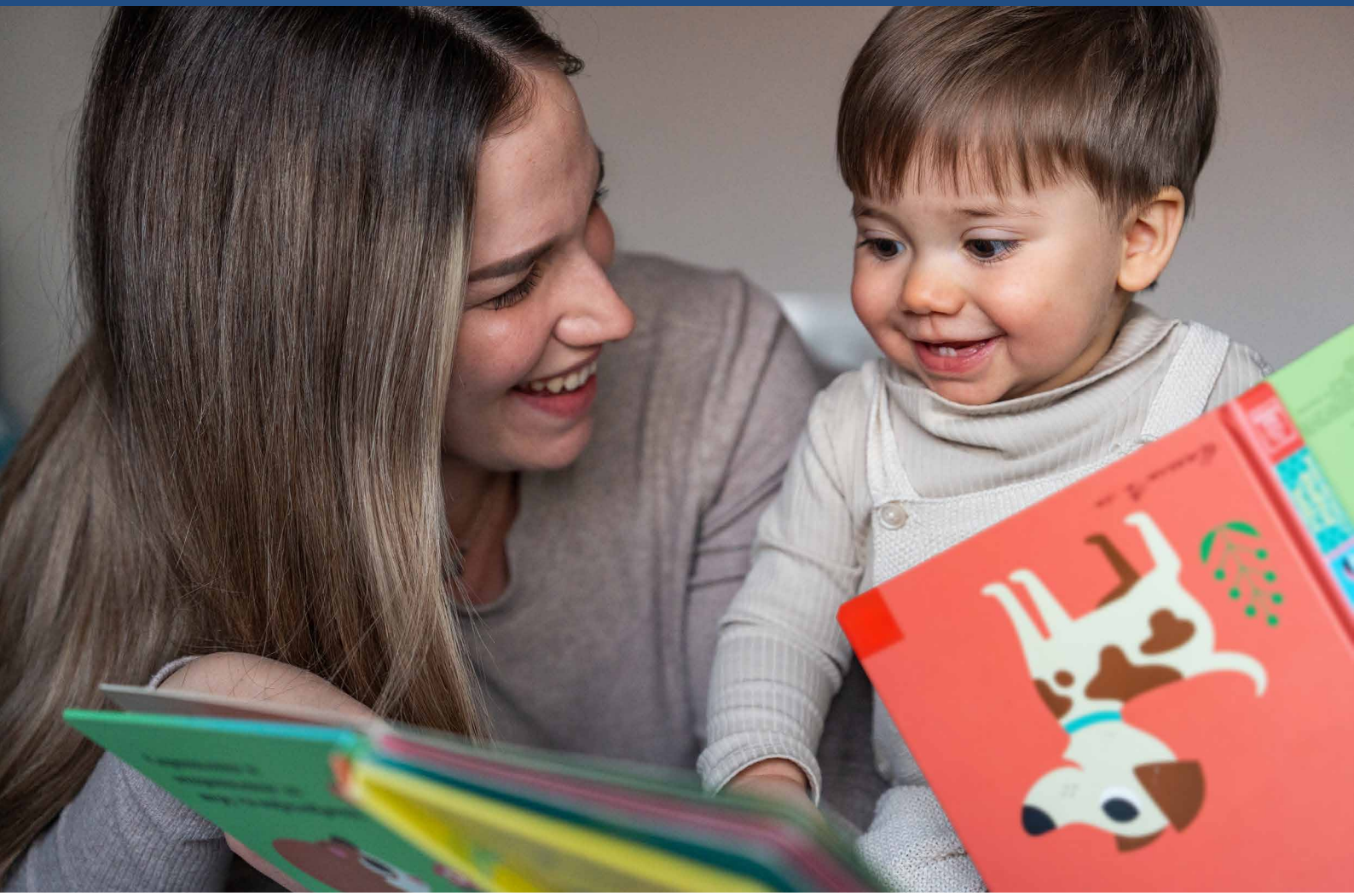
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BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF READING FOR PLEASURE

The policy, commissioning and delivery landscape for book sharing and early support



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PLAY IN EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

ABOUT THIS REVIEW

This review was conducted by Making Evidence Work to scope the policy, commissioning and delivery landscape relating to the home learning environment (HLE), early language development and family support services. The review was commissioned in summer 2025 by PEDAL, the Centre for Research on Play, Education, Development and Learning, to understand how the value proposition for a book sharing programme, Playtime with Books, could be strengthened and what strategic opportunities exist to support its scaling across the UK.



At the heart of the work was a focus on book sharing, an approach in which an adult and child interact around a story, with the adult responding to the child's interests and building on them in an emotionally supportive way. Book sharing is different to simply reading to children. It emphasises relationships, interaction and communication rather than literacy alone, and can begin before verbal language emerges. Book sharing is well evidenced, but it is not consistently recognised or embedded in local strategies and service models.

The review combined desktop research, four local authority workshops[1], and discussions with national stakeholders including the Department for Education (DfE), Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and BookTrust.

The review was conducted against a backdrop of continued national interest in improving speech, language and communication outcomes, alongside implementation of the Best Start in Life programme and expansion of Family Hubs across England. Further to this, since the review was completed the House of Commons Education Committee published its Reading for Pleasure report which is discussed in the recommendations in this summary[2].

1. Involving stakeholders representing family hubs, children's social care, libraries, health visiting, early years settings, speech & language therapy, and voluntary sector family support services.

2. House of Commons Education Committee (2026) Reading for Pleasure. Second Report of Session 2026–27, HC 150. London: House of Commons.

KEY LEARNINGS

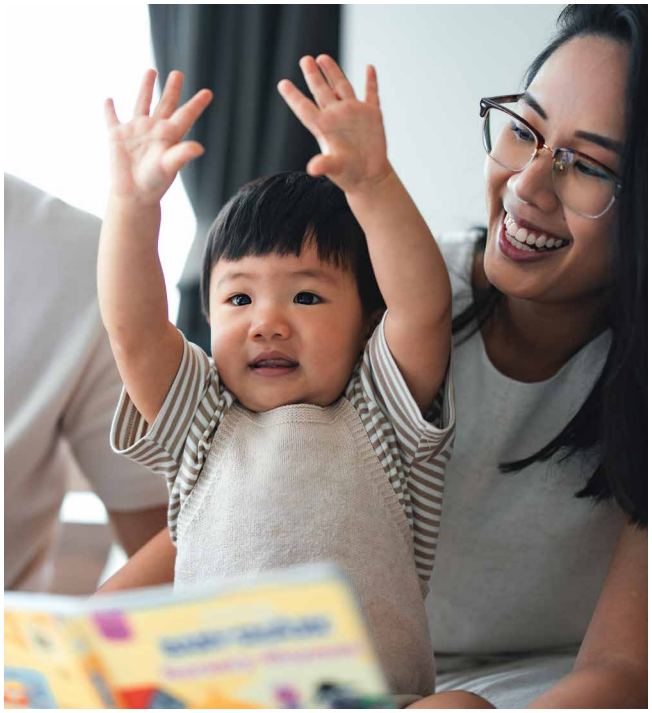
1. There is strong evidence for early intervention for children's language development, but limited identification before age two.

Supporting families is one of the best ways we can help children to thrive in the early years. But access to early support is unevenly available to families and those inequalities show up in children's development.

Research shows that children's language development is closely associated with family income and caregiver qualifications, with income-related language gaps emerging by 18 months and becoming entrenched by age three. Work by the Early Intervention Foundation / Foundations has suggested that intervention should therefore begin well before a child's first birthday.

However, local systems remain heavily reliant on the universal 2–2½ year health and development review as the primary route for identifying concerns. Stakeholders reported that consistent identification before the age of two was limited, despite recognising that earlier intervention would be beneficial. Capacity pressures in health visiting services were frequently cited as a constraint.

Across workshop areas there was strong support for a more systematic approach to early identification, including creating a shared narrative about language development and improving coordination between health, early years, libraries and family support services.



2. The home learning environment landscape is active but fragmented

Local areas described a wide range of services, interventions and resources designed to support families. These included family hub activities, health visiting services, early years settings, library programmes, speech and language initiatives, voluntary sector services and digital resources.

Despite this activity, stakeholders consistently described the local landscape as fragmented. There was often uncertainty about how different programmes connected with one another, limited workforce alignment and a lack of shared approaches to measuring outcomes. Many participants felt that local systems needed greater coherence and a clearer overarching narrative about the role of the home learning environment in supporting child development.

Several workshop areas noted that, although support for reading was widely understood, the concept of book sharing was not consistently recognised or embedded within local strategies and service models.

3. A common language and narrative for book sharing are urgently needed

One of the strongest themes emerging from both local and national conversations was the need for a shared language around the home learning environment, early language development and book sharing. Stakeholders described HLE as one of the most difficult aspects of Best Start in Life to define and communicate consistently. Different services were often using different terminology and approaches.

Participants believed a common narrative would improve understanding across the workforce, support clearer communication with families and help create greater consistency in service delivery and commissioning decisions. There was also a strong emphasis on ensuring language resonates with families rather than expecting families to adopt professional terminology.



4. Family Hubs and libraries present significant opportunities for strengthening book sharing

Family Hubs are an increasingly important organising structure for early years support. From April 2026, all top-tier local authorities in England are funded to deliver the national Best Start Family Hubs Programme, creating a universal framework through which HLE support can be developed and delivered.

Alongside Family Hubs, library services emerged as a particularly promising opportunity. Libraries were described as trusted, accessible and positive community spaces, often engaging families who may not use other forms of support. Library services already deliver a wide range of reading and language-related activities and have established relationships with parents of young children.

Libraries have significant untapped potential to become champions for book sharing and to strengthen local HLE narratives. Interest was also identified among sector bodies such as Libraries Connected and Libraries Rising.

5. Commissioners are looking for interventions that fit systems, not stand-alone programmes

Participants identified five factors influencing commissioning decisions:

- Cost and value for money.
- System integration.
- Flexibility.
- Practical implementation.
- Support to understand impact.

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that interventions must fit within existing systems rather than operate as separate initiatives. There was particular interest in approaches that are relational, strengths-based, adaptable and capable of being delivered through existing workforce roles and pathways.

While digital resources are encouraged, there was scepticism about their effectiveness unless combined with face-to-face support.

Local leaders also highlighted the importance of practical implementation support and measurement approaches that are simple, credible and aligned to local reporting requirements.

6. Playtime with Books appears well aligned to identified local needs

Playtime with Books addresses an area that is currently underserved within the policy and delivery landscape. Although Best Start in Life funding is currently focused largely on interventions for children aged three and four, stakeholders recognised a need for earlier support focused on children under two years old.

Research evidence demonstrates the benefits of book-sharing approaches, yet structured book-sharing interventions are not widely embedded within local systems. The report therefore identifies a clear opportunity for Playtime with Books to provide early, preventative support that complements wider HLE activity.

The programme's strengths were identified as being child-focused, evidence-informed, equitable, flexible, systemic and strategically aligned with wider Best Start in Life ambitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This review found a landscape that is active but fragmented, with strong evidence for supporting the home learning environment early and little agreement about what that support should look like, who should deliver it or how it should be described. It also found real appetite for change: local leaders wanted a shared narrative, earlier identification, and approaches that work through existing services.

National policy has since moved in the same direction. The Education Committee's Reading for Pleasure report, published in July 2026, reaches conclusions that closely match those of this review, including that the problem is one of policy choices, fragmented systems and unequal access rather than of family motivation. It asks government to guarantee opportunities for shared reading from birth, to embed reading into Best Start Family Hubs and health visiting, and to decide within a year which early years shared reading programmes to support at scale.

The conditions for change are therefore more favourable than they were when this review began, and the timeframe is short. What follows sets out what the system needs, and then what PEDAL and its partners can do in response.

1. Fill the gap in support for children under two

Provision remains concentrated on children aged three and four and local systems rely on the 2–2½ review to identify concerns. The Education Committee has called for shared reading opportunities to be guaranteed from birth and for government to decide within a year which early years programmes to scale. Playtime with Books is well positioned as a response to this recognised gap in local provision: early, light-touch, developmentally appropriate support for children aged 8–24 months. This positioning aligns with evidence on language development while complementing Best Start in Life priorities.

2. Build a shared language around book sharing

Stakeholders consistently described the absence of a shared way of talking about the home learning environment, what good support looks like and why it matters. The Education Committee has adopted 'shared reading' as the term for government-facing work, giving the sector a shared starting point. PEDAL should continue to strengthen the broader narrative around book sharing. Making the distinction between book sharing and independent reading more visible will help local leaders understand how the approach contributes to language development, relationships and home learning environments.

3. Embed book sharing within existing systems

Commissioners were clear that support has to work through workforces and pathways that already reach families, rather than as a separate initiative. The Education Committee has asked for a resourced reading lead and guided sessions for parents in every Best Start Family Hub, for health visitors to support reading in their work with young children and for public library funding to be restored. Future scaling efforts should focus on embedding Playtime with Books within existing systems. This review highlights six particularly promising delivery routes:

- Health visiting services.
- Library services.
- Family Hub stay-and-play provision.
- Targeted family support and family help teams.
- Voluntary and community sector organisations.
- Early childhood education and care settings.

4. Balance flexibility with what works

Playtime with Books should maintain a strong emphasis on flexibility. Local systems want interventions that are adaptable to their context, workforces and communities. They also need to know what has to stay constant if the benefit is to hold. The programme should be clear about both: what local areas can flex and the core components essential to delivery and outcomes.

5. Support commissioners to act

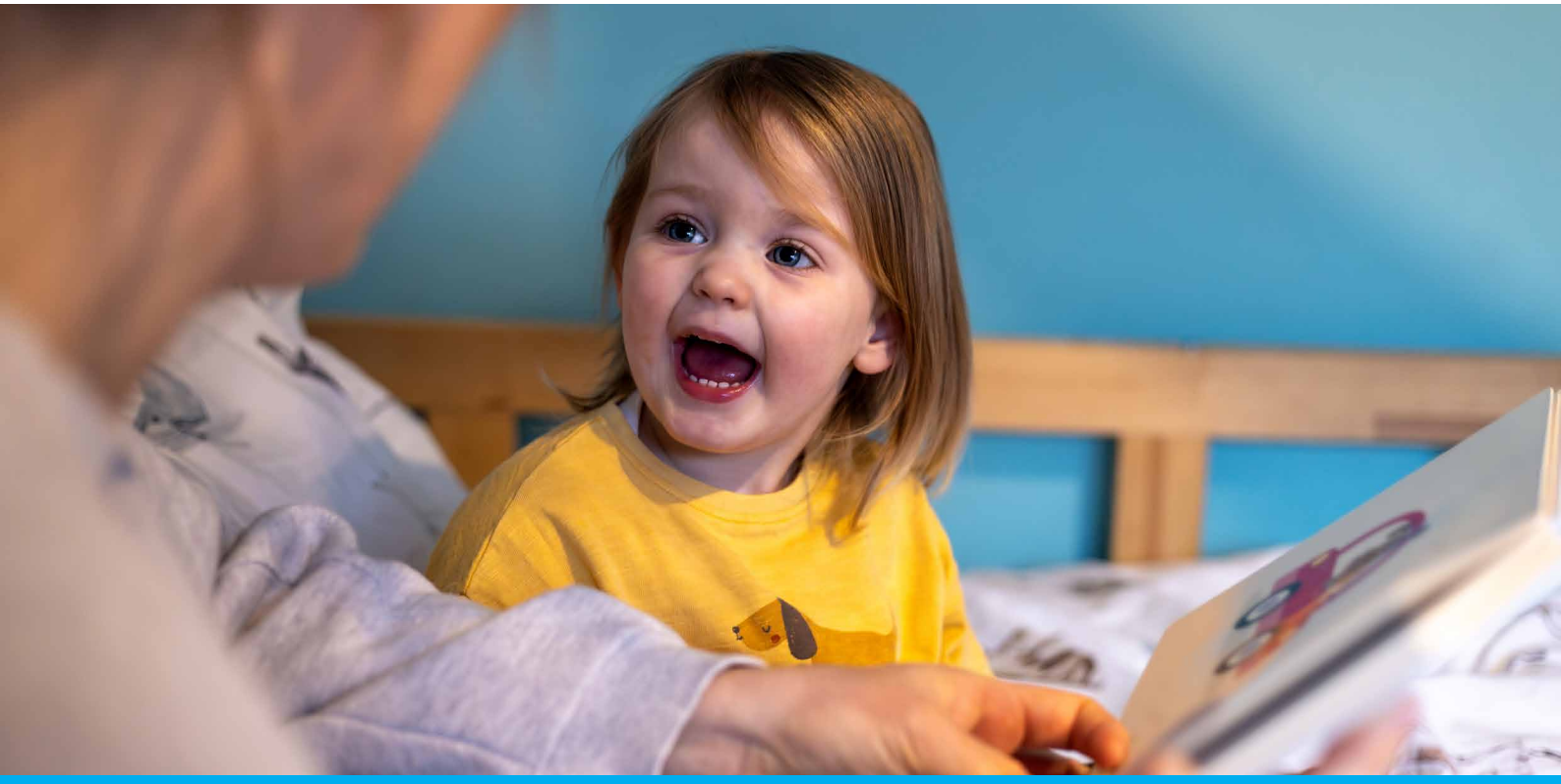
Commissioning decisions turn on cost, fit with existing systems, practical implementation and the ability to show impact. With government due to decide within a year which early years shared reading programmes to support at scale, this material is needed now. Playtime with Books should support commissioners by offering practical implementation guidance, case studies from different settings, clarity about costs and simple approaches to measuring impact. Demonstrating impact on language development and linking outcomes to the 2–2½ year review will be particularly important.

CONCLUSION

Playtime with Books has the potential to become a valuable component of local home learning environment offers.

National attention to early language and shared reading is stronger than at any point during this review, and decisions about what to support at scale are close.

The task now is to make Playtime with Books straightforward to commission, deliver and evidence, so that it is ready when those decisions are taken.



Acknowledgements

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