National Literacy Trust

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Children and young people's reading in Northern Ireland in 2025

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National Literacy Trust

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Regular reading for pleasure offers many benefits for individuals and society, including higher academic achievement, improved career outcomes and earnings, as well as improved life satisfaction and wellbeing[1]. However, many studies point to a decline in reading engagement in the UK and internationally over the last 20 years[2]. In the UK, our surveys show that only 1 in 3 children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoy reading in their free time, and just 1 in 5 read daily[3].

This is the first of our Annual Literacy Survey reports to focus on Northern Ireland. Encouragingly, pupils in Northern Ireland performed highly in the most recent PIRLS and PISA[4] assessments, demonstrating a level of reading skill well above the international average. However, reading enjoyment levels were of more concern, with the same study showing that just 28% of 10-year-olds from Northern Ireland enjoyed reading 'very much', compared with an average of 42% of their peers in other countries. As this report shows, our own research shares a similarly worrying picture.

It is vital to find ways to support reading engagement in children and young people to ensure they can access the benefits reading has to offer. To that end, this report also highlights what children and young people in Northern Ireland tell us motivates them to engage in reading.

Children and young people's reading in Northern Ireland in 2025

We asked 114,970 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 515 schools across the UK who took part in our Annual Literacy Survey how they felt about reading in 2025 (see Appendix 1 for more information on methodology and sample). This report focuses on findings for 5,156 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 48 schools across Northern Ireland, exploring levels of reading enjoyment, frequency and attitudes, as well as how background characteristics relate to reading experiences.

[1] See, e.g., Cremin, T. & Scholes, L. (2024). Reading for pleasure: Scrutinising the evidence base – benefits, tensions and recommendations. *Language and Education*, 1–23; British Land & WPI Consulting. (2021). *The power of reading for pleasure*.; Sun, Y.-J., Sahakian, B. J., Langley, C., Yang, A., Jiang, Y., Kang, J., Zhao, X., Li, C., Cheng, W. & Feng, J. (2023). Early-initiated childhood reading for pleasure: Associations with better cognitive performance, mental well-being and brain structure in young adolescence

[2] Loh et al., (2025) *The decline in volitional reading; IEA (2020) Troubling Trends: An international decline in attitudes towards reading*

[3] Clark et al., (2025) Children and young people's reading in 2025, National Literacy Trust

[4] PIRLS 2021 in Northern Ireland: Reading Attainment. https://www.iea.nl/sites/default/files/2023-06/PIRLS%202021%20%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20Full%20Report.pdf; PISA 2022 National Report for Northern Ireland. PISA 2022 National Report for Northern Ireland | Department of Education

Reading enjoyment in free time

In 2025, reading enjoyment levels in Northern Ireland were low, particularly among boys, young people aged 11 to 16, and those who received free school meals.

- Fewer than 3 in 10 (28.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2025, leaving 7 in 10 (71.1%) who did not enjoy reading.
- Reading enjoyment levels differed by gender, age and socioeconomic status:
    - More girls than boys enjoyed reading in their free time in Northern Ireland in 2025, with 1 in 3 (34.6%) girls enjoying reading compared with fewer than 1 in 4 (23.4%) boys.
    - Reading enjoyment was highest among 8- to 11-year-olds, with almost 1 in 2 (46.4%) saying they enjoyed reading in their free time. Levels of reading enjoyment decreased sharply in 11- to 14-year-olds and 14- to 16-year-olds, with 1 in 4 (25.0%) and 1 in 5 (19.1%) enjoying reading respectively. However, enjoyment rebounded somewhat among 16- to 18-year-olds, with more than 1 in 3 (35.7%) enjoying reading.
    - More children and young people who did not receive free school meals (FSMs) told us they enjoyed reading in their free time compared with those who received FSMs (30.6% vs 23.7%, a gap of 6.9 percentage points).
- Children and young people in Northern Ireland reported slightly lower reading enjoyment levels compared with those in the rest of the UK (33.0%).

Daily reading in free time

Just 1 in 6 children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they read daily, with fewer boys, older age groups and those receiving FSMs reading daily compared with girls, primary-school-aged children and those who did not receive FSMs.

- Only 1 in 6 (16.9%) children and young people in Northern Ireland reported reading daily in their free time in 2025, while 1 in 3 (28.7%) told us that they rarely or never read.
- Reading frequency varied by gender, age and free-school-meal uptake:
    - Almost twice as many girls as boys reported reading daily (20.9% vs 12.9%).
    - Around 1 in 3 (34.7%) 8- to 11-year-olds reported reading daily in their free time, with the older age groups reporting far lower percentages. For example, just 13.5% of 11- to 14-year-olds reported reading daily.
    - Almost twice as many children and young people who did not receive FSMs reported reading daily compared with those who received FSMs (19.1% vs 11.5%).
- Children and young people in Northern Ireland reported a slightly lower daily reading rate compared with those in the rest of the UK (18.8%).

What children and young people were reading in their free time

Children and young people's reading choices in their free time showed that the most popular reading materials included song lyrics, fiction, non-fiction and comics.

- Song lyrics were the most popular reading material and were read more in digital format than on paper (61.7% vs 8.9%).
- Fiction was the second most popular choice of free-time reading, with 1 in 2 reading fiction on paper (49.0%) and 1 in 5 (21.1%) on screen.
- Around 2 in 5 (40.8%) children and young people read non-fiction on paper (14.0% on a device) and 3 in 10 (30.4%) read comics in print (14.1% on screen).
- Twice as many children and young people read news on a device (30.1%) compared with print (12.4%), while fan fiction was read equally on paper and on screen (15.4%).

Many children and young people also reported reading digital-only materials, demonstrating that digital formats contributed to free-time reading:

- 7 in 10 (69.3%) read direct messages, 2 in 3 (64.2%) read social media content and 3 in 5 (62.5%) read in-game messages.
- In addition, 1 in 2 read text on websites (53.5%) and captions (50.1%), 42.9% read emails and 1 in 3 (32.4%) read blogs or forums.

Reading motivation

While levels of reading enjoyment and frequency were quite low, many children and young people still found value in reading, particularly for learning and wellbeing. Motivations fell into three broad categories: curious (learning-focused), mindful (wellbeing-focused), and social (connection-focused).

- Curious readers read to increase knowledge and skills. Nearly 3 in 5 read to learn new words (56.7%) or to learn new things (56.4%). Almost 1 in 2 (45.9%) read to improve their focus and concentration and more than 1 in 3 (36.8%) to better understand the views of others. 1 in 3 (32.4%) read to develop their critical thinking and 3 in 10 (30.7%) to learn about other cultures.
- Mindful readers read for wellbeing, creativity and escapism. 3 in 5 (59.9%) read to feel relaxed, 1 in 2 (49.9%) to feel creative, and more than 2 in 5 (44.0%) to escape into another world. 2 in 5 (39.4%) read to feel happy, 1 in 4 (26.5%) to feel more confident, and 1 in 5 (22.0%) to deal with problems.
- Social readers included those who read to learn more about issues and causes they cared about (24.8%), to feel connected to the world (19.2%) and those who read to spend time with other people (8.6%).

What would make children and young people aged 8 to 18 want to read?

An important way to address low levels of reading enjoyment and frequency is to explore what would drive children and young people to engage in reading.

- More than 1 in 2 children and young people in Northern Ireland said finding books that matched their hobbies and interests (50.6%) and books about films or TV series (49.0%) would made them want to read.
- 2 in 5 said that finding a book with an interesting cover or title (43.4%) as well as having the freedom to choose what to read (39.4%) would play a role in their decision to read in their free time.
- For more than 1 in 3, having free time (34.8%) or receiving a book recommendation (34.4%) were also important factors in them choosing to read.

What might encourage disengaged readers?

For less-engaged readers (children and young people who reported enjoying reading 'a bit' or 'not at all'), we identified many of the same factors that would motivate them to engage in reading, albeit to a lesser extent than their more-engaged peers:

- Finding books based on a film or TV series (43.1%) or books that matched their interests (41.2%) were the most influential factors.
- Finding books with an interesting cover or title (34.7%) as well as having the freedom to choose their own reading materials (28.3%) were also important factors that could motivate this group of children and young people to read more.

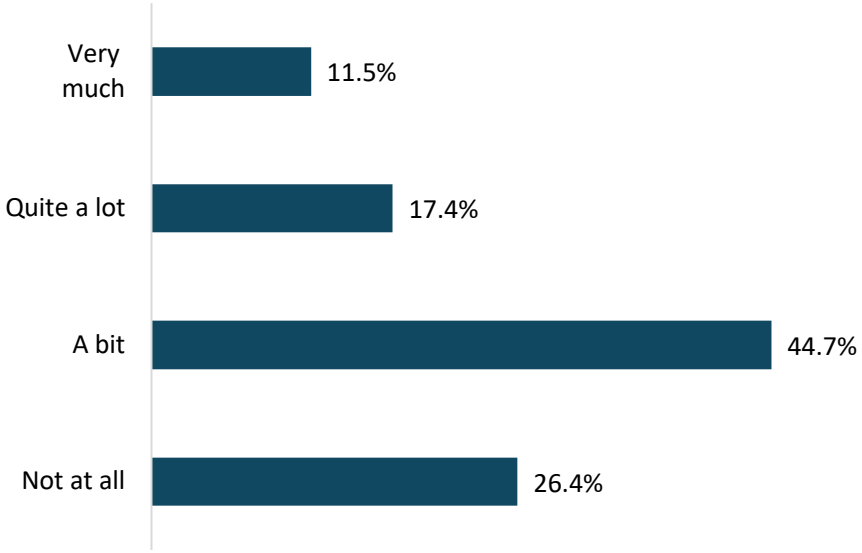
Children and young people's use of school and public libraries

- Only 2 in 5 (40.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 reported using their school library or reading spaces, while 1 in 2 (49.6%) didn't. Approximately 1 in 10 (9.7%) reported not having library facilities available at their school.
    - Twice as many of those who used their school library reported enjoying reading compared with those who didn't use their school library (43.1% vs 21.7%).
    - More than twice as many children and young people who used the school library reported reading daily compared with those who didn't use it (27.0% vs 11.4%).
- More than 3 in 10 (31.2%) children and young people told us they used their local public library, while almost 2 in 3 (63.8%) did not. 5.0% reported that there wasn't a public library in their area.
    - Reading enjoyment was higher among individuals who made use of a public library in their area compared with those who did not (50.9% vs 21.8%).
    - Almost three times as many children and young people who used their local library reported reading daily compared with those who didn't (31.6% vs 11.9%).

Children and young people's reading enjoyment in Northern Ireland in 2025

Fewer than 3 in 10 children and young people in Northern Ireland in 2025 told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time, with 11.5% enjoying it 'very much' and 17.4% enjoying it 'quite a lot' (see Figure 1). More than 2 in 5 enjoyed reading only 'a bit' and 1 in 4 said they did not enjoy reading at all.

Figure 1: Children and young people's reading enjoyment in Northern Ireland in 2025



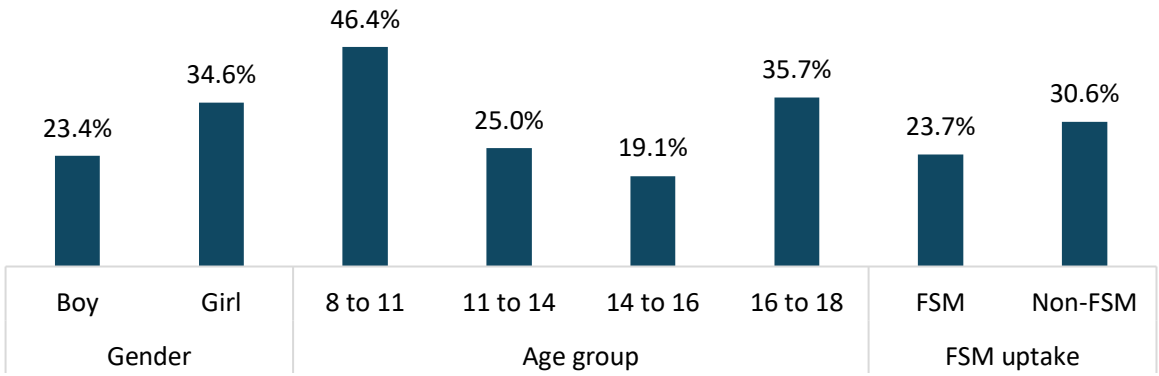
Reading enjoyment in free time by gender, age and FSM status

Exploring reading enjoyment in free time in Northern Ireland in 2025, we found differences by gender, age group and FSM status (see Figure 2). Considerably more girls (1 in 3) than boys (1 in 4) enjoyed reading in their free time, with a gap of 11.2 percentage points between the groups.

Reading enjoyment declined by age. The highest reading enjoyment rate was reported among those aged 8 to 11, with nearly 1 in 2 of this group enjoying reading, while considerably fewer 11- to 14-year-olds (1 in 4) and 14- to 16-year-olds (1 in 5) reported enjoying reading in their free time. However, rates picked up again for those aged 16 to 18, with more than 1 in 3 of this age group enjoying reading.

With regard to free-school-meal uptake, fewer children who received FSMs told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time compared with those who did not receive FSMs (23.7% vs 30.6%; a 6.9-percentage-point difference).

Figure 2: Reading enjoyment in free time in children and young people in Northern Ireland in 2025 by gender, age and FSM status.

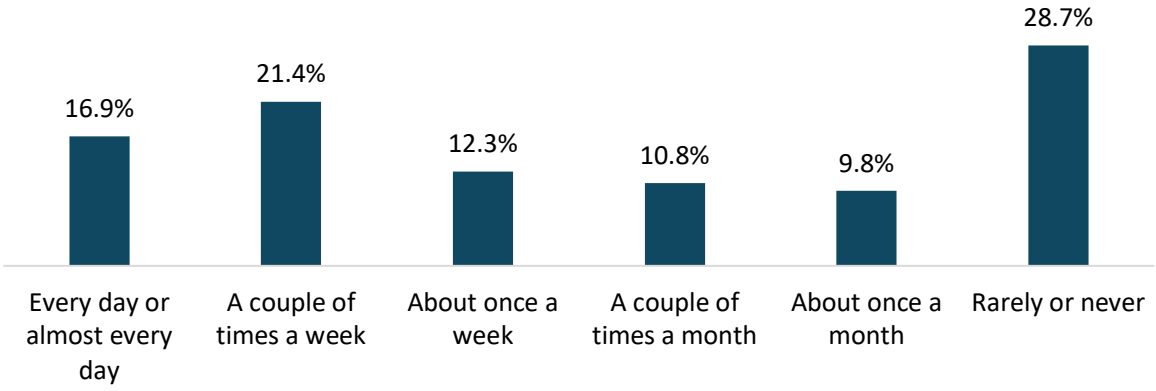


Considering reading enjoyment within the UK overall, compared with the reading enjoyment rate in the rest of the UK (33.0%), Northern Ireland's rate (28.9%) was 4.1 percentage points lower.

Daily reading in free time

As shown in Figure 3, only 1 in 6 children and young people in Northern Ireland in 2025 reported reading daily or almost daily in their free time. 1 in 5 read a couple of times a week and 1 in 8 about once a week. About 1 in 10 reported only reading a couple of times a month and once a month, while around 1 in 3 said they rarely or never read in their free time, suggesting that leisure reading was not a regular habit for a considerable number of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

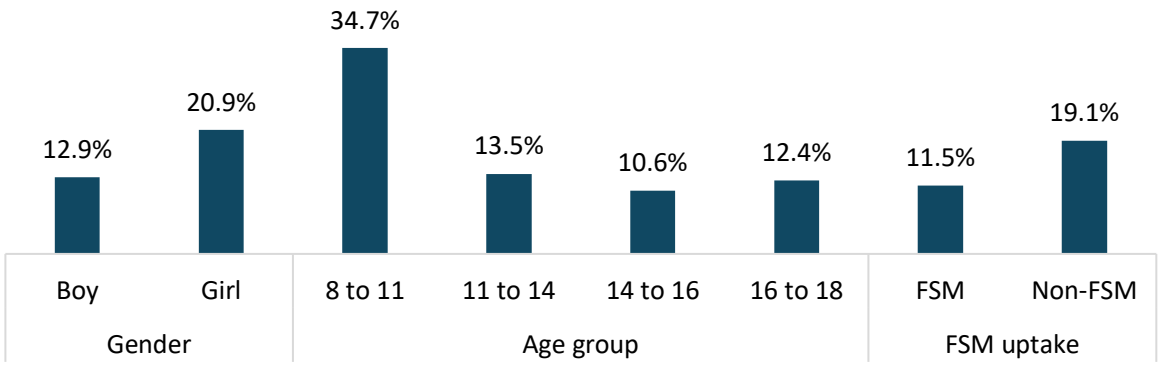
Figure 3: Frequency of reading in spare time for children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland in 2025



As with reading enjoyment, daily reading in free time in Northern Ireland varied by gender, age

and FSM status. Nearly twice as many girls as boys read daily in their free time (see Figure 4). The opposite pattern was seen among those who read rarely or never, with 34.2% of boys and 22.4% of girls saying this, an 11.8-percentage-point gap between genders. With regard to age, around three times as many children aged 8 to 11 reported reading daily in their free time compared with young people aged 11 to 18, while almost twice as many of those who did not receive FSMs read daily in their free time compared with their peers who received FSMs. These findings indicate that gender, age and socioeconomic background are all associated with reading engagement and suggest a need to focus on barriers to reading in boys, secondary-school-aged pupils and those from lower-income backgrounds.

Figure 4: Daily reading in Northern Ireland in 2025 by gender, age and FSM status.



The link between reading enjoyment in free time and reading frequency in free time

There was a positive relationship between reading enjoyment in free time and reading frequency in free time (r = .601), indicating that children and young people who enjoyed reading chose to read more frequently in their free time.

Table 1 illustrates children and young people's reading frequency by enjoyment level. It shows that more of those who enjoyed reading read regularly, while more of those who didn't enjoy it tended to read infrequently or not at all. For example, over 2 in 5 of those who enjoyed reading read daily compared with only 5.2% of those who did not enjoy reading. However, it should be noted that while fewer children and young people who didn't enjoy reading read daily, 6 in 10 still read in their free time at least once a month.

Table 1: Reading enjoyment in free time by reading frequency in free time in 2025 for children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland.

	Daily	A couple of times a week	Once a week	A couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely or never
Enjoyed reading	45.9%	37.6%	9.5%	3.8%	1.7%	1.5%
Didn't enjoy reading	5.2%	14.9%	13.4%	13.7%	13.1%	39.8%

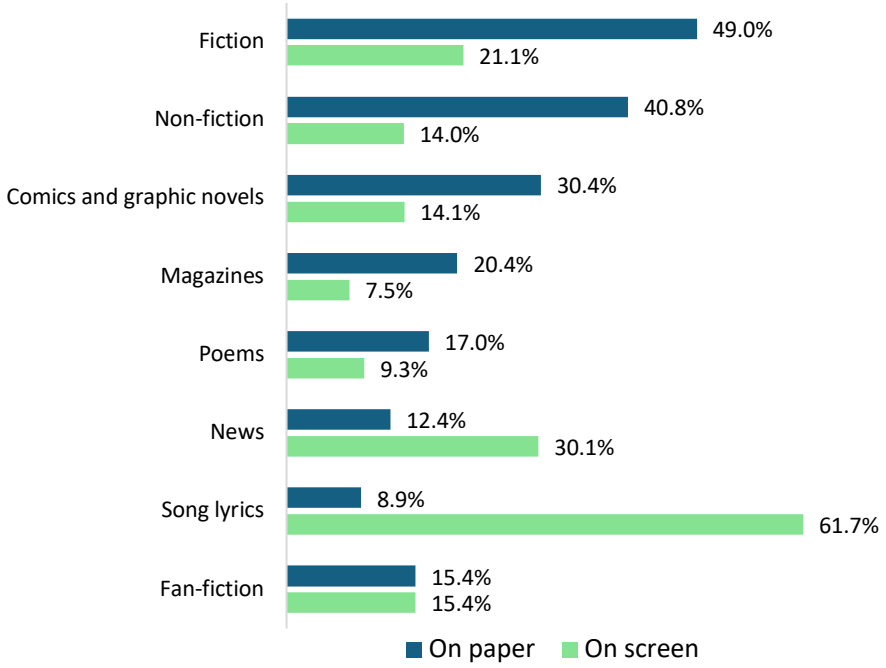
What do children and young people read?

The most popular reading choices in print among children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland were fiction, non-fiction and comics/graphic novels (Figure 5). More specifically, 1 in 2 reported reading fiction in print, 2 in 5 read non-fiction in print, and 1 in 3 read comics in print. 1 in 5 chose to read magazines on paper while slightly fewer chose to read poems in the same format. The least-preferred reading material on paper was song lyrics.

However, on screen, song lyrics were the most popular material, with more than 6 in 10 indicating this preference. The second most frequently read material on screen was news, with 1 in 3 sharing that they read news on a digital device. Fiction was also a relatively popular choice for on-screen reading, with 1 in 5 of children and young people reporting this. Conversely, only 7.5% of individuals reported reading magazines on screen, making it the least-preferred material for this format.

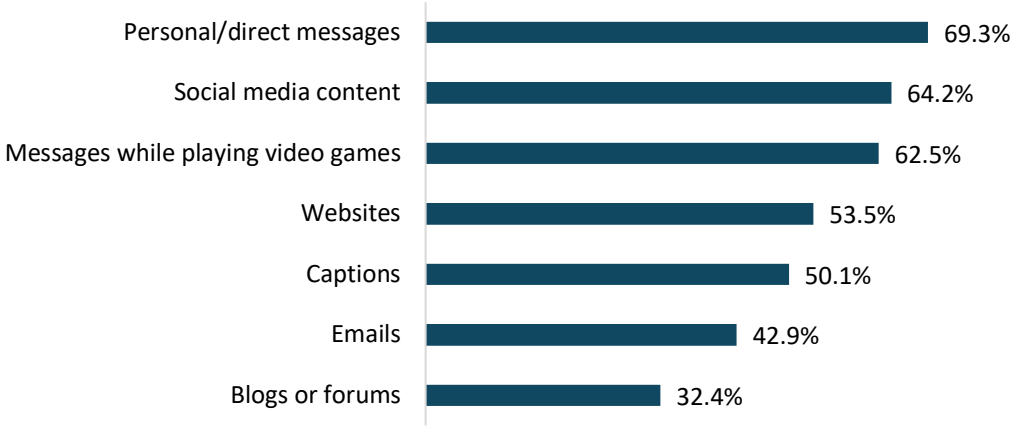
The most striking difference between print and digital formats was for song lyrics, with about seven times as many individuals choosing to read them on a device rather than on paper. The gap for fiction was also considerable, with just under twice as many reporting reading this material on paper compared with on screen. Fan fiction was read equally across both formats, suggesting no strong preference here.

Figure 5: Materials read either on screen or on paper in their spare time by children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland in 2025



Meanwhile, screen-only reading materials are a common part of children and young people's reading experience in 2025. 7 in 10 read personal/direct messages, nearly 2 in 3 read content on social media, while just over 6 in 10 read texts while playing video games (Figure 6). In addition, about 1 in 2 read material on websites or captions. The least popular digital materials were emails and blogs, although around 2 in 5 and 1 in 3 read these respectively, indicating that for many children and young people in Northern Ireland, a variety of digital formats contribute to free-time reading.

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2025



Reading formats by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

In 2025, girls generally reported reading a wider range of materials both on paper and on screen compared with boys (see Table 2), with the only exception being comics, which were more popular among boys in both formats. The most popular on-screen reading material for both genders was song lyrics, followed by news and fiction. Regarding reading on paper, fiction, non-fiction and comics were the top three choices for both genders. These patterns suggest that certain materials are generally preferred in specific formats across both genders and that on-screen reading appears to be an integral part of the reading experience in 2025.

Table 2: Percentage of boys and girls reading different formats in Northern Ireland in 2025

	On screen		On paper	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Fiction	18.9%	23.5%	42.5%	56.4%
Non-fiction	13.2%	14.8%	37.9%	44.7%
Comics	16.5%	10.6%	32.2%	28.6%
Magazines	6.9%	8.2%	16.4%	25.2%
Poems	6.0%	12.8%	10.5%	24.1%
News	32.0%	28.3%	11.2%	13.7%
Song lyrics	51.3%	73.6%	6.2%	11.9%
Fan fiction	12.5%	17.6%	14.8%	16.4%

When looking at age groups (see Table 3), 8- to 11-year-olds reported reading more in print than on a device. Their most popular reading materials on paper were fiction, non-fiction and comics. On screen, they reported reading song lyrics the most, followed by fiction and non-fiction, although at much lower rates. Young people aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 reported very similar levels of on-screen reading, with the only exception being news where 14- to 16-year-olds reported a higher rate. The most popular choices for on-screen reading were song lyrics, news and fiction, while for on-paper reading fiction, non-fiction and comics were preferred by both these age groups. In print, 11- to 14-year-olds reported higher percentages than 14- to 16-year-olds in all reading materials. Many older young people (those aged 16 to 18) read song lyrics, news, fiction and comics on electronic devices, reporting the highest on-screen reading percentages among all age groups. Their main reading choices in print were fiction and non-fiction, exhibiting lower engagement with the other materials.

Overall, more younger children (those aged 8 to 11) reported reading physical books, while more young people in older age groups reported on-screen reading. However, certain materials were consistently read in certain formats. For example, song lyrics and news were read primarily on screen across all age groups, while fiction and non-fiction were read in print.

Table 3: Percentage of children and young people reading different formats by age group in Northern Ireland in 2025

	On screen				On paper			
	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18
Fiction	21.0%	20.9%	19.2%	26.7%	56.7%	50.5%	37.6%	44.2%
Non-fiction	21.3%	11.5%	13.2%	16.5%	48.5%	41.3%	31.4%	40.0%
Comics	15.0%	12.8%	12.7%	23.3%	45.0%	30.0%	21.5%	18.0%
Magazines	7.4%	7.0%	7.9%	10.7%	23.7%	21.4%	18.1%	10.2%
Poems	10.7%	9.0%	7.8%	10.9%	26.0%	15.6%	12.9%	13.6%
News	19.1%	26.2%	37.4%	68.2%	13.3%	12.9%	11.6%	8.3%
Song lyrics	49.3%	63.1%	64.6%	74.5%	14.4%	8.5%	6.1%	5.3%
Fan fiction	16.6%	15.9%	12.6%	14.6%	26.9%	15.2%	9.3%	3.2%

Regarding FSM uptake (see Table 4), the same reading materials were listed as the most popular across both groups and formats. Song lyrics were the most popular for on-screen reading, with similar percentages reported for both groups, followed by news, although a slightly higher percentage of children and young people who did not receive FSMs reported reading news in both formats. Regarding reading on paper, fiction, non-fiction and comics were the most popular choices, with FSM recipients reporting lower percentages in all materials except for poems. Overall, a higher percentage of those who received FSMs reported reading all materials on screen compared with their peers who did not receive FSMs, while this pattern was reversed for reading on paper.

Table 4: Percentage of children and young people reading different formats by FSM uptake in Northern Ireland in 2025

	On screen		On paper	
	FSM	Non-FSM	FSM	Non-FSM
Fiction	24.6%	19.9%	38.8%	53.3%
Non-fiction	15.8%	13.4%	33.1%	44.2%
Comics	17.5%	12.7%	28.5%	31.3%
Magazines	8.1%	7.2%	15.3%	22.2%
Poems	11.4%	8.4%	17.7%	16.7%
News	25.5%	32.3%	8.6%	13.5%
Song lyrics	62.3%	61.9%	7.6%	9.2%
Fan fiction	17.1%	14.9%	13.8%	16.0%

What motivated children and young people who read at least once a month to read (aged 8 to 18 only)?

We asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland about the reasons why they chose to read. They were presented with 15 different motivations, which were then grouped into three reader categories: the curious reader[5], the mindful reader[6] and the social reader[7]. More specifically:

- Curious readers read to expand their knowledge base and improve their cognitive abilities.
- Mindful readers read for the emotional benefits (e.g., relaxation, happiness) and for personal growth such as gaining confidence and becoming more creative.
- Social readers read to engage with wider societal issues and to form a connection with the world around them.

Overall, the motivation for curious readers was to expand their knowledge and understanding of the world. As shown in Figure 7, of those who read in their free time at least once a month (n = 3,674), more than 1 in 2 read because it helped them learn new words or new things. Furthermore, among the curious readers, nearly 1 in 2 read to improve their focus and concentration, more than 1 in 3 to better understand the views of others, and 3 in 10 to develop critical thinking skills. 3 in 10 said that they read to learn more about other people or cultures.

Mindful readers were primarily drawn to reading for its emotional benefits, such as relaxation and escapism. 6 in 10 individuals said that they read because it helped them relax and 1 in 2 because it inspired them to be creative. Over 2 in 5 said reading made them feel like they had escaped into another world, while 4 in 10 said it made them feel happy. 1 in 4 used reading to boost their confidence and just over 1 in 5 to deal with their problems.

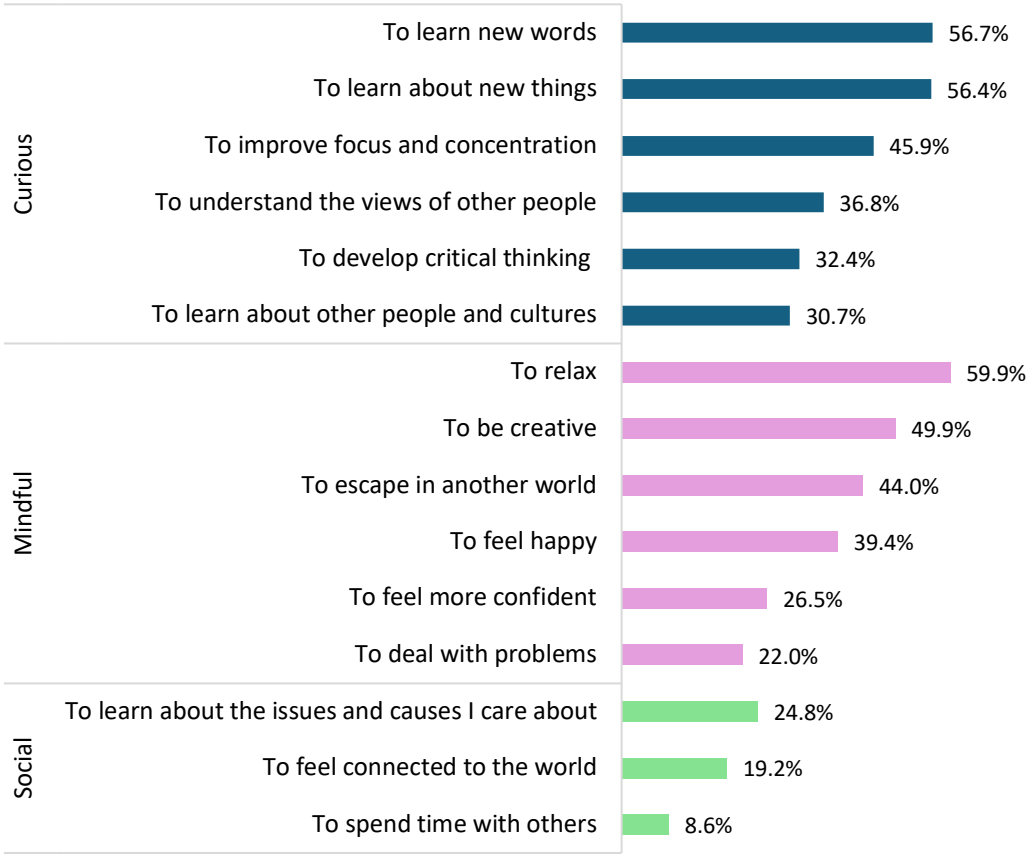
The main motivation for social readers was connectedness and insight into wider societal issues. Just under 1 in 4 reported reading to learn about issues and causes they cared about, while about 1 in 5 read to feel connected to the world. Only 8.6% of children and young people chose to read to spend time with others.

[5] Combining six items: reading helps me learn about new things, reading helps me learn about other people and cultures, reading helps me learn new words, reading helps me understand the views of other people, reading helps me improve my focus and concentration, and reading helps me develop critical thinking skills. Cronbach's alpha = .799. Top quartile of responses being described here as the curious reader (38.5%).

[6] Combining six items: to relax, to feel happy, to feel confident, to deal with problems, to escape to another world, and to be creative. Cronbach's alpha = .786. Top quartile of responses being described here as the mindful reader (29.0%).

[7] Combining three items: feel connected, spend time with others, learn about issues and causes. Cronbach's alpha = .582. Top quartile of responses being described here as the social reader (42.3%).

Figure 7: Children and young people's (aged 8 to 18) motivations for reading in Northern Ireland in 2025



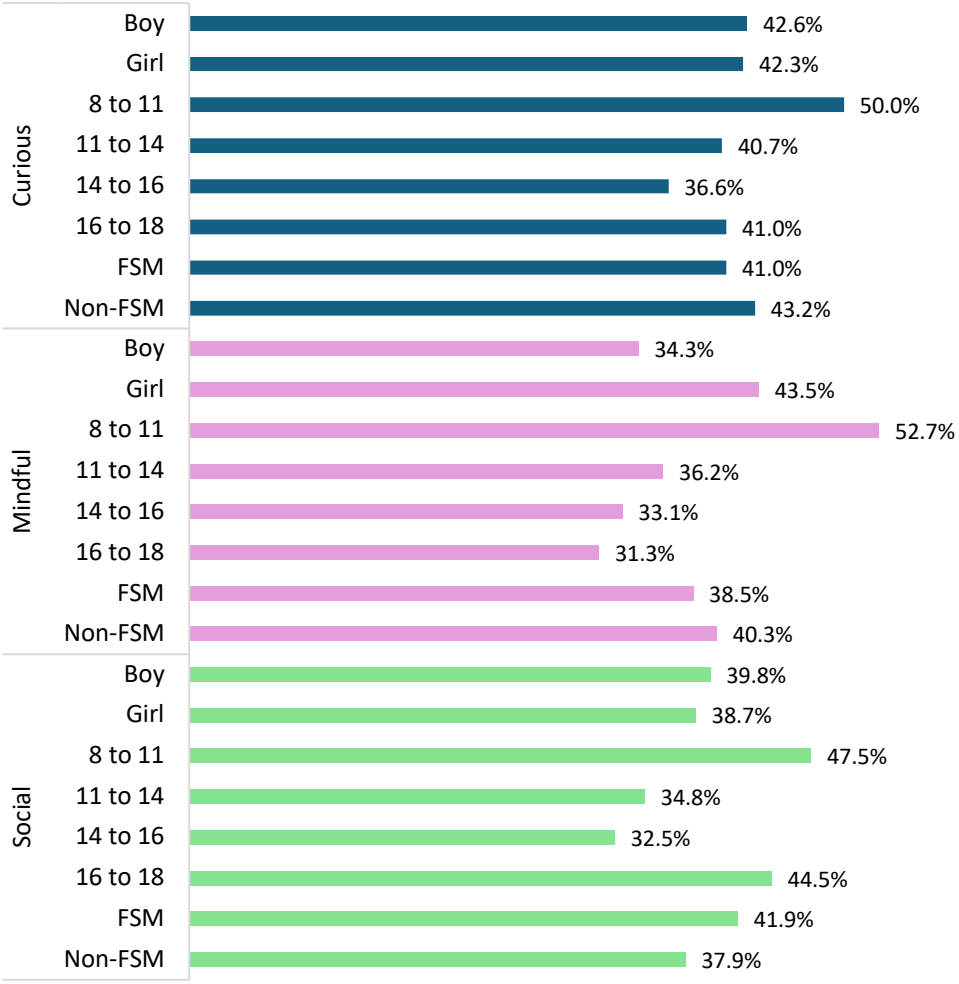
As shown in Figure 8, reading motivation was somewhat influenced by gender, age and socioeconomic background. Equal numbers of boys and girls fell into the curious-reader category, suggesting that reading to expand knowledge and enhance cognitive abilities was equally valued across genders. A similar picture emerged for social readers, with a marginally higher proportion of boys. In contrast, more girls than boys were mindful readers, suggesting that the emotional benefits of reading were considered important to more girls than boys.

In terms of age, younger children (8 to 11) showed the highest levels of engagement across all three reader categories. The highest proportion of 8- to 11-year-olds was found within the mindful category, followed by social and then the curious-reader profiles. For young people aged 11 to 16, the curious-reader category was slightly more prominent, suggesting that the learning aspect of reading held most appeal. Reading engagement increased among 16- to 18-year-olds, who were more drawn to the social aspects of reading and the sense of connection to wider societal issues, and less drawn to the feeling of escapism it can offer.

Children and young people who received FSMs were slightly less represented among the curious and mindful readers compared with those who didn't receive FSMs. However, FSM recipients showed higher engagement in the social-reader category, indicating that reading

related to societal issues and causes was a particularly meaningful motivation for this group.

Figure 8: Being a curious, mindful and social reader in Northern Ireland in 2025 by gender, age and FSM uptake



What would make children and young people want to read?

Considering the low reading enjoyment rates among children and young people in Northern Ireland, we wanted to know what, if anything, could potentially make them more interested in reading. As shown in Figure 9, 1 in 2 children and young people told us that finding books that matched their hobbies and interests or those that were based on a film or TV series would encourage them to read, while 2 in 5 said books with an interesting cover or title as well as autonomy in the choice of reading materials would encourage them to read. Nearly 1 in 3 children and young people said that they would want to read more if they had more free time or if they received book recommendations from their immediate circle, including family, friends or teachers.

Other suggestions included hearing about a popular book or reading reviews, having easy access to books, wanting to learn more about a specific topic, and being influenced by people they admire. Participation in a book club or discussion was selected by fewest children and young people as something that would encourage them to read more.

Figure 9: What would make children and young people in Northern Ireland want to read?

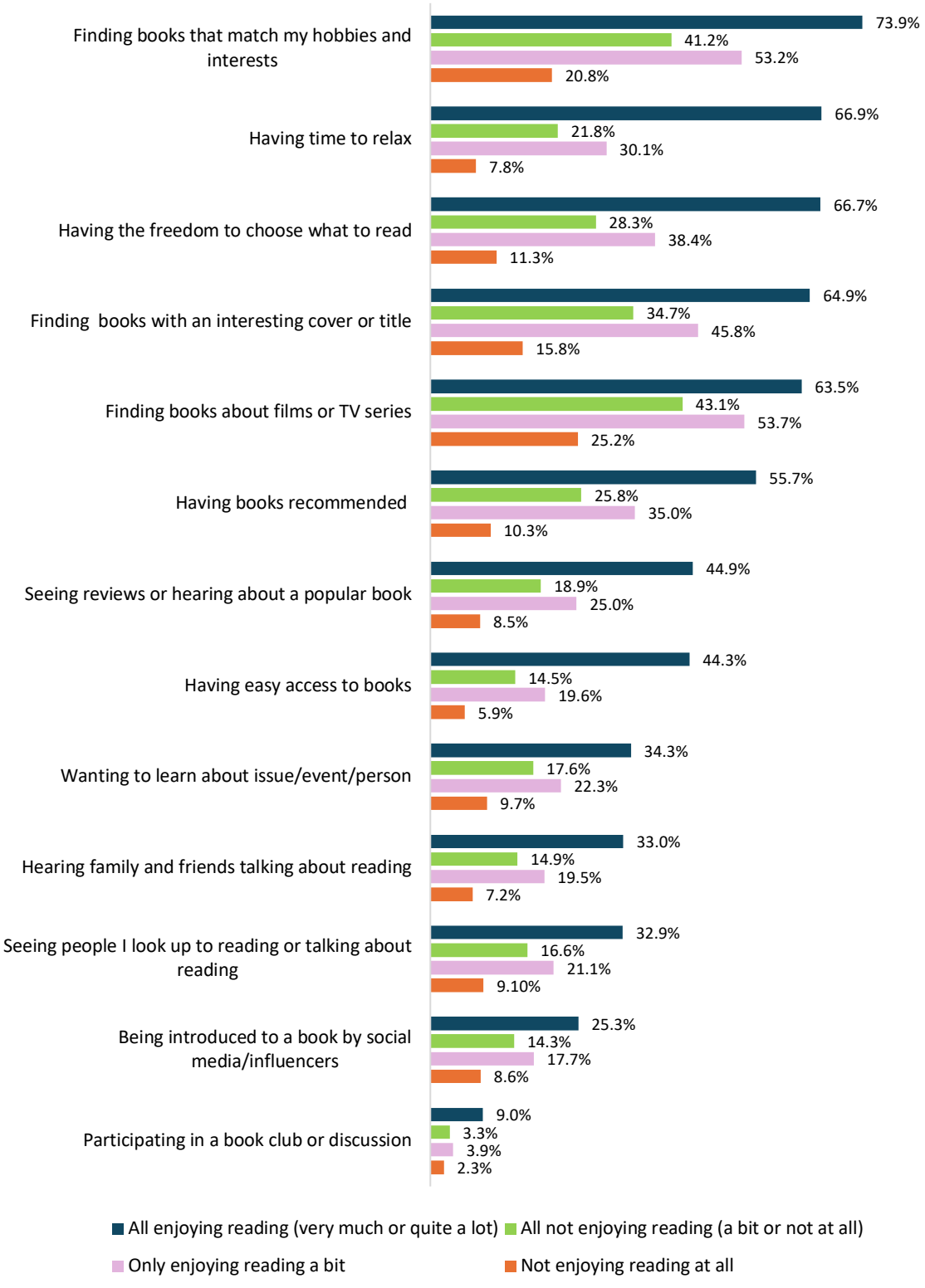
What would encourage children and young people who find little enjoyment in reading to read more?

The previous section showed that finding interesting reading materials – as well as having free time and autonomy in reading choices – could encourage children and young people in Northern Ireland to read. However, considering that approximately 2 in 5 children and young people only enjoyed reading a bit, 1 in 4 did not enjoy reading at all, and 1 in 3 chose to read only rarely or not at all, we were interested in looking at how to encourage reading among less-engaged readers.

In general, for children and young people who either enjoyed reading a bit or not at all, the two most influencing factors in encouraging them to read would be finding books that sparked their interest or books based on TV series or films. For those who only enjoyed reading a bit, the top two potential motivators were the same (Figure 10). Finding books with appealing covers or titles was also chosen as a factor that could encourage them to read more, along with having the freedom to choose their own books. In addition to receiving book recommendations from family, friends or teachers, 1 in 3 children and young people who only enjoyed reading a bit said that having more free time would play a key role in their decision to read.

As illustrated in Figure 10, children and young people who said they didn't enjoy reading at all identified the same top encouraging factors as those who only enjoyed reading a bit, albeit at much lower percentages. Finding books that are interesting and relevant to them, whether related to their hobbies or based on TV series and films, was still seen as potentially motivating, even among children and young people who reported no enjoyment in reading. Other potentially motivating factors included finding books with appealing covers or titles, having the freedom to choose what to read and receiving book recommendations. The factor with the lowest potential impact for both groups was participation in a book club or discussion.

Figure 10: What would encourage children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Northern Ireland who find little enjoyment in reading to engage in reading?



Children and young people's use of school and public libraries in Northern Ireland in 2025

We asked children and young people in Northern Ireland whether they used their school library and their local public library. Both reading enjoyment rates and reading frequency were higher among children and young people who made use of these facilities.

2 in 5 (40.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 reported using their school library or reading spaces. Twice as many students who used their school reading facilities reported enjoying reading (43.1% vs 21.7%) and reading daily (27.0% vs 11.4%) compared with those who didn't. 1 in 3 (31.2%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us that they used their local public library. More than twice as many children and young people who used a public library reported enjoying reading (50.9% vs 21.8%), and about three times as many reported reading daily (31.6% vs 11.9%) compared with those who didn't use a public library.

To sum up

This first report focusing on children and young people's reading engagement in Northern Ireland highlights low levels of reading enjoyment and reading frequency in 2025, with fewer than 3 in 10 of those aged 8 to 18 enjoying reading in their free time, and fewer than 1 in 5 reading daily outside school. In particular, fewer boys and secondary-aged pupils reported enjoying reading and reading daily in their free time in 2025, highlighting a need for targeted initiatives to support reading engagement in this group. A considerable gap was also found between children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs) and their peers, further suggesting that exploring barriers to reading for children from lower-income backgrounds should also be a priority.

Nevertheless, our findings offer reasons for cautious optimism. Understanding the motivations underpinning children and young people's reading choices is essential for promoting greater engagement with reading outside school. Many children and young people recognised the benefits of reading for academic learning, mental health, and social connections, indicating that highlighting these advantages may increase engagement. Reading profiles provide valuable insight into these diverse drivers. Notably, the 'curious' motivation, linked to learning, is prevalent even among those who do not enjoy reading, suggesting that educational framing may be effective in engaging some disengaged readers.

In addition, for those reporting the lowest enjoyment of reading, books related to visual media, hobbies or featuring appealing covers and titles, as well as opportunities for self-selection, may be effective motivators. A considerable percentage of children and young people, even those with lower levels of reading enjoyment, told us they would be more motivated to read if they could find material aligned with their interests, and this may include digital texts, song lyrics, news articles and fan fiction. This foregrounds the importance of supporting reading engagement across a wide range of formats and preferences.

With reading for pleasure associated with positive outcomes including reading proficiency, academic achievement and mental wellbeing, these findings underscore a need for strategies that emphasise relevance, autonomy and supportive environments to promote children and young people's engagement with reading. More broadly, Northern Ireland's new Anti-Poverty Strategy highlights the need to reduce poverty by addressing its underlying causes and promoting education, employment and support services[8]. As good literacy skills are associated with higher educational attainment, better job prospects and increased earnings[9], improving literacy can play a vital role in overcoming poverty.

National Literacy Trust programmes aim to support and sustain a reading culture in children and young people across the UK. Since early 2024, our Libraries for Primaries programme has been transforming reading in schools in Northern Ireland by creating vibrant, inspiring school libraries that put reading for pleasure at the heart of learning. Participating schools receive 500 new books, high-quality library furniture and staff training to ensure the library is used effectively and inclusively. Currently in 33 primary schools across Northern Ireland, the programme will expand to reach 73 schools by the end of 2025, giving thousands of children access to books that reflect their interests, lives and aspirations. By promoting choice and inclusivity, school libraries can help to address engagement gaps while providing a foundation for improved literacy outcomes, academic success and mental wellbeing for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

[8] https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-ni-executive-anti-poverty-strategy
[9] British Land & WPI Consulting. (2021). *The power of reading for pleasure*.

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Appendix

About the Annual Literacy Survey

The Annual Literacy Survey, run annually since 2010, includes questions about reading, writing and listening as well as about children and young people's home learning environment and access to resources at home. Questions about young people's use of AI to support their literacy have been included since 2023, and questions about speaking were added to the survey in 2024.

We made three surveys available in 2025: one for children aged 5 to 8 (Year 1 to Year 4, or Primary 2 to Primary 5 for Scotland), one for children and young people aged 8 to 16 (Year 4 to Year 11, or Primary 5 to Secondary 5 for Scotland), and one for those aged over 16. The surveys contain similar questions but the one for the younger age group is shorter and more pictorial, while the one for those aged over 16 had questions more relevant for that age group. The 2025 survey contained 19 questions for those aged 5 to 8, 39 questions for those aged 8 to 16, and 35 questions for those aged 16 and over.

Taking place from January to the middle of March every year, schools are recruited from autumn onwards through our networks, newsletters and social media followers, as well as through partner organisations like World Book Day and Renaissance. Participating schools receive a school-specific report as a thank you, which means that they can compare their responses to those received nationally once we've published the national reports.

114,970 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 515 schools took part in our Annual Literacy Survey in 2025. 9,730 answered a shorter survey for those aged 5 to 8, while 105,583 answered longer surveys for those aged 8 to 18.

Sample description

The make-up of our 2025 sample was largely comparable with that of 2024 and previous samples. Of those aged 8 to 18, 50,907 (48.2%) were boys; 50,748 (48.1%) were girls; 2,360 (2.2%) would rather not say; 1,475 (1.4%) described themselves another way; and 93 (0.1%) described themselves as non-binary. 15,509 (14.7%) were aged 8 to 11; 67,624 (64.0%) were aged 11 to 14; 15,913 (15.1%) were aged 14 to 16; and 6,537 (6.2%) were aged 16 to 18.

18,493 (17.5%) told us they received FSMs; 76,336 (72.3%) told us they didn't receive FSMs; 8,873 (8.4%) didn't know; and 1,881 (1.8%) didn't want to say. 90,749 (86.0%) attended schools in England; 1,939 (1.8%) attended schools in Wales; 7,739 (7.3%) attended schools in Scotland; and 5,156 (4.9%) attended schools in Northern Ireland. Of those aged 5 to 8, 4,239 (45.2%) were boys; 4,428 (47.2%) were girls; 174 (1.9%) would rather not say; and 62 (0.7%) described themselves another way (485 didn't answer the gender question). 7,047 (75.1%) attended schools in England; 187 (2.0%) attended schools in Wales; 1,644 (17.5%) attended schools in Scotland; and 510 (5.4%) attended schools in Northern Ireland.

The sample in Northern Ireland

This report focuses on findings for 5,156 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 48 schools across Northern Ireland. Slightly more boys (50.8%; n = 2,617) than girls (46.1%; n = 2,378) participated from Northern Ireland. We also had data from 101 children and young people who would rather not share their gender, 52 who would describe themselves in another way, and eight who would describe themselves as non-binary. In line with the national sample, more children and young people aged 11 to 14 (56.2%, n = 2,899) took part, followed by those aged 8 to 11 (18.8%, n = 971) and then those aged 14 to 16 (17.0%, n = 874). 412 (8.0%) young people aged 16 to 18 also took part. 24.9% (n = 1,282) children and young people told us they received free school meals (FSMs), 67.8% (n = 3,494) did not, 1.6% (n = 84) would rather not say, and 5.7% (n = 296) didn't know.

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to all the schools that took part in our survey this year – we couldn't do it without you!

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.

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