



20<sup>th</sup> January 2026

Children, Young People and Education Committee  
Welsh Parliament  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
CF99 1SN

## **Response to Invitation for Views on the Expert Literacy Panel**

Dear Ms Williams,

Thank you for inviting me to share my views. I have structured my response in line with the five areas you asked me to address.

### **1. Sincerity of Panel Members**

It is likely that panel members are sincere in believing their preferred approaches are best. I am concerned that these approaches have not been rigorously evaluated, or have not been compared directly with systematic synthetic phonics, which is strongly supported by extensive evidence.

### **2. Methodological Weighting**

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle, said that the government has a “clear expectation that all schools will use synthetic phonics to teach reading.”<sup>1</sup>

However, while panel members accepted that *phonics* is essential, they disagreed significantly on how it should be taught. There was no consensus on whether beginners learn more effectively through discrete, systematic synthetic phonics lessons or through approaches that mix phonics with other literacy activities.

Based on both research evidence and practical experience, I am convinced that beginners make stronger progress when word reading and spelling are taught through discrete systematic synthetic phonics lessons, while spoken language is developed throughout the day. When these elements are taught together in a single lesson, children do not get enough focused practice in reading and spelling. Spoken language requires sustained attention and is too important to be slotted into a reading and writing lesson.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.itv.com/news/2024-10-03/welsh-government-accepts-need-to-improve-guidance-on-teaching-reading>

It was unrealistic to expect a group of individuals with publicly stated, conflicting views to produce agreed statements on how literacy should be taught. Given the significant differences in their positions, the only possible outcomes were weak statements or no agreement at all.

### **3. The Composition of the Panel**

Seven out of nine of the panel had no direct experience of teaching children to read and I was the only one who had experience of teaching beginners systematic synthetic phonics. This undermined the panel's credibility and effectiveness.

### **4. Prospects for Impact**

It is possible the panel will produce a statement of limited value. It is doubtful that it will justify the time and effort spent on it and it is unlikely to include enough detail to drive significant improvement in standards.

#### **Further concerns:**

##### **1. The influence of civil servants:**

Civil servants exerted more influence on the panel's work than panel members. I had the impression that consultation with the panel was used to legitimise decisions rather than shape them. Draft statements were sent to the panel to review, which included sentences that bore no resemblance to panel discussions. Some were excessively wordy and appeared designed to sound authoritative, but in practice said little of value. Others set unrealistic and over-detailed expectations for beginner readers, in a document with the title, "Key Foundations". My comments challenging these were largely ignored. Practical, evidence-based proposals, such as a clear outline of phonics lesson content, received no response and were excluded. The panel was not consulted about setting up related organisations, including the "National Professional Learning and Leadership Body" and, most crucially, CAL:ON Cymru.

##### **2. CAL:ON Cymru – The Centre for the Advancement of Literacy**

The Welsh Government's approach to improving reading has been marked by mistakes, the most serious being the creation of CAL:ON Cymru, a literacy initiative led by Bangor University. The announcement of CAL:ON Cymru, presented as an evidence-informed initiative, was the final trigger for me to resign from the panel.

My concerns about the CAL:ON initiative include these:

- CAL:ON relies on the RILL programme, a programme for intervention which does not include discrete focused teaching of the alphabetic code for word reading and spelling.
- Bangor University claims that CAL:ON's work is guided by the literacy expert panel, despite no consensus among panel members on some fundamental issues.

- There is a risk that schools will adopt CAL:ON resources because they are free, government-approved, and probably endorsed by Estyn, even if they are less effective than other resources.
- £8.2 million of funding could be wasted, or even cause harm if better resources are displaced.
- CAL:ON has stated that it will produce guidance on selecting and implementing a phonics programme. This suggests it does not intend to fund a programme directly, despite having £8.2 million allocated to improve literacy. Given that phonics is fundamental to literacy, and that beginners require a structured programme to learn it effectively, this raises serious questions about the value of the initiative. This omission is particularly striking given that the panel spent over a year discussing how phonics fits into the key foundations of literacy. It reinforces doubts about the purpose of the panel.

### **3. Lack of Clarity**

The government has not been clear enough about its approach to improving literacy teaching in Wales, making it difficult to understand the issues at stake. I hope my response will help members of the committee and others to make sense of the situation and to identify the questions that must be put to both the government and Bangor University.

#### **A Proposal for a Way Forward**

The Welsh Government's literacy initiative risks wasting £8.2 million and undermining effective teaching. These concerns are compounded by CAL:ON's intention to advise on choosing a phonics programme rather than supplying one, despite phonics being central to early literacy. Given the contract with Bangor University, cancelling it is unlikely to be possible.

Instead, the Reading Reform Foundation calls on the Welsh Government to commission an independent study to compare early literacy outcomes under CAL:ON with those achieved through a programme based on systematic synthetic phonics teaching principles. The details would require careful consideration, but such a study is both feasible and necessary. We urge the government to act on this proposal to inform future policy, for the sake of children and their teachers in Wales.

I am happy for this response to be shared publicly.

Yours sincerely,



Elizabeth Nonweiler  
Chair of the Reading Reform Foundation