



Rocket Phonics Impact Trial

2021-23 summary



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Introduction

According to the most recent PiRLs (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, 2021), **pupils in England are amongst the most proficient readers in the world**. In this assessment for 10-year-olds, England was ranked fourth out of all participating countries, its highest position since the study began in 2001. This is testament to the commitment and hard work of Early Years and primary school teachers, and to the continued focus on systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) as the dominant reading strategy for teaching reading. Indeed, one of the strongest predictors of PiRLs performance was pupils' Year 1 phonics screening check result: **those who meet or exceed the required standard in phonics are highly likely to become successful and confident readers**.

Although the PiRLs results are extremely encouraging, they don't tell the whole story, and particularly **since the Covid-19 pandemic, children's performance in Early Years Foundation Stage assessments and in the Year 1 phonics screening check has faltered** and not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels (DfE October 2023, November 2023). Furthermore, **children's enjoyment of reading has declined significantly since the pandemic**, falling to its lowest level in 2023 (National Literacy Trust report: Children and young people's reading 2023); and much is still to be done to close the socio-economic attainment gap, particularly in reading (EEF/NFER 2022).



As part of the drive to raise literacy standards for all pupils, in 2021 the DfE invited publishers to submit SSP programmes for validation. These programmes were initially self-assessed on a range of criteria set out by the DfE and then submitted for validation by a panel selected by the DfE. ***Rocket Phonics, published by Hachette Learning as part of the Reading Planet suite of reading resources, was successful in receiving validation in the first round of the process.***

The *Rocket Phonics* programme **draws on the most up-to-date practice and research into phonics instruction**, and was developed following an iterative process of trialling in schools prior to publication. It was written by phonics and literacy expert, Abigail Steel, in consultation with Debbie Hepplewhite MBE, a renowned advocate of SSP.

The *Rocket Phonics* SSP programme is notable for **combining a rigorous approach to teaching phonics with nurturing a love of reading** through its unique interactive 'Big Books' that present the letter-sounds within the context of engaging stories, and its engaging, fully decodable Target Practice Readers that enable children to practise decoding skills in full alignment with the programme.

Following publication, the *Rocket Phonics* programme was trialled for two years in 14 schools. This report provides a summary of the post-publication results trialling. For the full impact trial statistical analyses and process evaluation reports, visit: hachettelearning.com/blog/rocket-phonics-impact-trial-2021-2023-summary



What is the purpose of this report?

This report shares the evidence from schools involved in trialling *Rocket Phonics* and sets out what this means for those considering adopting a new SSP programme.

This includes both qualitative and quantitative data, gathered across a range of trials and studies which were run between 2021 (shortly after the programme was first launched) and July 2023.

The research aimed to:

- Measure the impact of using *Rocket Phonics* by comparing standardised assessment data from *Rocket Phonics* schools with those using a range of other SSP programmes.
- Compare schools' KS1 reading performance by carrying out statistical analyses of those using *Rocket Phonics* versus those who were using other programmes.
- Evaluate the ease with which schools were able to implement and use *Rocket Phonics*.
- Capture attitudes towards the programme and how it impacted on teachers' confidence and enjoyment in teaching phonics.
- Observe children's behaviour during phonics sessions to assess the impact of *Rocket Phonics* on their engagement and enjoyment of learning.





Rocket Phonics ★

programme evaluation

In order to answer the overarching question, 'does this programme work?', *Hachette Learning* commissioned a series of independent evaluations from academic researchers. When reviewing 'evidence of impact', we know teachers are looking at:

- Methodology: the research must be designed in a way that is rigorous and unbiased. The approach should enable the impact to be measured.
- Sample size: in order to ensure that the impact of the 'intervention' (in this case, using *Rocket Phonics*) is replicable, it needs to be large enough to deliver consistent results in a range of schools.
- Clear reporting: transparency is essential. Teachers are too busy to have the time to scrutinise the data in its entirety. Regardless of this, it must be available, clearly linked and referenced to any report summaries.

The efficacy of *Rocket Phonics* has been tested across a range of trials and studies. *For a summary of these, please see appendix 1.*



What are the key findings?

01

Nearly all pupils using *Rocket Phonics*, including those starting Year 1 with very low phonics knowledge, made a **rapid and measurable increase in phonics knowledge** by the end of the year. This indicates that the programme works for children across a range of abilities.

02


Average scores from PiRA showed that attainment in schools using *Rocket Phonics* was lower than those in non-user schools at the start of Reception. By the end of the year, **attainment score was slightly higher than the non-user schools.**

03

Spelling scores in Year 1 suggested greater improvements amongst *Rocket Phonics* schools. **This indicates a 'value-added' benefit for schools using the programme.**

04

Again, when comparing average performance in 2022/23 KS1 SATs reading, ***Rocket Phonics* schools did slightly better than non-user schools**, meaning that adopting *Rocket Phonics* could have a positive impact on KS1 SATs reading outcomes.



Although statistically inconclusive, **these differences are noteworthy**, particularly given that *Rocket Phonics* schools typically had higher proportions of children eligible for Free School Meals than both the national average and the percentages in non-user schools. And while *Rocket Phonics* schools were in line with the national average for EAL numbers, the non-user schools had far fewer EAL children. Finally, Ofsted ratings amongst the non-*Rocket Phonics* group were higher than amongst the user schools, four of which were rated as 'Requires Improvement'. Overall, any bias in the two samples would likely favour the non-user schools.



05

Compared with those using other SSP programmes, teachers' **attitudes towards teaching phonics were far more positive amongst *Rocket Phonics* schools:** 79% of teachers using *Rocket Phonics* said they 'very much' enjoyed it, compared with 67% of those using other programmes.

06

This was corroborated through independent observational evidence: **researchers reported that children and teachers enjoyed their phonics lessons,** and children engaged well with *Rocket Phonics* resources they used.

07

Teachers using *Rocket Phonics* believe that the resources work: across both years in which data was captured, **100% said the resources benefited the children.** 80% rated the resources as 'very successful'.



08

Ten out of ten teachers using *Rocket Phonics* said that they **would recommend the programme to other schools.**

Overall, the combined evidence across all trials and studies shows that *Rocket Phonics* is a well-liked, easy-to-use programme which is effective in teaching and embedding the phonics skills children need to become successful readers.

The full evaluation reports [are available here](#), and were independently authored by Dr Helen Breadmore (Associate Professor of Psychology in Education, University of Birmingham - author of interim and outcome evaluation reports), Professor Clare Wood (Nottingham Trent University - author of process evaluation), along with the statistical report from *Hachette Learning's* inhouse data scientist Nikolay Panayotov (author of Year 2 outcome evaluation).



Performance of *Rocket Phonics* against key adoption criteria

Rocket Phonics is an effective, evidence-based programme offering a structured, coherent approach to teaching phonics which is compliant with the DfE's Reading Framework. This is backed up with independent research.

Schools which have adopted *Rocket Phonics* also reported other benefits to using the programme. These were relayed to independent researchers during in-school visits, and interviews. Qualitative and quantitative feedback was also captured through surveys.



Teachers' confidence

An [Ofsted blog](#) on 'getting all pupils reading' reminds us that one of the main reasons for adopting a validated SSP programme is to support a consistent approach to teaching phonics.

Older 'legacy schemes', where components may be missing or don't match up can affect the quality of phonics delivery, making it harder to implement a coherent, whole-school approach. This lack of consistency in terminology, resources and lesson structure also undermines teachers' confidence.

This was the case with many of the schools which decided to adopt *Rocket Phonics*. In some schools, their existing resources weren't aligned with the sounds taught during lessons, and the books were out-of-date and unsuitable.

"We had some really old books in there that really weren't diverse, didn't have the language level and didn't cater for the needs [of our children]".

"In so many cases before [*Rocket Phonics*] the reading books you had were so different to the scheme you were teaching."

Children weren't making expected progress because teachers weren't clear on what to expect.

"Because we're in an area of quite high deprivation and we have low starting points, I almost feel like expectations haven't been as high as they ought to have been".

Adopting *Rocket Phonics* has had a positive impact on teachers' confidence in their ability to deliver consistent, effective phonics sessions. This was extensively reported through both qualitative and quantitative feedback.

Based on feedback from 22 respondents whose schools trialled *Rocket Phonics* over a two-year period, confidence levels in teaching both reading and phonics increased between the first and second year of implementation.

Teacher training

Rocket Phonics is underpinned with training carried out by Abigail Steel, the series author, and her team of trainers. Schools have the option of online 'live' training, in-person school insets, or access to a library of training videos, available as a one-year subscription.

Participants across the sample acknowledged the value and benefit of the training.

☞ ...with regards to the videos, they're really insightful."

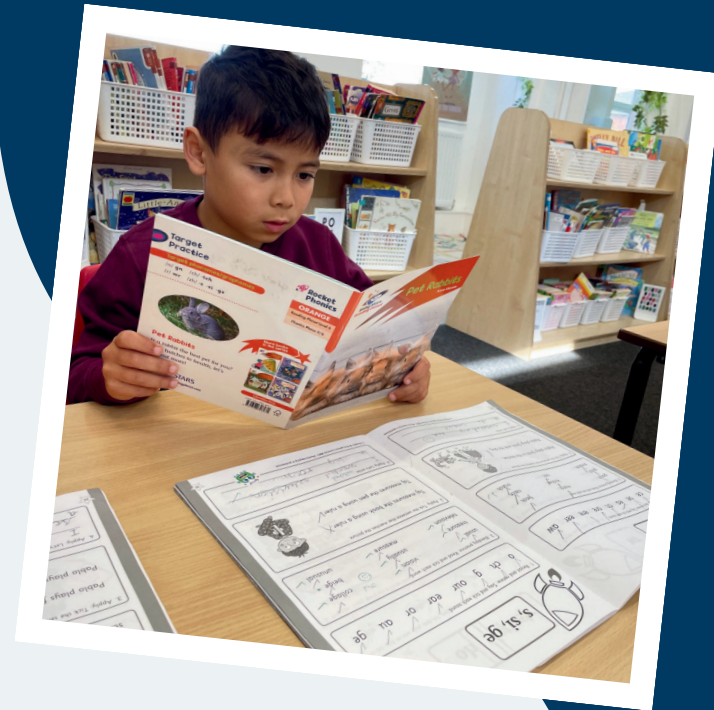
☞ ...because they've all had the training, they've taken it on really easily."

☞ Abigail Steel ... sets out what [we] need to be doing each half term, which is really useful."

☞ Watching others teach *Rocket Phonics* that's really helped us to ensure that our approach towards phonics is consistent. We're all using the same language."

Overall, participants liked that the training was flexible, and could be adapted to the needs, confidence and experience of staff. Being able to access videos 'on demand' meant that specific issues or questions could be addressed as and when they arose, dictated by need.

Teachers valued the practical, classroom-focused approach to training, which could easily be adopted into their own teaching. **"Watching [Abigail Steel] model it to a class helped [us] to see and envisage it in [our] own classroom."**





Coherence of the programme



Rocket Phonics follows a structured approach based on a five-day teaching sequence with whole class teacher-directed learning supported by practice and consolidation activities. Terminology is used consistently throughout the programme. The product components have been designed to support different elements of the teaching and learning cycle. Clear planning and teacher support makes it easy to pick up and use the programme.

Teachers agreed that this is a programme that makes sense to them and is easy to use.



There was positive feedback on the planning: **“I use it a lot when planning out the long-term plan for school. So just the overarching plan for phonics from Reception through to the end of the year 2, it was really helpful.”**

“Just the progression sequence that’s in there is very useful. I like the overview of the weekly plans and the daily plans are very helpful.”

The Teacher’s Guides were praised for their user-friendliness: **“I’ve used the teacher’s guides religiously, so they are very useful.”**

This adds up to ease-of-use, allowing teachers to focus on their pupils, and not on how to teach them. **“It’s a very easy scheme to follow; the resources are there.”**
“Everything you could need is there.”

The consistent approach also supports progression from one year to the next: **“the pupils are progressing really well because we did it last year with the foundation stage children; they know the routine ...”**

It’s not just teachers who value a structured, coherent approach. Children benefit from this, too: **“Children like routine,”** one noted.

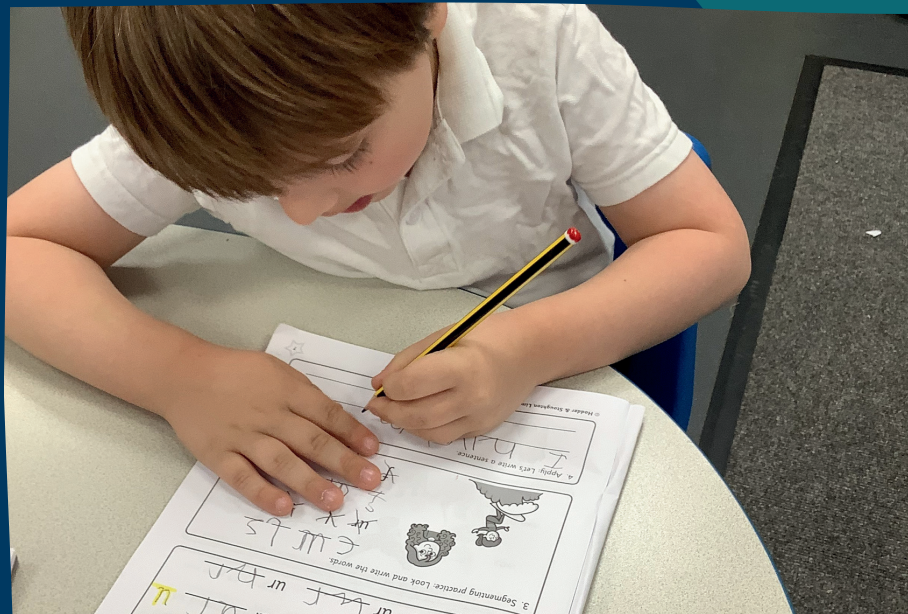
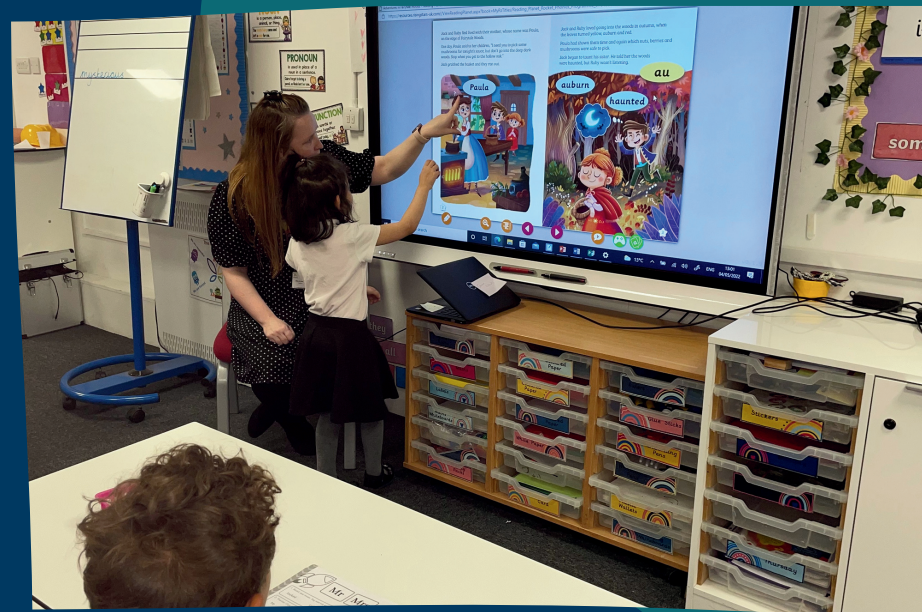


Overall, the teachers using *Rocket Phonics* believe that adopting the programme has provided a consistent approach to teaching phonics.



"It's consistent throughout school. The lessons are the same. The practice workbooks are the same. There's no time wasted. They know what they're doing. So that works very well and I feel like it's had a bigger impact on the reading."

"I just feel like it now feels like it's our phonics programme. It feels like it's something that I'm confident with ... I feel like we've got these consistent systems in place."



Keep up, not catch up

“Teachers should aim for all pupils to keep up with the school’s chosen phonics programme, ensuring teaching time is sufficient for the content to be taught within the timescales the programme sets out.”
[DfE’s Reading Framework]

Rocket Phonics claims that one of its guiding principles is for pupils to keep up, not catch up. Each letter-sound is taught over two days, allowing time for children to practise and embed each new sound before moving to the next.

When observing and speaking to practitioners involved in the trial, the researcher explored whether this reflected schools’ experiences of using the programme. These comments were unprompted.

Across the research sample, the pace and structure of the programme was deemed right, with teachers using their professional judgement to differentiate the follow-up activities according to the level at which children were working.

A slower pace supports deeper learning: **“Spending two days on each sound helps embed the learning.”**

The resources are pitched at the right level of challenge: **“Practice workbooks are excellent and so are the target books, matched perfectly to where pupils are working.”**

The familiar routine scaffolds independent working, because children know what to expect: **“...the fact that it's the same activity every alternate day, but obviously just with a different sound, different text, they very quickly got used to what they need to do, what the process is. We don't have to go over and re-explain anything that they need to do.”**

Because children know what to expect in each session, they can focus on learning and not on following instructions: **“it's sort of taking away that cognitive load, it breaks it all down, so the children don't have to think about it. They know what they're doing that day.”**

This means that even those working below expectations can keep up: **“I've got a little boy in mind at the moment who's slightly below where he needs to be. However, with phonics, he knows the order and he knows what he needs to do and he just does it, and for me that's such a great thing because it is giving him that independence in his learning.”**



Evidence of enjoyment amongst teachers and children

“When teachers are engaging and motivating, children mirror their teacher’s mood and attitude, pay attention and enjoy learning.” [DfE Reading Framework]

One of the concerns teachers sometimes express over the adoption of a structured programme is that the prescriptive approach takes away the spontaneity and fun of learning. It’s important that this doesn’t happen. During lesson observations, researchers reported:

- A sense of anticipation for their daily phonics session amongst children
- High levels of engagement and participation amongst children during whole class elements
- Verbal comments from children indicating their enjoyment of the sessions
- Children staying focused and on task during follow-up activities

Overall, enjoyment levels amongst *Rocket Phonics* teachers were higher than those amongst teachers using other SSPs. While ‘enjoyment’ can be hard to measure, the combined evidence of observational data and teachers’ self-reported ratings indicate that both teachers and children enjoy using *Rocket Phonics*.

“The children love [the Big Books]. The stories are really engaging and my class love hearing the storyteller read it as well... They have a really good time with it.”

“Each day the children are really excited to listen to the next page of the book and they’re excited to spot the sound that they’re being taught that day.”

“The stories are lovely. They’re really engaging with children... We love them.”

“We are really enjoying it and everyone really loves...teaching it.”

Inspiring a love of reading

Reading for pleasure doesn't just make a difference to children's life chances: research shows it also develops social and emotional skills and promotes a sense of wellbeing. Early exposure to the right books is essential: learning to read is hard, and it needs to be worthwhile in order for children to persevere. Children are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards reading if books are high quality, relevant and appealing. It's also important that independent reading books are closely aligned to each child's phonics progression, so that from the start, they experience 'success' in applying their decoding skills.

Across the sample of early adopter and trial schools, the quality of the books was identified again and again as a standout aspect of the programme.

When asked which component of the scheme they enjoyed using most, many singled out the Big Books (teaching storybooks) which are designed as a whole class, teacher-led resource.

"Oh my goodness. The Big Books, that is one thing that I would say really hooked the children in, and it's really nice because you can include all children."

"Teaching with the Big Books is something that as a school we absolutely love."

"The children love them. The stories are really engaging and my class love hearing the storyteller read it as well."

[the digital Big Books have a 'storyteller' option]



Teachers said that the Target Practice reading books (decodable readers which are aligned with the scheme structure and progression) were well matched to children's development, and enjoyable to read.

"The target books are excellent. Again, they are very progressive. You know, they match up perfectly and they're beautiful books. They're exciting. The children like them."

Teachers also praised the range and diversity of books.

"There's a good selection and there's a lot of nice genres around which I really like about it. I'm not really seeing another scheme where you have so many different genres."

Across the research sample, teachers agreed that the books are a key strength of the programme.

"The stories are lovely. They're really engaging with children. We love them."

This means that *Rocket Phonics* is not 'just' a phonics programme: it's a literacy programme which takes an holistic approach to developing children's love of reading and books, while also equipping them with the skills they need to become fluent and successful readers.

"So that's the really good thing is it's just bringing all literacy into it, not just phonics."

"I really feel like there is a really big emphasis on the love of reading and high-quality books."

For teachers and school leaders interested in exploring the impact of exposure to high-quality, high-interest decodable readers on children's proficiency and attitudes towards reading, *Hachette Learning* has published the findings from a [collaboration with the National Literacy Trust](#). The study involved 15 schools in areas of high economic deprivation which were gifted books and resources from *Reading Planet*, underpinned with training for staff. Pre- and post-trial standardised scores indicated substantial increases in reading attainment and enjoyment across the sample, with participants also indicating other benefits, including improved parental engagement, greater emphasis on the development of higher-order reading skills, and improved teaching and learning links across the curriculum.

The Reading Framework emphasises the importance of nurturing a 'reading for pleasure' culture and mindset amongst children. The attitudes observed amongst pupils learning to decode using *Rocket Phonics* indicate that these children associate reading with enjoyment.

Evidence from Ofsted inspections

As primary schools are well aware, during primary school inspections, inspectors now carry out a 'deep dive' in reading to evaluate how well all children are supported in becoming confident, fluent readers. The school's approach to teaching phonics will be closely scrutinised to ensure that it is coherent, cumulative and progressive, meeting or exceeding the expectations of the national curriculum and EYFS early learning goals.

While it is important not to conflate the quality of teaching with the quality of the resources adopted by the school, **schools which have been inspected since the implementation of *Rocket Phonics* believe that their choice of programme contributed to the positive feedback they received in their most recent Ofsted report.**

Four schools shared this feedback with the publisher.

Knowing that the school's phonics programme is validated, and that staff feel confident and well trained in delivering high-quality phonics sessions is important: while the inspection process is not intended to add to the stress and workload of staff, the peace of mind associated with the successful implementation of a validated, well-liked SSP is an important consideration for school leaders concerned about staff well-being, and their school's rating.

“Pupils quickly become confident, fluent readers through the phonics curriculum that leaders have chosen. Staff who teach phonics lessons are experts. They give targeted support to pupils who need support with their reading. Pupils develop a love of reading and a love of being read to. This love of reading, combined with a rigorous and clear approach to teaching pupils how to read, means that pupils become fluent, confident and engaged readers during their time at school.” (Ofsted report, 2023)

“Books are well matched to the sounds being taught, and pupils are expected to read regularly in class and at home.” (Ofsted report, 2023)

“Reading is a priority throughout the school. Strong, systematic reading routines begin in the early years. Children take an active part in their phonics sessions. They learn to decode sounds and blend them into words... Leaders understand the importance of precise assessment procedures which support pupils in becoming accurate and fluent readers.” (Ofsted report, 2022)

“[Pupils] develop confidence and competence by reading books that match the sounds that they have learnt.” (Ofsted report, 2022)

What does this mean for schools?

The DfE's Reading Framework has an audit which schools can use to evaluate the suitability of their SSP [see page 57]. If gaps or weaknesses are identified, the school will need to weigh up the benefits of purchasing ad hoc resources, versus investing in a complete, new programme which provides a coherent and consistent approach. A scheme or approach that may have been fit for purpose previously might need to be updated or replaced.

Making the right choice of validated SSP programmes is crucial, and school leaders will of course consult their professional networks for peer-validated recommendations and reviews.

When comparing and contrasting the available commercial schemes, it may also be worth reflecting on these points:

- Has the publisher been transparent about sharing the research into the programme's efficacy and impact? Is the research robust and impartial? Do you trust the methodologies used?
- How recent is the research? Does it reflect the latest approaches to teaching phonics?
- What training is available? Is this tailored to the needs of your teachers, giving schools 'agency' over whether a lot or a little training is needed, and when it's needed?
- Is the programme easy to use? Do the components 'fit together' in a logical, simple way?
- Finally, is this a programme that will inspire a love of reading amongst children?



In a recent poll, 16 out of 16 primary school headteachers along with English and Phonics leads said that they would recommend *Rocket Phonics* to other schools.

Along with the wider research conducted with the schools that trialled *Rocket Phonics*, this indicates high levels of satisfaction. Overall, *Rocket Phonics* has performed strongly across a range of metrics based on multiple studies. The publishers will, no doubt, continue to build a body of evidence demonstrating the ongoing impact of *Rocket Phonics* as it continues to grow its userbase, and will share the findings transparently and openly so that school leaders can make the best choice for their school, staff and pupils.

Appendix 1: Summary of *Rocket Phonics* impact and efficacy research

The efficacy of *Rocket Phonics* has been tested across a range of trials and studies run by independent academic research institutions.

Two separate longitudinal studies, based on a controlled trial methodology, were carried out between 2021 and 2023. The total sample size of ‘complete’ datasets at the end of these trials was 1,620. Three outcome evaluations of the data were conducted.

- Dr Helen Breadmore, Associate Professor of Psychology in Education, School of Education, University of Birmingham conducted two outcome evaluations. The first, the interim outcome evaluation, examined the impact of the programme on Reception and Year 1 pupils, from September 2021 to July 2022, in 13 *Rocket Phonics* schools (416 pupils) and 7 schools using a range of different SSP programmes (309 pupils). The Year 1 pupils in the interim evaluation had not used *Rocket Phonics* in their Reception Year. The second outcome evaluation examined the impact of the programme on Year 1 pupils from September 2022 to 2023. This included 11 *Rocket Phonics* schools (409 pupils) and 13 schools using a range of other SSP programmes (398 pupils). These were the same cohort of children who had used *Rocket Phonics* from Reception to the end of Year 1.
- *Hachette Learning*'s inhouse data scientist, Nikolay Panayotov, analysed complete datasets focusing on pupils in Year 2 from 10 schools (397 pupils) using *Rocket Phonics* with 14 schools (416 pupils) using other SSP programmes to evaluate the impact on their 2023 KS1 Reading performance. The baseline data was captured at the start of Y2. Participating *Rocket Phonics* pupils had been taught using *Rocket Phonics* from Y1 but hadn't used it in their Reception year.

Quantitative online surveys were used to capture feedback from staff using *Rocket Phonics* and compare this with feedback from those using other SSPs. This was conducted by Professor Clare Wood and Assistant Researcher Violeta Baikousi at Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Language, Education and Developmental Inequality, who carried out a process evaluation of *Rocket Phonics* implementation.

- An anonymous survey of staff using *Rocket Phonics* was carried out at the start of the 2021/22 academic year and compared with data captured in a similar survey amongst teachers using other SSPs.
- The surveys were run again at the end of the 2022 academic year, and the end of the 2023 academic year, allowing researchers to track changes in adopter schools' attitudes towards the programme and confidence in teaching phonics, and compare this with the views of respondents in non-adopter schools.

Qualitative data was captured through a series of indepth interviews with staff at schools using *Rocket Phonics*. A total of 14 interviews were carried out by a researcher at Nottingham Trent University between 2021 and 2023.

Observational data was gathered from four of these schools, who invited Prof. Wood from Nottingham Trent University to watch a phonics lesson with either Reception or Y1 pupils.