

# The administration of the Phonics Screening Check in autumn term 2020 to Year 2 children in primary schools in England: why and at what cost to teachers and children?

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**B**ackground: In 2012 the Phonics Screening Check, initially said to be intended as a light touch diagnostic assessment, was made mandatory in all primary schools in England. Children were expected to read aloud 40 words, 20 real and 20 pseudo words, to assess their competence in phonics. Any child who failed to reach the pass mark of 32 words correct out of 40 when tested at the end of Year 1 was required to re-sit the check in June at the end of Year 2. Synthetic phonics was, according to the government, the only way to teach all children to read. Observational research has shown that the demands of that policy, and in particular, the high stakes position increasingly accorded by the government and Ofsted to a school's percentage pass on the check, have resulted in synthetic phonics coming to dominate the early years experiences of many young children in England, at least from reception class to Year 2. The results on the check have come to be treated as a measure of a school's success in teaching children to read by DfE and by Ofsted when inspecting schools.

The Phonics Screening Check was not administered in June 2020, as most children were not in school, and together with the SATs tests all the papers from 2020 were shredded. However, the government intends to reintroduce the check in June 2021 for Year 1 children. In spite of protests from many teachers, the government has instructed schools to administer the check to all children in Year 2 during the second half of the autumn term 2020, that is the children who would normally have sat the check in June. Only children in Year 2 who fail to reach the pass mark will then be required to sit the check with Year 1 children in June 2021 (estimated to be about 25%). In this article I will discuss the instructions sent to schools about this administration of the check, and the demands this imposition may place on the teachers and children. I will also consider any potential value in undertaking this testing in current circumstances during the COVID 19 pandemic, and limitations in the value of any data collected. I have recently directed two independent researches, one published in 2018 explored the views of teachers and parents on the phonics check, and whether they saw any value in its continuation either as a mandatory or optional assessment. The second research was into the requirement by Ofsted that institutions in England involved in initial teacher education, must in their courses, emphasise synthetic phonics as the way to teach all children to read to retain their right to train teachers. The reports of these researches, a list of my publications on phonics, and copies of my recent articles critiquing the policy, can all be read and downloaded from the Newman University website: <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/impact-of-the-systematic-synthetic-phonics-government-policy-on-literacy-ite-courses/>

The first report *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of headteachers, teachers and parents*. Final Report September 2018 (editors Clark, M.M. and Glazzard, J.) was initially available on <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>). That research involved a survey from a national sample of 230 headteachers, many of whom had administered the check; 1348 teachers some of whom were parents whose children had taken the check; and 419 parents, some of whom had more than one child who had taken the check. The survey showed that many considered that:

- Either the check should be discontinued or be made voluntary.
- The inclusion of pseudo words should be discontinued
- A pass/fail criterion was unhelpful.

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Concern was expressed by some parents whose children could already read that the check was having a negative effect on their children's reading, some of whom still failed the check. Even parents whose children had passed the check expressed concern at adverse effects on their children's reading. In the report and in a number of articles, I stressed that it was time for the government to involve all stakeholders in discussions on the future of both the Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement that the only method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics. I have in a number of publications expressed concern at the lack of government involvement in England with the professionals in policy planning, and in particular, their failure to consult teachers on the value of the check as a diagnostic assessment. Even now no such consultations have taken place, yet the government has already announced that the check will again take place in June 2021.

Our second research undertaken in 2019-January 2020 involved a survey of the views of 38 academics at ITE providers in England, 10 of whom were interviewed to explore in more detail the findings from the survey. This was published in April 2020 (Clark, M.M, Glazzard, J, Mills, C, Reid, S, and Sloan, J, 2020) The reports of this research and the earlier research are now available to read and download from the same site. On that site are other relevant articles with many references to research by others critiquing the government phonics policy, also a list of my recent publications on the policy.

<https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/impact-of-the-systematic-synthetic-phonics-government-policy-on-literacy-ite-courses/>

In January 2020, Ofsted published a consultation document on the future inspection of initial teacher education institutions in England. The new policy was announced in June and will be implemented

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Our evidence has been sent to members of the Education Select Committee and to Ofsted. Written questions about the implications of our research have been asked in parliament, yet none of these relevant publications is cited either by the government or Ofsted, nor have other

researches challenging the government's claims that their policy is evidence-based, many of which are cited in the reference lists in my publications.

I have on several occasions asked Freedom of Information Questions about the cost of this policy and reported the information from these (see for example Appendix II in Clark and Glazzard, 2018). Most recently in October 2020 I asked further questions. The answers to several are pertinent and I will summarise these in the following section and place the entire response from DfE on the website. I will here report briefly on a survey by Alice Bradbury, the results of which have just been published. She sought the views of teachers on the requirement by DfE that in the second half of the autumn term they must test all Year 2 children on the screening check, requiring as it does an experienced teacher to spend time administering it to each individual child. Her survey was confined to that issue with the assumption

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that the PSC will still continue to be mandatory in 2021.

In the final section I will review the instructions which have been issued to schools about the administration of the check and how the data will be collected and used.

**Response from DfE to Freedom of Information Questions:** (The response from DfE was sent on 2 November 2020).

I sent seven questions in October, four relevant to England and the remaining three concerning use of the check in Australia. In 2019-20 it was claimed that the only costs prior to cancellation of the check were those of printing paid to Capita Business Services amounting to £104,357 and the cost of shredding the PSC papers was £2,800. The estimated cost for the current Year 2020-21 Test Cycle was £329,659. It was claimed that as Year 2 tests this Autumn term will use past tests this will incur no cost. It was not, however, indicated who will bear the cost of printing these test forms, DfE or the schools and of analysing the results! It was estimated that about 25% of Year 2 pupils may be required to re sit the check in 2021, at an estimated cost of £82,711.

I was informed that: 'The Standards and Testing Agency has a contract with Capita Business Services Ltd 'to deliver, the print collation and logistics of the Phonics Screening Check. STA's contract with Capita is currently due to run up to and including the 2024 Test Cycle'.

I assume that should DfE decide not to continue with the check Capita might be entitled to some compensation.

In answer to my questions as to whether Capita or DfE received any payment for use of the check by any Australian States, and/or whether there are any restrictions on their use of the PSC I was informed that: "Since the materials are made available under Open Government Licence, no payments are made for their use by others". This answer means that the back tests are accessible to anyone and therefore could be used, for example, to coach children prior to testing. Until now the PSC was new each year and prior to being used was kept under lock and key until administered. This autumn term the schools are being instructed to use a past test from 2017, 2018 or 2019, all of which will therefore be readily available.

### **The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Autumn Term 2020: the views of the teachers**

Alice Bradbury in a working paper reports her survey of the views of teachers on the impact of the use of the PSC with Year 2 in the autumn term 2020. The survey was promoted on social media and through a range of educational organisations. There were 1246 responses from Year 2 teachers, though not all answered every question. The survey will remain open until the end of the autumn, term so these are only preliminary results. The survey has not explored whether the teachers feel the PSC should remain a statutory assessment and therefore their responses may be based on the assumption that it will recommence in June 2021. There is no evidence in the working paper as to how long the respondents had been teaching and it is possible that those who were more favourably disposed to the check are those who trained more recently (see Clark and Glazzard, 2018).

1. The majority of Year 2 teachers did not agree with the statement that doing the PSC would have a positive impact on their teaching during the term. However, some of those who agreed did so because these children had not sat the check in June when in Year 1.
2. The majority of Year 2 teachers and headteachers did not regard the PSC as helpful in identifying children who are struggling in reading' because they already have this information, although a quarter of the respondents felt it did give them helpful information. Many felt that the check was motivated by a need to hold schools to account.
3. Many respondents felt that an additional test this year added an unwelcome pressure to the children and to the teachers.
4. The check was regarded by many of the respondents as having a negative effect on the curriculum

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and the teaching of pseudo words was mentioned by some and the negative effect on fluent readers by others.

Concerns were expressed by many headteachers about the requirement to conduct this testing within the COVID-19 regulations and with staff absent due to self-isolation. It is recommended in the working paper that repeat of the check in June 2021 by any Year 2 children who do not reach the threshold mark on the check should be voluntary. It is also recommended that there should be discussion about the future of the check, 'particularly the lack of useful information provided, and the potential for negative impacts on children who are struggling'. The working paper has been released very quickly after a limited survey on this issue and does not explore wider issues as to the concerns of many teachers, parents and researchers as to the way in which this check is now dominating the early years experiences of many young children in England. The reader is referred to the two research reports mentioned earlier where a chapter is devoted to such issues, and each has an extensive reference list reporting the research of many others.

The reference for the working paper is: Bradbury, A (2020) The use of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 2: 'It's getting in the way of what the children need right now'. HHCP Working Paper 1. London: UCL Institute of Education.

### **The guidance for schools administering the Phonics Screening Check to Year 2 pupils during the second half of the 2020 autumn term**

These instructions were issued by the Standards and Testing Agency in 2020 Administering the Phonics Screening Check to Year 2 pupils in the 2020 autumn term STA/20/8558/e ISBN 978-1-78957-569-9. The information was sent to school staff, maintained nursery schools with eligible pupils and local authorities. Schools are required to administer a past version of the check to eligible year 2 pupils during the second half of the autumn term and submit the results by the end of term to their LA. By 22 January 2021 the LA must submit the phonics data to DfE. All pupils aged 7 by the end of the 2020/21 academic year must take the check (most pupils will be in Year 2). The responsibilities of headteachers and LAs are noted and children who are exempt. Schools may choose from past papers for 2017, 2018 or 2019, but it should be noted that schools can use check materials from different years for pupils in the same cohort, if required!! Details of who should administer the check, when and where are detailed. However, it is stated that: "A member of staff who is trained in phonics and has experience delivering phonics sessions to pupils must administer the check on a one-to-one basis. They should also familiarise themselves with the training video to understand how to score the check consistently."

It appears that the data will be stored by DfE and used to determine which pupils have not met the expected standard and are therefore expected to take the check in 2021 alongside Year 1 pupils. It is not stated whether the pass mark will be as in previous years 32 words read correctly. The results must be recorded in the pupils CTFs and also have to be reported to parents.

### **Final comment**

The instructions cover many pages yet there is no reference to COVID-19 and its effects on the teachers or pupils, or any reference to whether teachers who would be qualified to administer the check might be available, or whether they or any of the children might indeed have the virus. This testing seems to put an unnecessary stress on both the children and the teachers. It can take up to twenty minutes to test each individual child, and in a quiet area away from the other children. Who will teach the other children during this time?

The circumstances in which these tests are being administered must give rise to serious questions as to the reliability and the value of any data that arises, to say nothing of the adverse effects on other aspects of the curriculum if preparation for these tests is given priority.

## Literacy: Teaching Methods

**Simon Jupp:** [112132] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether the Year 2 phonics screening test will be taken during the autumn term. **Nick Gibb:** In the 2020/21 academic year, it is a statutory requirement for schools to administer a past version of the phonics screening check for Year 2 pupils during the second half of the 2020 autumn term.

**Philip Davies:** [120000] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department took to mark International Men's Day on 19 November 2020. **Nick Gibb:** International Men's Day offers an opportunity to highlight where we need to do more to improve outcomes for men and boys, as well as an opportunity to talk about some of the work being done across Government to tackle those issues. Work includes preparation for an Employment Bill which, subject to further consultation, will make flexible working the default unless employers have good reason not to; and delivering the Suicide Prevention Workplan, which sets out action that is being taken across Government departments and the NHS to reduce suicides, including amongst men. The Government is committed to levelling up opportunity and ensuring fairness for all - regardless of gender or background. Civil Service Local events to mark the day were promoted by our staff networks. A virtual panel event was organised by the Black Asian Minority Ethnic Network in Coventry, to commemorate International Men's Day on the importance of role models and men's mental health issues.

*Thursday 3 December 2020*

Pupils: Attendance

**Wes Streeting:** [122808] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will publish the school attendance figures released under the title Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak: 23 March to 19 November 2020 for each (a) region and (b) local authority area.

**Nick Gibb:** The Department intends to publish regional and local authority level data covering the period from September 2020 on 15 December. This data will be included as part of the publication 'Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak'. The frequency of the publication 'Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak' will be reviewed in the new year. The Department is constantly reviewing the content of its publications. Announcements about future content will be made through the official statistics release page: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-foreducation/about/statistics>.

*Thursday 3 December 2020*

## Supply Teachers: Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

**Dan Jarvis:** [122708] To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of requiring employment agencies representing supply teachers to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

**Nick Gibb:** The Government has extended the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) until 31 March 2021 to support individuals and businesses who are impacted by disruption caused by COVID-19 this winter: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-coststhrough-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme#when-furlough>. The CJRS is open to all employers that meet the eligibility criteria, with no