose reading materials that reflect their interests, and our findings suggest that comics are one format through which many children and young people exercise that choice, particularly children who may struggle with more conventional reading materials. Recent research has further outlined the wider benefits of comics for supporting children and young people's learning, reading engagement, visual literacy, creativity and critical thinking (Jones & Starbuck Braidley, 2026). Ensuring that comics, graphic novels and manga are recognised as legitimate reading materials in homes, schools and libraries may therefore help more children and young people find reading experiences that are enjoyable, meaningful and personally relevant.

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About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions. Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories. Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter.

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