**Guidance note relating to the DfE’s recent announcements about the validation of phonics programmes.**

**Context**

Until recently, the DfE had been planning to revise Letters and Sounds, to bring it in line with the 2014 National Curriculum. If your school uses Letters and Sounds, you will be aware of the phases of phonics acquisition that children undertake. The current Primary English Curriculum identifies a small number of objectives for Year 1 that are not covered in the Letters and Sounds phases usually covered in Year 1, and there are some other slight differences.

In addition to this, Letters and Sounds is not a full phonics ‘programme’, and schools have had to build their own programmes around the progression, supplementing it with other resources. The DfE recently stated, ‘The 2007 Letters and Sounds handbook, published under the previous Government, has never been a full Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) programme. For a number of years, effective teaching using Letters and Sounds has relied on schools themselves building a programme around the handbook.’

On the 30th March, the DfE announced that they had taken the decision that they were *not* going to revise Letters and Sounds, or publish a full programme around it, but instead, publishers wishing to create a programme around Letters and Sounds, (or any SSP programme for that matter) could submit their programme for validation by the DfE, and to support this, they have published a set of essential criteria the SSP programmes must meet.

The DfE already hold a catalogue of approved providers, who they have officially validated, and schools who have wished to access funding support through the English Hub Programme have had to choose a programme from the approved list. Choosing a phonics teaching programme - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

**What does this mean for my school?**

You may not need to make any changes to your current systematic synthetic phonics programme at all, whether you have bought in to a full published programme, or have a home-grown programme built around Letters and Sounds. As long as you are happy that your programme is comprehensive, you are aware of the changes that the National Curriculum has made to phonics learning in Year 1 and 2, and you are confident that your reading books align with the progression set out in Letters and Sounds, then this announcement will have little impact on your school. We would advise that you audit your current provision against the DfE’s essential criteria to reassure yourself that your current programme meets expectations. The related footnotes notes provided within the DfE’s guidance document also provide useful detail when considering your own school’s provision. (See the link below.)

If you are not convinced that your current phonics programme is as effective as it could be, and are in the process of considering a change, it is important to be aware of this validation process, to ensure that any product that you decide to buy into has received official endorsement. The validation process will not be fully completed until spring 2022.

**Link to whole guidance Validation of systematic synthetic phonics programmes: supporting documentation - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)**

**FAQs**

Please see below a number of queries that have come from schools who have considered the DfE documentation:

**Q. Why is there new legislation on phonics programmes now?** A. The 2007 Letters and Sounds handbook, published under the previous government, has never been a full SSP programme. 2007 Letters and Sounds is not fit for purpose and on its own does not meet the below 16 essential criteria or provide the support, guidance, resources or training needed and is no longer endorsed by the DfE. With phonics teaching being one of the main drivers to accessing the curriculum and improved pupil outcomes, it is essential that your school’s phonics programme meets the essential criteria.

**Q. What if our teaching policy means that children are taught to join letters or to start every letter ‘on the line’ with a ‘lead-in’ but the guidance says that they must not.** A. Children may be taught simple exit strokes for letters that end ‘on the line’ (a, d, h, i, k, l, m, n, t, u). In addition, you may continue to implement your preferred style of teaching writing,

as long as your policy takes into account for pupils that need something additional and different strategies to help them to write fluently and work towards the end of KS1 writing standard at greater depth *‘use the diagonal and horizontal strokes needed to join some letters.’*

**Q. When will I know if the published phonics programme that we use has been validated?** A. The self-assessment form and evidence submitted by each programme will be reviewed by a small, independent panel with relevant expertise. There will be three validation panels and there is a separate deadline for applications for each panel. The first updates to the validated list will be made after the first panel at the end of June 2021 when new programmes that demonstrated that they meet the criteria at this first panel meeting it will be added to the list. The validation process will not be completed until Spring 2022. After this point, there will be a new catalogue of approved providers of SSP programmes. Those approved will need to provide a full resource of teaching materials, resources, texts and training, so it is best to wait to ensure you are investing in quality programmes and materials.

* 1.6 2021 - panel 1
* 29.10.2021 - panel 2
* 28.2.2022 - panel 3

**Q. What if the published phonics programme that we currently follow is not validated?** A. There is an appeals process. Published SSP designers have known about this new legislation for a while and it is likely that your SSP will be amended, so that it **does** meet all the 16 essential criteria.

**Q. We have invested time and money into ensuring that our phonics programme matches our books, will we have to audit our books again to match the criteria?** A. Yes. It is advised to audit your programme against the essential criteria. If you feel that Letters and Sounds is serving you well, and that you have built a ‘programme’ around it that offers support, guidance, resources and training, there is no reason to change it. Or if your phonics outcomes are not as anticipated, and you conclude that your own phonics programme does need a radical overhaul, take time to do your research and wait for the conclusion of the validation process; most publishers have realigned content to match phonics phases for L&S and retained bands to support progression resources.

**16 Core Criteria Systematic Synthetic Phonics Programme**

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| **Does your programme?** | **Y or N** |
| constitute a complete SSP programme providing fidelity to its teaching framework for the duration of the programme |  |
| present systematic, synthetic phonic work as the prime approach to decoding print |  |
| enable children to start learning phonic knowledge and skills early in reception, and provide a structured route for most children to meet or exceed the expected standard in the year one (Y1) Phonics Screening Check and all national curriculum expectations for word reading through decoding by the end of key stage 1 |  |
| be designed for daily teaching sessions and teach the main grapheme-phoneme correspondences of English (the alphabetic principle) in a clearly defined, incremental sequence |  |
| begin by introducing a defined group of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that enable children to read and spell many words early on |  |
| progress from simple to more complex phonic knowledge and skills, cumulatively covering all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences in English |  |
| teach children to read printed words by identifying and blending (synthesising) individual phonemes, from left to right all through the word |  |
| teach children to apply the skill of segmenting spoken words into their constituent phonemes for spelling and that this is the reverse of blending phonemes to read words |  |
| provide opportunity for children to practise and apply known phoneme-grapheme correspondences for spelling through dictation of sounds, words and sentences |  |
| ensure that children are taught to decode and spell common exception words (sometimes called ‘tricky’ words), appropriate to their level of progress in the programme |  |
| provide resources that support the teaching of lower-case and capital letters correctly, with clear start and finish points. The programme should move children on by teaching them to write words made up of learned GPCs, followed by simple sentences composed from such words as well as any common exception words (‘tricky words’) learned |  |
| be built around direct teaching sessions, with extensive teacher-child interaction and involve a multi-sensory approach. The programme should include guidance on how direct teaching sessions can be adapted for online delivery (live or recorded) |  |
| provide resources to enable teachers to deliver the programme effectively including sufficient decodable reading material |  |
| ensure that, as children move through the early stages of acquiring phonic knowledge and skills, they can practise by reading texts closely matched to their level of phonic attainment, that do not require them to use alternative strategies to read unknown words |  |
| include guidance and resources to ensure children practise and apply the core phonics they have been taught |  |
| enable children’s progress to be assessed and highlight the ways in which the programme meets the needs of those who are at risk of falling behind, including the lowest attaining 20% of children |  |
| provide full guidance for teachers to support the effective delivery of the programme and appropriate, programme-specific training either directly, through appointed agents or remotely; with assurances that there is sufficient capacity to do so and that those delivering this training will have appropriately high levels of expertise and relevant experience |  |

**Contacts for Further Queries**

Please use contact [phonics.validation@education.gov.uk](mailto:phonics.validation@education.gov.uk) or [paula.shore@bracknell-forest.gov.uk](mailto:paula.shore@bracknell-forest.gov.uk) for any questions about validation or for further information.