

LETTER BOX

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Letterbox Green 2010:
an Evaluation of the Letterbox Club Pilot
for Children in Secondary School



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Inspiring a love of books

Acknowledgements

The Siobhan Dowd Trust

The Siobhan Dowd Trust is the legacy of one of the UK's most talented children's writers, Siobhan Dowd, who died in 2007 at the age of 47.

Siobhan founded the Trust shortly before her death, bequeathing the royalties from her books to bring the joy and delight of reading to disadvantaged children who have little or no access to books.

Supporting the pilot of Letterbox Green specifically for Looked After Children was one of the very first grants awarded by the Trust. Trustees are hugely proud of the way the pilot they funded has grown from 60 participants to 15 times that the following year, and which continues to grow - it is exactly the type of project that Siobhan would have championed.

For more information about the Siobhan Dowd Trust, please see www.siobhandowdtrust.com

Geoff Morgan



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Letterbox Green 2010

an Evaluation of the Letterbox Club Pilot for Children in Secondary School

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What is the Letterbox Club?

The Letterbox Club is a programme managed by Booktrust, a national charity, in partnership with the University of Leicester. From the initial trials in 2003, the project has explored ways of improving the educational outlook for children in foster care by providing them with educational materials.

Each child who joins the Letterbox Club receives a parcel once a month for six months. The parcel is addressed to the child at their foster home or other residence, and typically includes a letter (personalised with the child's name), two reading books, stationery items such as pencils, an exercise book or drawing book, a bookmark, and a maths game. Sometimes there is a CD to accompany a book. Parcels are usually sent from May to October, to cover the summer holiday period, where there is a dip in attainment for many children. Children aged 7 to 9 belong to 'Letterbox Blue' (so called because their parcels come in blue padded envelopes) and those aged 9 to 11 are members of 'Letterbox Red'.

From 2009 to 2011, the programme has been extended in two ways: with an additional age range, 'Letterbox Green' for children aged 11 to 13; and 'Letterbox Extra' (now called 'Letterbox Yellow') for children aged 7 to 11 who are working below National Curriculum Level 1. This means children can now be a member of Letterbox Club three times: when they are aged 7 to 9; aged 9 to 11; and finally when they are aged 11 to 13.

'Letterbox Green', for children aged 11 to 13, is the subject of this report. Children may use the materials on their own, but most also ask foster carers or other family members to read and play the games with them. Children keep the books, games and other materials, and they are often used for many months after the last parcel is provided.

A pilot project in England in 2007 and 2008, involving 50 local authorities and over 1,500 children aged 7 to 11 and their foster families, demonstrated that this intervention was an enjoyable, effective and inexpensive way of supporting children in care.

The key benefits of taking part in the Letterbox Club were:

- Increased involvement of children in their own learning
- Gains in reading and number for many children
- Enjoyment for the child in receiving a series of personalised parcels
- Increased involvement of carers.

The pilot project was funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Additional funding was donated by Penguin, and every participating local authority provided help in kind. Pearson helped with maths games, and many publishers gave generous discounts on their books. The final evaluation report for the pilot in England is available on the University of Leicester School of Education website (www.le.ac.uk/education) or a printed copy can be requested from the Letterbox Club at Booktrust (see back cover).

From 2009 the Letterbox Club has been open to every local authority in the United Kingdom, on a subscription basis for each child, paid for by their local authority, and over 4,500 children have been enrolled each year.

How the Letterbox Club works

Each year, local authorities or other organisations tell the Letterbox Club team how many children they have whom they would like to be in each Letterbox programme for the coming calendar year, and pay a subscription for each child. In 2011, this was £125 per child in England.

The Letterbox team, based at Booktrust in London, provide customer service support across the UK, manage the book selection panels and book purchase, provide the number games, order stationery and arrange the warehouse operation to pack the parcels and deliver them to each local authority.

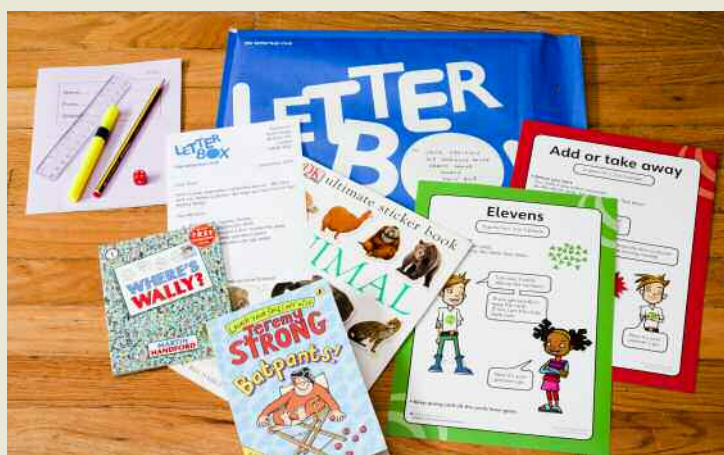
For data protection reasons, children's details cannot be held by Booktrust, so each participating local authority or organisation holds a database of the participating children's current addresses. In each area, the staff add any personalised materials for each child and address the parcel ready for the post.

Books are chosen by a selection panel to include a mixture of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, with good levels of illustration, and aimed at the 'interest age' of each cohort of children. Children in Letterbox Yellow, Blue, Red and Green each receive a different selection of books.

The mathematics games focus on number and arithmetic, and are provided at a suitable level for children receiving each colour parcel. Letterbox Yellow concentrates on counting, number recognition and adding within 10. The number games for Blue and Red are provided by level, and each child is sent games at National Curriculum Levels 1 and 2, or Levels 3 and 4, depending on an initial maths test or a teacher assessment. The Letterbox Green parcels each include 'Starter' and 'Expert' games, so children can choose which they want to try.



Letterbox Yellow, for children aged 7-11 with special needs



Letterbox Blue, for ages 7 to 9



Letterbox Red, for ages 9 to 11



Letterbox Green, for ages 11 to 13

The Letterbox Green Pilot

The Letterbox Green pilot was designed to find out whether children in the first two years of secondary school would benefit from being members of the Letterbox Club. We also wanted to explore the kind of books, games and stationery items that would be most suitable for looked-after children in this age group, and to see whether foster carers valued this support.

A selection panel was set up to choose 12 books for the pilot, chaired jointly by Rose Griffiths from the University of Leicester and Marian Keen-Downs, Letterbox Club Programme Manager. The panel also included:

Steve Voake, Children's author and former Head Teacher

Claire Harris, Children and Young People's librarian, Bristol

Lucy Mangan, Guardian journalist

Rebecca Wilkie, Booktrust Children's Website editor.

Funding from the Siobhan Dowd Trust for a pilot in 2010 covered the costs of developing the parcel contents, providing the parcels free to 60 children, and carrying out an evaluation of the project.

For more about the Siobhan Dowd Trust, please see the inside front cover.

Participating organisations included nine English local authorities, one in Wales, and Fostering Network Northern Ireland. Each had between five and seven children enrolled. Unfortunately, the timing of the pilot prevented the two invited Scottish local authorities from taking part.

Although Letterbox Club usually operates from May to October, more time was needed to select and write materials for the parcels and to brief the local authorities, so the pilot ran from July to December 2010.



Evaluating Letterbox Green

The three evaluations of Letterbox Blue and Letterbox Red (for children aged 7 to 11 in England, Northern Ireland and Wales) conducted between 2007 and 2010 each used assessments of attainment, questionnaires, and interviews to judge the effectiveness of the intervention. We used the same three methods for Letterbox Green, which enables us to compare results across the complete programme.

60 children aged 11 to 13 were enrolled across our eleven geographical areas. Our focus for the evaluation was on children who were in their first year of secondary school at the start of the pilot. Fifteen data returns were from children who were older than our target group at the start of the pilot, and the complex nature of care placements meant that it was not possible to get information for some children, giving us a cohort of 38 children: 17 boys and 21 girls.

(a) Children were assessed for reading and number, prior to receiving their parcels. These assessments were repeated a few weeks after their last parcel was sent; we have data for 38 target children.

(b) Children were sent questionnaires after receiving each group of three parcels, asking them to give their opinion of the books and games they had been sent, and giving their foster carers a chance to say what they thought of the parcels, too. We received questionnaires from 33 families for parcels 1, 2 and 3, and from 24 families for parcels 4, 5 and 6.

(c) A sample of 6 children and 6 foster carers, from two local authorities, were interviewed to give a more detailed picture of their view of Letterbox Green.



What did children and carers think of the parcels?

A full list of the contents of the Green parcels for 2010 is on the inside back cover.

The comments that follow are from the interviews and questionnaires; all names are pseudonyms.

Receiving a parcel

Just as we had found in the Blue and Red pilots, children responded very positively to having materials sent to them with their name on them; for many, it made them feel important and that someone was interested in how they were getting on. Children who had been in Letterbox Club before were still very enthusiastic. One carer from Stockton said that her foster daughter had had the Red parcels eighteen months before, and when the first Green parcel came she *“just ripped it straight open. Excited and straight into it!”* Her foster daughter said, *“It’s a great thing and it makes you feel a bit happier ... To get the parcels, it’ll take a lot of money to put together for people, but it makes people happy”*.

Those for whom this was their first experience of Letterbox were excited and enjoyed the surprise of not knowing what would be in their parcels. *Kyle said the best thing about it was “just getting things that you might not have seen – or just getting things!”* Lauren said she felt *“Really glad – opened it straight away”*.

The fact that the parcel comes through the post to the child’s home address seems to be particularly important to children who have moved recently or frequently. One carer with two foster daughters said, *“They love just getting the parcels and that was important to them, especially when they hadn’t been here very long, it was like ‘somebody from the outside knows I’m here’.”*

A significant proportion of children in care will move placement in any year; during the pilot for 7 to 11 year olds, about 15% of Letterbox Club members moved. In this older age group, about 30% moved placement at least once during their six months.

Other particularly vulnerable children have been mentioned by local authority staff:

“Two children who are placed in a children’s home were very keen to receive the parcels as they often don’t have much to do in the evenings, and they were very excited to be part of the Letterbox Club.”

Member of staff from Birmingham

“One child is from Bangladesh and English is not her first language. Having a parcel of books has really helped her improve her English. Another child has been out of school for a year, and the parcels have helped him gain some confidence about starting back at school.”

Member of staff from Gloucestershire

Kelly’s foster carer commented that getting the parcels showed someone was interested in you: *“It may not seem a lot, but when you’ve not had much attention in your life, it is.”*

“Just receiving a parcel with his name on it made William feel special, but also like an ordinary member of his foster family. He read his books mainly on his long journey to school every day”.

Comment from adult about child from Southwark who travels from an out-of-area placement.

Books, number games and stationery

Most children used all three types of items in the parcels – and the variety this provided was appreciated. There were some children who said that they used the books but not the games, and some who used the games but not the books. Every child liked the pens, notebooks and other stationery. Those children who said they did not use one element of the contents (for example, because *“books are not my thing – I’d rather play out”*) have still been keen to be members, and have often used more of the materials than they initially expected.

A busier, more independent lifestyle

Compared to the younger children in the Blue and Red Letterbox Club pilots, some of these secondary school children, not surprisingly, had many more calls on their time. Their increasing independence was reflected in more opportunities to join in activities outside the home, including clubs and ‘playing out’. Kyle’s foster parents described how he played football for a club, watched sport on TV, and went to rugby league matches: *“They’ve just got that much going off and around them, with making new friends and contact with their sisters and everything else. They just want to come home from school, have their tea, do their [X-Box] games and run off.”*

Lauren and Emma’s foster mum listed the activities they took part in each week: swimming, a girls’ club, an after school club, glee club, a youth club on Saturdays, and “Sunday’s chill out day!” Some children had periods of individual tutoring after school, and most said they had more homework now. Paul said he had less homework, though, because he did it at break times, but he had a very long journey from school to home. Kezia said she liked playing out in the summer, so she would read more in the winter. Several children said they liked books that they could ‘dip into’ when they had short periods of time to spare; this is discussed further in “Children’s suggestions” below.

“Millie loves the parcels – she really enjoys playing the games and using the stationery. She enjoys the reading books, she reads in short bursts as she has poor concentration.”
Carer from Wakefield

“Joe enjoyed receiving them and has looked after all items. Some of the games were very good. He has started to read more since the parcels have arrived.”
Carer from Wakefield



Involvement of carers and the foster family

Foster carers were asked on the questionnaires: *“Do you think the Letterbox parcels have helped you to do more with this child?”* The response was almost unanimously positive, with only three carers saying no, they did not think so – one of whom indicated that this was because *“He likes to do things on his own”*. Carers wrote that they read with the children, played the games, talked about the books, looked up things on the internet after reading something in one of the books, or used books to help with homework. Sometimes the role of people in the foster family was to encourage the child just to look at a book or game – for example, Lauren decided to try Romeo and Juliet because her older foster-brother was interested in it, as it was a ‘Manga’ version.

Some children were keen to read with their foster parents; some needed people to read to them, as they could not yet read independently; others were much more confident, and enjoyed independent reading. The range of attainment in both reading and mathematics is wider in this age group than with younger children, and some carers were uncertain about how to help. However, Dave and Kathy described how they act as positive role models: *“We get two newspapers. I’ll get my Mirror and I’ll be reading the sport, and Kyle (aged 12), he’s got the Daily Star and he starts at the back, at the sport. And he’s started reading the cartoons, like Simon’s Cat”*.

Some carers expressed confidence about asking for advice; Jane, for example, had been concerned that perhaps her foster children were reading things that were ‘too young’ for them, but she said, *“I’ve been in school, you know, and asked what should they really be reading at their age. And the teacher said ‘I can give you a list but it’s whatever they enjoy reading.’”*

There was some indication in the interviews with carers that those who had had children in the

Letterbox Club before, were more confident about joining in with the children’s activities and prompting children to try things. Their previous experience of Letterbox Club had perhaps made them feel more ‘expert’, and they had had time to ask questions about the programme, and to see for themselves how children responded.

In the earlier pilots, many children said that they read with other children in their families, as well as with the adults around them, and Letterbox Green children reported this, too. Children read to younger children, or asked older ones to read to them. Sometimes they swapped books or gave them away: Kezia gave The Silver Sword to her older brother because *“it was too scary for me”*. Several reported looking at The Guinness Book of World Records together; Beckie’s foster mum said, *“She drove me mad with it!”*

“My little brother would have a look at it as well. He’s ten. I’d show him some stuff that was a bit weird and stuff. Like the dog with the longest tongue”. Kyle, aged 12, talking about the Guinness Book of World Records.



Encouraging writing and drawing

Several children told us that they enjoyed writing stories or plays ("about my favourite things on TV" said Emma), and drawing. Lauren said she wrote *"millions of stories"*; Kyle thought the stationery was the best thing about the parcels, and he liked getting the pens and notebooks. Kelly's foster mum said: *"She loves pens and pencils and rubbers and anything like that, and she does spend a lot of time writing stories here. She got quite creative in writing things. Getting the stationery, I can't say it was definitely that, but I think it all contributed (to her writing more)"*.

Kezia felt the colouring pens helped her do better at school, because *"In French, sometimes, we do fancy posters for food and stuff like that, like croissants, and we might be allowed to write in colours"*. She explained that you can't have too many pens, as you need a lot for secondary school; the teacher is pleased when you have the right equipment, and if you have plenty then you can lend them to other people. *"We got a calculator in one parcel, a purple one. That helped me, and I got a sticker from the teacher in my planner, for bringing my own equipment."*

"Max uses all of the stationery. He puts it straight into his pencil case for school!" Carer from Lewisham

Links with school

The majority of children felt that receiving the parcels had helped them do better at school. Kezia said: *"At school, you go to learn, for education, and when you come home ... you're not expected to read or write, are you! Cause it's sort of your spare time. But because I got the Letterbox Club, I did sometimes read or write, and it helped me at school because I was prepared to do it at school."*

Several children commented on the link between improving reading and doing better at school. Emma said that Letterbox had *"helped me reading, made me enjoy some more. Because I used to didn't read before I got Letterbox parcels."* Kelly mentioned reading aloud in class: *"It's helped me more in English and my different lessons when teachers asked me to read."*

Children and carers particularly mentioned the Oxford Pocket School Dictionary and the Oxford School Atlas as being directly useful for school, and some children took these to school with them. Kezia just used hers at home, and joked that if she took it to school, *"one of the teachers would probably think I'd pinched it from them!"*

Kyle preferred the number games to the books, and said that he liked the Magimixer (a dice game similar to "Countdown" using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division to reach a target number) and he thought it helped him practise his maths. His foster mum commented *"If he's not good at something, he won't even entertain it"* and that Kyle liked playing against her on the Magimixer *"because he was better than me, you see!"*

"It has helped me learn new things."

Roisin from Northern Ireland

Books to own and books to borrow

Children who were interviewed were asked “Apart from Letterbox, where else do you get books from?” Kyle said he did not get books from anywhere else, except “We might get a textbook from school which we have to revise from. It’d be from English. And then we have to give it back.”

Kezia mentioned her foster mum (“She bought me *Horrid Henry*. I’ve got about ten of them!”), her dad, and her Nana as people who gave her books. Kezia was enthusiastic about the stories she had enjoyed: “My Nana, she loves books. And she buys me a lot of books, like mysteries, and she bought me a good book called the *Ice Ring*, about a girl, and a man bought her a pair of ice-skating shoes for her birthday, and she went to an ice-skating ring, and she’s, like, she couldn’t do it at first, but when she persevered, she could do loads of stunts and flips and stuff like that.”

Lauren and Emma’s foster mum said that they “buy books as treats”, and the girls said they had also had books from a reading club at school, but they no longer used the local library, as it was difficult to find the books when they needed returning. Experiences of using the local library were mixed. One child from Dudley said, “I visited my library a few months ago and I was told to be quiet when I was reading, so I haven’t been again”. In contrast, Kelly’s foster mum said she felt that being in Letterbox Club had acted as a catalyst: “It spurred us into actually going to the library more” and talked about an enjoyable and motivating reading project that the library ran.

We were told that several libraries have used the Letterbox Club as a focus for showing children and carers the range of materials and activities they offer by holding special events; the hope is that once children and their families have visited the library and met staff, they are more likely to come again.

“Letterbox is a fantastic scheme, it has changed Jamie from a child you would have to fight to get him to read, but now he enjoys reading.”

Carer from Blaenau Gwent



Favourite books and games

The questionnaires sent to children asked them to tell us, for each book or game, whether they 'liked it', thought it was 'OK', or 'did not use it'. Across the 11 books that each child received, we hoped they would be satisfied with about 7 or 8 of them, leaving only 3 or 4 that they did not use. Similarly, we hoped they would like 4 of the 6 number activities. This gave us a target "satisfaction rating" of at least 66% for each item.

Favourite books

The book selection process for Letterbox Green was more difficult than for younger children, partly because of the greater range of attainment in reading in this age group, and because children's interests are more varied. The mixture of fiction, non-fiction and reference books was valued, and several children commented that they might not have chosen a particular book for themselves, but they had enjoyed it.

"I didn't think I'd like it, but when I read it, it was good."

Kelly, talking about the Guinness Book of World Records

The favourite books in 2010, listed in rank order, were these:

Oxford School Atlas	97%
Guinness Book of World Records	91%
Manga Romeo and Juliet	88%
Oxford School Dictionary	88%
Orange Silver Sausage	76%
The London Eye Mystery	74%

[Details of authors and publishers are on the inside back cover.]

Only two books fell below our target 'satisfaction rating': The Outsiders (58%) and Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief (63%). Both of these have a higher reading level, and some of the children who did not use them said the books were "too thick". Alex from Birmingham commented on The Hobbit (67%): "It's so long and I just couldn't get into it."

For some children, though, these were their favourites:

"I like this, it was about real life, it was urban."
Harry from Lewisham about The Outsiders

"I really did like it. And I read it right through."
Eva from Southwark about Percy Jackson

In two local authorities, the Looked-After Children staff member arranged to swap some of the fiction titles for ones with an easier reading level, including some from Letterbox Red or Blue, such as Horrid Henry. This flexible arrangement was very helpful, but would be more difficult to sustain with a larger group of children. The adjustments made to the book selection in 2011 as a result of this evaluation should reduce the likelihood of this being needed.

*I liked the Book it was
very mysterious*

Chloe from Northern Ireland about the London Eye Mystery.

Children's suggestions for books

The six children we interviewed were asked for suggestions of books for future Letterbox parcels. Three of the children found reading difficult, and three were average or above-average readers.

Kelly, Dylan and Paul (with low reading scores) each suggested “thinner books”, magazines, joke books, cartoon books, and more non-fiction, especially books about animals and sport. Dylan said he would like a serial – perhaps send the first half of a story in one parcel, then the rest in the next one, so each part could be quite short. He would like plenty of action: *“I wouldn't read a Harry Potter book because I've tried to read one of them and they just go on, too much detail and stuff. You just want to know what happens, and I don't want to know about a chair that squeaks or something.”* Paul wanted Horrid Henry, and Kelly had two specific ideas: Desirable by Frank Cottrell Boyce, and a book about High School Musical. Her foster mum also commented on the fact that many books are labelled by age: “It says 9+ for this ...” and wondered whether this was off-putting for older children.

Kezia, Lauren and Emma each also wanted jokes and cartoons, High School Musical and more non-fiction. They had liked a biology book which they had received in Letterbox Red, because it had flaps to lift, and it helped them at school. Emma and Kezia both wanted more poetry. Kezia said *“I like poems. I enjoy reading them. And you don't get bored like after you've read a chapter, you just keep going.”* Emma would like a book about how to write letters, and she thought plays would be enjoyable, to read with her sister.

Kezia said one of her favourite books was Hansel and Gretel, which she had received two years before in a Letterbox Red parcel, but she still read it.

Favourite number activities

The number games in Letterbox Blue and Red are packed locally, to provide them at a more closely targeted level, depending on each child's previous attainment. The decision was made to provide the Green mathematics activities ready-packed centrally, as this would be much more straightforward for local staff who were administering this additional age range. Number activities for each of the six parcels were chosen or devised by Rose Griffiths from the University of Leicester, each at ‘Starter’ and ‘Expert’ levels. These included board games, card games, and two commercially-produced items, the ‘Magimixer’ dice game and ‘Uno’ playing cards, each with an introductory leaflet from Letterbox. The favourite number games, listed in rank order, were these:

Playing Cards Games: starter and expert levels	87%
£200 Game and Double Your Money Game	66%
Follow Me Games: starter and expert levels	57%

“Played lots of card games.”
Amarjit from Wigan

As was the case with the Blue and Red parcels, some children used the equipment provided with the games to make up their own activities:

“I liked the money games, cause ... I get stuck on anything with money. I used to pretend that the £5 notes with tigers on, like, was real money... I took the fake money in [to school]. Pretending I was rich. I gave my friend two [pretend] pound coins.”
Kezia from Stockton-on-Tees

Loved it because fake money was involved.

Skye from Gloucestershire, writing about the £200 and Double Your Money games.

"Do you know the best thing what I found? The playing cards. I used to know how to do card tricks, but I just never had a pack of cards. Now I'm really good at card tricks."

Paul from Wakefield

The later three games that involved more multiplication and division were not used as much: the Magimixer (56% satisfaction level); Uno (53%) and Purple Squares (40%). This may be partly because these three games also have instructions that are more complicated: the majority of the children who did not use these games were also those whose questionnaires indicated they found reading difficult. As Paul said, "I didn't really play the maths games. Like, I didn't know what to do, cause I had a look at the instructions but didn't understand it." Several of the children who used Uno mentioned that they had played it before, so they knew what to do.

During the Red and Blue pilots, some foster carers acknowledged that their own confidence

with literacy and numeracy was low. Some carers in Green were anxious about mathematics: one carer said "I attempted [to play the maths games with her], but I'm not very good at that neither."

Whilst the majority of foster carers said they did spend time playing the games with their children, others felt that there was little time to do things together, partly because parents of older children, whether foster parents or birth parents, are more likely to be working outside the home. "We're just so busy all the time. I work, my husband works, I've got three (older) sons, then the girlfriend turns up ... It's just finding time, to be quite honest with you."

"Very good games, enjoyed playing them. The parcels helped him to read with me, also integrated through playing games together."
Carer from Wakefield



Improvements in reading and number

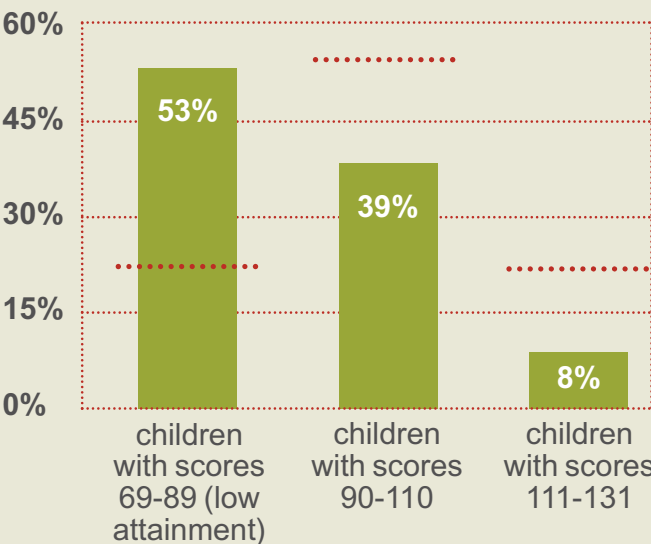
Children’s reading scores (using the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability) were recorded as standardised scores. For a typical child of any age, a standardised score of 100 is average; if the child makes normal progress over any period of time, their score will stay as 100, because it is adjusted for age.

In the mainstream population, you would expect about 20% to 25% of children to fall in the ‘low-attaining’ range for reading, with standardised scores of less than 90. In the Blue and Red Letterbox pilots, for children aged 7 to 11, about 37% of children were in the low attaining group before they began receiving their Letterbox Club parcels. In our group of 38 children before they received their Green parcels, a very high proportion, 53%, had very low scores.

The low initial scores may be because staff in the participating local authorities chose to target children they felt were particularly in need of extra support. However, we do know that the gap between mainstream attainment levels, and those of children in care, widens as children get older: many children in care fall further behind.

Any increase in the standardised reading score means that children have made more progress than would normally be expected over that period of time. Although the Green sample group is very small compared to those which we have examined in our previous evaluations, the results do follow a similar pattern, showing an increase of 3.0 in the mean standardised reading score.

Percentage of children at each reading level before receiving Letterbox Green



..... National expected percentage for comparison.

Standardised reading scores are the most reliable scores to use when looking at children’s progress, but many people find it helpful to think of a child’s situation using “reading ages”. Here is an example of one child from the Green pilot who made the same improvement as the average:

Robbie from Dudley was aged 11 years 11 months when he was tested before receiving Letterbox parcels. By the time of his second test, a month after his last parcel, his standardised reading score had improved from 94 to 97, an increase of 3.0. This was equivalent to his ‘reading age’ improving from 10 years 5 months to 11 years 7 months: an improvement of 14 months in the 8 month period.

Increase in children’s standardised reading scores for different age groups

Year of pilot	Number of children assessed	Letterbox Blue (ages 7 to 9)	Letterbox Red (ages 9 to 11)	Letterbox Green (ages 11 to 13)
2007	316	4.4	2.5	-
2008	449	4.4	3.5	-
2010	38	-	-	3.0

The mathematics assessment was designed to show improvement (or otherwise) in number skills for children operating at National Curriculum levels 1 to 4 for England; it does not give significant information about children who are already operating at Level 4 or higher. The number of children for whom we had a complete set of scores in the mathematics assessment was only 23. Of these, one child's score decreased over the period of Letterbox Club, seven stayed the same, and 15 improved.

As we have commented in previous reports, it would not be reasonable to attribute all of the children's progress in reading or number to the Letterbox Club, but many carers and children did feel that receiving the materials had provided significant additional support and encouragement to learn.

"Alongside all the provision in school, we feel that Letterbox reading and number activities made an impact on improving her attainment over the 26-week period, particularly as this period includes ten weeks of school holidays and they receive the parcels throughout. [Using school tracking data], she moved up one [National Curriculum] sub-level in reading, and two sub-levels in maths." Looked-After Children staff reporting on progress of Ellie from Stockton-on-Tees.



Plans and ideas for the future

Enrolment in 2011

Many local authorities that used Letterbox Blue and Red wanted to extend the age range they enrolled as soon as possible, sometimes prompted by children who had received the Red parcels saying that they would like to be in Letterbox Club again. Since early responses to the pilot were already encouraging, it was decided to open Green to subscriptions before the evaluation was completed. As one of the staff from Barnet commented, they felt it was important to provide enjoyable activities for children early in secondary school.

In 2011, 47 local authorities in England and Wales subscribed to Letterbox Green, for 935 children.

Book selection

Some of the ideas for further improvements to Letterbox Green have already been incorporated for the 2011 parcels, including adaptations to the range of books offered. Children's preferences and suggestions have been taken into account, and the next book selection panel will consider plays, further non-fiction and poetry, and books that are more accessible to children who find reading difficult.

Promoting active library membership

Library membership has considerable potential for children who are old enough to go to the library on their own. Local libraries involved with Letterbox Club in many areas of the UK have found ways of simplifying the process of joining the library, and have looked at things which deter children and foster carers from joining, including their worries about fines and losing or damaging books.

Some library services have coded children's membership cards so they can see that a child is a member of the Letterbox Club, and then pay particular attention to helping the child choose books or story CDs. Letterbox Club events in libraries have also been successful. It is hoped that examples of this good practice can be shared over the next few years.

Recommended reading

Once a child has received a book through Letterbox that they have enjoyed, a few suggestions of others that they might like to read could be helpful. This could be provided in several ways: through leaflets aimed at the children and included in their parcels; through the Letterbox website for foster carers to access, or by suggesting links to Booktrust or publishers' sites.

Number activities

Learning how to play a new game by yourself can make children feel anxious, so a local "Number Games" session, where children and any family members could come and try out the games they will receive in their parcels, could be useful. Times tables activities (for both multiplication and division facts) could be a helpful alternative in one or two of the Green parcels.

Targeting Letterbox Club Membership

Letterbox Blue, Red and Green are each targeted at a particular age group, but occasionally, it might be appropriate to choose a different pathway for some children. For example, a child who had Letterbox Yellow at age 7 or 8, with parcels designed for children who have not started reading or counting to ten, might then have Letterbox Blue (usually for ages 7 to 9) when they are aged 9 to 11, and Letterbox Red at age 11 to 13, depending on the progress they have made. This will be an area where the Letterbox team can advise local staff. As well as children in foster care, some local authorities have enquired about enrolling children who have been placed for adoption. We hope that Letterbox Club will become a regular part of post-adoption support for children aged 7 to 13.

Advice for foster carers

Foster parents vary in their confidence about helping children with educational activities at home, and our evaluations across the whole Letterbox Club programme have indicated that many would appreciate reassurance or advice at times. This could be a major area for development in the future. The evaluations have also shown that, whether they feel confident or not, the majority of foster carers and many other members of their families have been enthusiastic users of the Letterbox Club books and games alongside their foster children. The enjoyment, support and encouragement this has given to children should not be underestimated.

Letterbox Club 'Green' Parcel Contents, 2010

Parcel One, July

- The London Eye Mystery by Siobhan Dowd (Random House)
 - What's Biology All About? (Usborne)
 - £200 Game (starter level) and Double Your Money Game (expert level)
 - Pencil case, scissors, cartridge pen, dice, pack of counters, token money (£5, £10, £20 and £50 notes), zip-top wallet, Letterbox postcard
 - Letter to child
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Parcel Two, August

- The Silver Sword by Ian Serraillier (Red Fox)
 - Oxford Pocket School Dictionary (Oxford University Press)
 - Playing Cards Games leaflets (starter and expert levels)
 - Pack of playing cards, shorthand notebook, blue ink pen, Letterbox bookmark, 'post-it' notes, pencil, zip-top wallet
 - Letter to child
-

Parcel Three, September

- Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief by Rick Riordan (Puffin)
 - Oxford School Atlas (Oxford University Press)
 - Follow Me Games (starter and expert levels)
 - Exercise book (squares), pencil, eraser, sharpener, calculator, zip-top wallet
 - Letter to child
-

Parcel Four, October

- Manga Romeo and Juliet, illustrated by Sonia Leong (SelfMadeHero)
 - The Outsiders by SE Hinton (Puffin)
 - Magimixer Games leaflet and Magimixer
 - Plain sketch book, felt tips (pack of ten), pencil, pencil/ink eraser, zip-top wallet
 - Letter to child
 - Personalised name labels for books
-

Parcel Five, November

- The Hobbit by JRR Tolkien (HarperCollins)
 - Orange Silver Sausage: a Collection of Poems Without Rhymes, from Zephaniah to Agard, compiled by James Carter and Graham Denton (Walker)
 - Purple Squares Game (starter and expert levels)
 - Exercise book (lined), 15cm clear ruler, highlighter pen, two dice, pack of 50 counters, zip-top wallet
 - Letter to child
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Parcel Six, December

- Guinness Book of World Records 2011 (Guinness World Records)
 - Uno games leaflet and Uno card game
 - Exercise book (lined), black ink pen, bookmark, zip-top wallet
 - Letter to child
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Contact us

Please call the Letterbox Club team on 020 8516 2993 or see our website www.letterboxclub.org.uk

We are based at Book House, 45 East Hill, London SW18 2QZ and our office is open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. Outside these hours, please leave a message and we will call you back.

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