

## Building a legacy during the Essex Year of Reading

Roy Blatchford CBE, Chair of the Essex Education Task Force



When we first came together in 2021 as the Essex Education Task Force, our remit was clear: to address the short and long-term impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's education.

The Task Force - funded by Essex County Council - was established in recognition of the extreme pressure schools were under and a shared desire to help school colleagues and pupils to recover, building on the amazing work education professionals do every day.

We decided that a key focus for the Task Force would be **reading** and outlined our aim of ensuring that every Essex child leaves school able to read at their age level or better. Today, 11 months into the official 'Essex Year of Reading' - a year we now plan to make **two years of reading** - we reiterate that aim.

We have invested £1 million to date in reading across Essex communities. I am pleased to share some of the positive ways that schools across the county continue to make reading meaningful, exciting and enjoyable for pupils.

### The power of reading

As education professionals, we know the true power of being able to read well. It can unlock other areas of education for pupils and help them to realise their full potential later in life. OFSTED's current focus on reading in schools during their inspections is undoubtedly indicative of this. A blog from Gill Jones, Deputy Director for Schools and Early Education, earlier this year, states:

*"Reading is the gateway to learning. It is the key to pupils' future academic achievement and well-being. Pupils who struggle to read words accurately quickly fall behind their peers. They read less and do not accumulate the necessary background knowledge and vocabulary from reading. To fulfil the demands of the secondary school curriculum, pupils need to be able to read age-appropriate texts fluently. Pupils who cannot read well are not able to access the curriculum and are disadvantaged for life.*

*"It is therefore essential that reading is a priority to prevent pupils from falling any further behind with their education."*

By choosing to invest £1million in helping school colleagues build on their existing approaches to literacy and sharing best practice across the county, we knew we could maximise our resources and ensure there would be a ripple effect in terms of the benefits

realised. It is our intention that no child in Essex should be disadvantaged and should be able to benefit from the same opportunities as their peers. Being able to read well is the crux of this.

### **Reading in Essex schools**

Essex schools already have interesting approaches to embedding reading into the curriculum – making it a fundamental building block for teaching other subjects and enriching pupils’ overall education. It was our ambition to enhance opportunities and improve access to reading initiatives and materials – both in and out of school.

Since the official launch, we have seen a multitude of initiatives and projects to help us achieve our vision. Some of them have been targeted interventions in schools. Others have been broader and aimed at helping children, young people and adults alike discover a lifelong love of reading.

I have always been clear that anything we do as a Task Force should build on what school colleagues across Essex had already set in motion for pupils who were affected by the loss of learning and missed opportunities. Children and young people across the county are well-supported by a dedicated network of teachers and teaching support staff who never fail to amaze me. We only have to look at some of the recent OFSTED reports across Essex to see evidence of this:

*“Reading is fundamental to the school’s curriculum. Each topic is enriched with books from a variety of interesting authors and genres. Children and pupils enjoy reading and being read to. The school has recently changed its approach to teaching pupils to read. The new scheme starts early in Reception where children explore books with staff and quickly learn their letters and sounds. Books that help pupils to read are closely matched to pupils’ reading knowledge.”*

*All Saints CofE VC Primary School, Maldon, OR:10212464, 2 September 2022*

*“Pupils become capable readers who love books. Children in Reception and pupils in Year 1 quickly learn what they need to read confidently and accurately. Staff give pupils who find reading hard the support they need to read well. Pupils regularly recommend books to their friends and talk outside of lessons about their reading. Staff closely check what pupils are reading to ensure that pupils are reading books that are not too hard or too easy.”*

*Birchanger CofE Primary School, OR:10211396, 17 June 2022*

*“Leaders have designed an early reading curriculum that precisely targets pupils’ wide range of cognitive and physical needs. In early years, adults are highly skilled at choosing the most appropriate teaching strategy to teach sounds. Staff expertly adapt pupils’ targets, so that pupils make strong progress over time.*

*Southview School, OR:10241326, 13 and 14 September 2022*

*“Ensuring that pupils read widely and often is a leadership priority. Opportunities for quiet reading are built into the start of every English lesson. Work to establish a whole-school approach to promoting a love of reading is part of a development project this year.”*

*Joyce Frankland Academy, OR:10193980, 22 March 2022*

*“Leaders have adopted a range of approaches to support a love of reading. It includes teachers modelling reading during tutor time and many opportunities for pupils to read out loud in other lessons.”*

*Great Baddow High School, OR:10211361, 1 September 2022*

### **The fun and fundamentals of reading: securing a legacy**

The Essex Year of Reading campaign has helped Essex County Council tell the ‘story’ of reading in the county. We have a clearly defined narrative that highlights the benefits of reading in terms of pupils’ education, but we have also been clear about how fun reading can be – not only for children and young people, but their families too.

Reading transcends so many different areas of education, helping children’s speech and language development for example, but also brings people together. These may be people within the same family, but during the campaign we have also seen how reading can unite people of different generations through the work with Essex County Council’s dementia service.

Throughout this year, we have seen [innovative projects, competitions and events](#) to support and complement the work already being done in Essex schools to engage families in reading. We are now aiming to build on initiatives like these to establish a legacy for the campaign through to next year and beyond.

While the Essex Year of Reading will be longer than a calendar year as we plan to continue into 2023, I am proud of the strong foundation Essex schools have already established. I have no doubt we will continue to see further positive comments from OFSTED heading into next year.

The Essex Task Force looks forward to building on this legacy, lobbying with Central Government to ensure schools have the support they need and sharing best practice between settings to achieve our vision for every pupil in Essex to read fluently and with enjoyment - a golden key to a successful and happy life.

You can find out more about the Essex Year of Reading, including how to download the free app, at [www.essex.gov.uk/news/essex-year-of-reading](http://www.essex.gov.uk/news/essex-year-of-reading).

*Roy Blatchford on behalf of the Essex Education Task Force.*