

National Year of Reading – Theory of change

National Year of Reading: Why now

The UK is experiencing a profound, generational decline in reading engagement. A recent survey of parents and carers of children aged 0 to 7 found that more than 1 in 3 (35%) said they didn't enjoy reading ([BookTrust, n.d.](#)). This is important as strong links were found between family reading attitudes and children's reading environments and experiences. If parents enjoyed reading themselves, children were 25% more likely to be read to every day and 40% more likely to enjoy reading themselves ([BookTrust, n.d.](#)). Similarly, a recent survey of parents of children aged 0 to 13 found that just 2 in 5 (40%) agreed that reading books to their child was fun ([HarperCollins, 2025](#)). At the same time, National Literacy Trust surveys of parents of children aged 0 to 5 have found a steep decline in the number parents who say they read daily with their child over the last five years, decreasing from 2 in 3 (66.1%) in 2019 to 1 in 2 (50.5%) in 2024 ([National Literacy Trust, 2024](#)).

Evidence from the National Literacy Trust's Annual Literacy Survey ([2025](#)) reveals that only one in three children and young people aged 8 to 18 reported enjoying reading in their free time, while just one in five read something daily. International comparisons further highlight this challenge: according to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021), only 29% of pupils aged 9 to 10 in England said they "very much like reading," significantly below the international average of 42%.

This pattern of disengagement extends beyond childhood. Recent research from The Reading Agency ([2024](#)) underscores a lack of reading among adults, many of whom cite barriers such as time pressures, low confidence, and limited access to relevant reading materials. Evidence consistently shows that independent, agentic reading is a powerful enabler, linked to outcomes such as improved educational performance, greater mental wellbeing, and stronger employment prospects (see, e.g. OECD, [2002](#), [2021](#); Sullivan & Brown, [2015](#); Sun et al., [2023](#); WPI, [2021](#)). Against this backdrop, the decline in reading is far-reaching, undermining cognitive development, language and critical thinking skills, and contributing to widening social and economic inequalities.

The National Year of Reading: A sector-wide response

Responding to this long-term pattern of disengagement, a consortium of organisations, supported by the Department for Education and a broad coalition of funders, will deliver a UK-wide campaign in 2026: the **National Year of Reading** (NYR). This once-in-a-generation opportunity will create a shared national moment to help people of all ages (re)connect with reading - rediscovering its personal and social value in everyday life. It is not simply another literacy initiative but a movement to motivate people everywhere to see reading as modern, social, and personally meaningful to boost skills, empathy and benefit wellbeing.

The campaign will span the whole year and reach into every corner of society - schools, communities, libraries, workplaces, the justice system, and early years settings - and it will be delivered through local stakeholders and cross-sectoral partnerships across business, media, government, and civil society. Importantly, it is underpinned by extensive audience research and a disruptive consumer-facing marketing campaign designed to engage everyone. Its ambition is to make reading visible, relevant, and valued across all ages, communities, and contexts, recognising that reading takes many forms and means different things to different people.

While the NYR is universal in intent, it also recognises that people's relationships with reading vary. For some, it may mean (re)discovering reading for pleasure; for others, sharing stories with children or exploring new formats and connections with others through books and ideas. The Theory of Change reflects this diversity: rather than focusing on specific groups, it describes broad pathways through which people, whatever their starting point, can build stronger, more positive connections with reading.

Introducing the Theory of Change

The Theory of Change sets out how the NYR can (re)connect people of all ages with reading, helping everyone to recognise its relevance, joy, and importance, and create meaningful and lasting change. It provides a common guide for partners, funders, and delivery teams, a high-level map linking the campaign's activities to the outcomes we aim to achieve, and aligning strategy, delivery, and learning across a diverse movement.

Practical and unifying by design, the Theory of Change is a tool for planning, coordination, and communication throughout the campaign year, while also laying the groundwork for evaluation and long-term legacy. By clarifying how collective action can generate personal, social, and systemic change, it gives partners a shared language for collaboration and a clear reference point for understanding progress.

Building on the evidence of need and the sector-wide response outlined above, it shows how NYR activities contribute to the short- and long-term shifts we aim to see over the next five to ten years. In doing so, it bridges strategy and practice, demonstrating how diverse initiatives, delivered through communities, organisations, and systems, can drive transformation at three levels: personal, social and cultural, and systemic.

For the many groups and partners gathered around the NYR, this high-level Theory of Change therefore serves several purposes:

- **Shared vision and language:** clarifying what we mean by reading, the changes we want to see, and how our collective efforts connect to a common goal.
- **Alignment of strategy and practice:** illustrating how different activities, programmes, campaigns, and partnerships contribute to shared outcomes, while allowing flexibility for local innovation.
- **Framework for learning and accountability:** providing a clear structure for tracking progress and demonstrating the difference we make together in 2026 and beyond.

The Theory of Change also helps to **bring coherence to a complex movement**. By mapping the relationships between the NYR's change strategies and its intended outcomes, it shows how individual contributions - from national campaigns to local programmes - can reinforce one another to build wider impact. It offers a way for partners to see where their work fits, identify opportunities for collaboration, and understand how collective effort can generate meaningful change at scale.

Finally, this Theory of Change is designed as a **working framework**: a shared point of reference that provides coherence across the NYR while leaving space for the diversity and complexity of delivery on the ground. It does not attempt to capture every programme, partnership, or activity in detail. Instead, it offers a common structure and language that partners can use to align their work, identify connections, and build a collective picture of how the NYR can make a lasting difference.

Foundational definitions of the NYR TOC

What do mean by “Reading”: *Reading* in the NYR is defined as a dynamic practice that includes engaging with stories, ideas, illustrations and information across print, digital, and audio formats; connecting with others through shared texts and conversations; and finding personal meaning that relates to identity, culture, and everyday life. Reading is a practice based on choice and agency that is contemporary, communal, and deeply personal - an activity that matters because of how it connects to people's real lives and aspirations.

The key elements of this top-level theory of change are:

Change strategies: Rather than listing a long set of activities or inputs, the NYR is guided by five overarching change strategies. Together, these capture the breadth of what will drive the campaign while keeping the focus on shared direction rather than operational detail. These strategies describe *how* NYR will work: through creative and disruptive approaches that use modern messaging and cultural relevance to (re)ignite interest in reading across all ages and communities; by amplifying and scaling proven programmes and practices, particularly in areas such as shared reading in the early years, to increase reach and coherence; by building and strengthening partnerships and investment across sectors to sustain impact beyond the campaign year; by connecting local action to national visibility, ensuring that activity rooted in communities, schools, libraries and workplaces contributes to a unifying national movement; and by ensuring all delivery is insight- and evidence-led, shaped by audience understanding, behavioural insights, and learning gathered throughout the year. Together, these five strategies form a high-level framework for understanding how the diverse inputs and partnerships of the NYR will generate lasting change, providing structure, coherence, and flexibility across a campaign designed to reach every part of society.

Short-term, medium-term and long-term (legacy) changes: These describe the impact of the NYR in a staged manner through the lens of the individual, the system and society/culture.

Vision: The ultimate vision of the NYR is *more people see reading as a personally meaningful, modern and social activity*. By this we mean:

- **Personally meaningful:** Reading feels relevant to people's identities, aspirations, everyday lives and futures. Individuals see stories, information, and knowledge that reflect their cultures, interests, and needs, and they experience reading as something that can inspire joy, confidence, empathy, curiosity, creativity, agency, and wellbeing.
- **Modern:** Reading takes many forms and is part of everyday, contemporary life for all ages. It includes digital and audio formats, blends with popular culture, and resonates with the fast-changing ways people learn, connect, and share ideas.
- **Social:** Reading is not just solitary, but something that builds relationships and communities. People encounter reading in shared spaces, whether at home, online, in workplaces, or in public venues, and experience it as a way to connect with and feel connected with others, exchange perspectives, and strengthen belonging.

And as a result, *more people choose to read to pursue their interests, express themselves, and participate fully in life*. Together, these shifts mean that reading becomes a vibrant, inclusive part of cultural and social life - something people choose to do because it adds value to their lives, connects them with others, and opens pathways to opportunity.

While the overall vision of NYR is universal, approaches will vary by audience. For example, in the early years, NYR will champion and scale evidence-based shared reading between adults and children, whereas for older readers the focus may be on widening access through contemporary formats and social engagement

Narrative summary of the TOC

The NYR is built on a simple but ambitious vision: to (re)connect people of all ages with reading, helping them see it as a personally meaningful, modern, and social activity. Reading is not only a skill for school or work, but a practice that brings relevance and meaning to everyday life. It allows people to encounter stories, ideas, and knowledge that reflect their cultures, interests, and needs. Through reading, individuals can find inspiration, creativity, agency, and wellbeing, as well as joy and confidence.

To achieve this vision, the NYR brings together communities, organisations, and systems around five interconnected change strategies. The campaign will use creative and culturally relevant approaches that use modern messaging and familiar touchpoints to (re)ignite interest in reading across all ages and communities, while amplifying and aligning proven programmes and practices, such as shared reading in the early years, that already deliver impact. It will build and strengthen partnerships and investment across sectors, connect local action with national visibility, and ensure delivery is guided by insight and lived experience, continuously learning from what works.

Through these strategies, the NYR aims to create change at three levels: **individual, social and cultural, and systemic**.

- At the **individual level**, the journey begins with greater exposure to reading in accessible and engaging formats, alongside improved access to materials, spaces, and encouragement. For families with young children, this may mean more opportunities and support for shared reading;

for others, it may involve discovering new, relevant ways to (re)connect with stories and ideas. Over time, people grow in motivation and confidence, feeling that reading is “for them” and that their choices and interpretations are valid. Shared experiences with families, peers, and communities strengthen this engagement. In the long run, reading becomes part of identity and everyday habit: more people see themselves as readers, turning to reading for inspiration, creativity, self-expression, and connection as much as for knowledge or pleasure.

- At the **social and cultural level**, the NYR works to shift perceptions and narratives. In the short term, reading becomes more visible in everyday life and more present in popular culture, with diverse voices and role models showing that reading takes many forms. As these representations grow, attitudes shift: reading is increasingly seen as enjoyable, relevant, and inclusive. Over time, this contributes to a sustained reading culture in the UK - one that is diverse, welcoming, and deeply woven into cultural and community life.
- At the **systemic level**, the NYR strengthens the reading and wider literacy ecosystem through collaboration and partnership. In the short term, this means building stronger connections across organisations, sectors, and communities. As these ways of working deepen, they create a more coordinated and resilient infrastructure. In the long term, sustainable funding, shared learning, and supportive policy will help ensure that the momentum of the NYR leads to lasting impact for future generations.

Taken together, these three pathways show how the NYR connects vision with action. By combining creative campaigns, local engagement, partnerships, and insight, the movement can generate change that is personal, cultural, and systemic. The outcomes achieved during the campaign year are designed to lay the foundations for deeper shifts over the next decade: more people seeing themselves as readers, more communities celebrating reading as part of everyday life, and a stronger, more sustainable ecosystem that supports reading for everyone.

Above all, the NYR aims to help people (re)discover what reading can bring to their lives - relevance, connection, and joy - and to make that feeling part of everyday life.

The Theory of Change is built on a set of shared assumptions about what needs to be in place for change to occur and endure. These assumptions help shape both delivery and learning as the NYR unfolds.

- People can access relevant, engaging, and affordable reading materials in formats that suit them.
- Partners and organisations collaborate effectively, sharing insights, resources, and learning.
- Practitioners, families, and communities have the capacity and confidence to support reading.
- The campaign builds on and amplifies existing, evidence-based practice rather than duplicating effort.
- Media, funding, and policy environments remain supportive of reading engagement and participation.

These enablers are not fixed; they will continue to evolve as the NYR develops and as we learn more about what drives engagement and impact.

National Year of Reading – Theory of Change

Change strategies	Short-term changes (by end of 2026)	Medium-term changes (by 2030)	Long-term changes (legacy – by 2035)	Vision
Creative and disruptive: The campaign and delivery will use modern messaging, bold branding and culturally relevant voices to break through and engage new and existing audiences in new ways. Amplified: NYR will align, support and scale existing programmes and approaches, such as shared reading in the early years, using the campaign year as a platform for coherence and reach. New partnerships and investment: NYR will strengthen existing and cultivate new partnerships across sectors and unlock diverse funding streams, bringing new voices, resources, and champions to the reading movement and ensuring its impact is sustained beyond the campaign year. Local and national: Campaign activity will be rooted in communities, early years settings, schools, libraries and bookshops - scaled through regional infrastructure and surfaced through national platforms Insight and evidence-led: Delivery will be shaped by behavioural science, lived experience, segmentation data, sector insights and research, and independent evaluation	INDIVIDUAL			More people see reading as a personally meaningful, modern and social activity and more people choose to read to pursue their interests, express themselves, and participate fully in life
	More people recognise reading as relevant to their interests, choices and everyday life.	More people experience reading as a relevant activity, where their choices and interpretations are recognised and respected.	People view reading as personally relevant and meaningful.	
	More people can access reading materials, spaces, time, and encouragement to read.	More people are motivated to read more.	Reading is part of self-identity - more people see themselves as readers.	
		More people believe that reading is for them and that they have the confidence to engage with it.	Reading becomes a regular, chosen habit integrated into everyday life.	
		Reading is a shared experience that connects families and communities.		
	SOCIAL			
Reading is increasingly seen and celebrated in everyday life and across society.	Reading is understood as culturally, emotionally and economically important/and championed activity by public figures and institutions.	Reading is embedded in the cultural fabric of everyday life, celebrated, shared, and valued across generations and communities.		
Diverse role models and contemporary voices begin to reshape perceptions of what counts as “reading.”	Narratives about reading shift: it is increasingly described in media, schools, and communities as personally meaningful.	Reading is recognised publicly as both a social and cultural practice that supports wellbeing, creativity, and identity.		
		A sustained, inclusive “reading culture” is established in the UK: one that reflects diversity, welcomes multiple formats, and inspires participation for pleasure, growth, and connection.		
SYSTEMIC				
Families, educators, volunteers and community organisations are supported with the materials they need to foster reading.	Supportive environments for reading are established across families, schools, and communities.	Long-term sustainable infrastructure, inclusive policies and cross-sector partnerships to support in reading are in place.		
A stronger reading and literacy sector underpinned by collaboration and new, strengthened partnerships.	A stronger reading and wider literacy sector where collaboration (such as joint working across organisations, sectors, and communities that creates coherence, shares resources, and strengthens impact) and partnerships are embedded as standard practice, underpinning coordinated and sustained action.			

