

The Letterbox Club in Wales

Evaluation Report 2009 – 2011

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Executive summary

This report presents an evaluation of the impact of the Letterbox Club initiative in Wales. The report incorporates data collected during the Pilot Study undertaken across 2009-2010, along with further data collected in 2011.

Introduction and Background

The Letterbox Club is a literacy and numeracy initiative that involves sending looked-after children carefully selected, age appropriate books and number games in brightly-coloured parcels. The parcels, which are personally addressed to the child and posted directly to their home, are sent out once a month for six months. Children may use the materials – which are theirs to keep – on their own, but most also ask foster carers or other family members to read and play the games with them.

Following the success of Letterbox Club in England, a pilot initiative was introduced in Wales in 2009, involving some 700 children aged 7 to 11, and their families, from across all 22 local authorities in Wales. The pilot was funded by the Welsh Assembly Government via *Basic Skills Cymru*. By 2011 the number of Letterbox Club members had grown to 950.

The contents of Letterbox Club Wales parcels have been designed to provide access to Welsh as well as English, through offering Welsh language and bilingual materials.

In February 2012 the Welsh Government confirmed additional grant funding for Letterbox Club, meaning that looked-after children in Wales are currently guaranteed to receive parcels up to and including 2013.

The evaluation

Across the two years of the evaluation, evaluation data were received from 18 of the 22 local authorities in Wales.

The evaluation approach for Letterbox Club Wales drew on that of the English evaluations and included the following:

- *Pre- and post- assessments of reading and number*
- *Surveys of children about the Letterbox Club, their book and activity preferences*
- *Surveys of carers' views of the educational, social and personal impact of Letterbox Club*

Outcomes

Number and reading assessments for both 2009 and 2011 showed that many looked-after children are at much lower levels of educational attainment than their peers. For example, 57% of the Year 3 children and 47% of the Year 5 children in 2009 had standardised reading scores below 90; across *all* children in the UK, this figure would be only 23%. These figures are broadly in line with those for looked after children in England.

Again consistent with the evaluations of Letterbox Club in England, the general benefits of taking part in the Letterbox Club Wales 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.

Specific benefits were:

- An average gain in standardised reading scores of 3.3 points over the period of the 2009 pilot, and a gain of 2.4 in 2011;
- 48% of children in 2009 and 42% in 2011 attained a higher National Curriculum level in Number at the end of the project (compared to the 33% of children who would normally be expected to improve this much in this time);
- High levels of enjoyment and excitement amongst children at being sent personalised parcels, and high levels of satisfaction with the materials in them;
- Over 95% of carers surveyed were keen to be involved, and felt the programme had helped them do more with their foster children.

Emerging issues that could be considered for action

- The development of additional accessible materials in Welsh, appropriate to both age and level of Welsh language proficiency. This should include audio materials (and perhaps the provision of CD players, as has been done in Northern Ireland);
- A survey of Welsh language competence among looked after children and their carers, to facilitate the above;
- Building strong links with library services and other relevant agencies.

What is the Letterbox Club?

Getting a parcel through the post is exciting for anyone and the Letterbox Club uses this excitement to encourage looked after children aged 7 to 13 to enjoy playing games and reading at home. The aim is to enable children to make as much progress as possible in literacy and numeracy, and to support foster carers and family members who would like to help the children do well.

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, bookmark or stickers, and a maths game chosen to match the child's own level of attainment (chosen from four possible levels). 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. For the 2009 pilot in Wales, the first parcel was sent in July to allow more time for setting up the programme, and children therefore received their last parcel in December. In subsequent years (2010, 2011) the parcels were sent out from May to October in line with practice in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

While it is hoped that many carers will join in by reading or playing games with the children, there is no assumption that this is required. Children can join the Letterbox *Blue* club in Wales in Year 3 (and be members across the summer holiday into Year 4) or Letterbox Club *Red* in Year 5 (to take them into Year 6). 2010 saw the launch of Letterbox Club *Yellow*, designed for children with special educational needs, followed in 2011 by Letterbox Club *Green*, the parcel for secondary school children in Year 7 (taking them into Year 8).



Background to the project

The Letterbox Club is a programme managed by Booktrust, a national charity, in partnership with the University of Leicester. From initial trials in 2003, the project has explored ways of improving the educational outlook for children aged 7 to 11 in foster care by providing them with educational materials, addressed to them personally through the post.

A pilot project in England in 2007 and 2008, involving 50 local authorities and over 1500 children and their foster families, demonstrated that this intervention was an enjoyable, effective and relatively inexpensive way of supporting children in care.

The evaluation of the programme showed that the majority of children who took part made gains in reading and number that were greater than expected for this period of time. Children enjoyed receiving the personalised parcels and this increased their involvement in their own learning, often leading to them asking foster carers and other family members to join in or help with their reading or number activities.

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.

From 2009 the Letterbox Club was open to every local authority in the United Kingdom, on a subscription basis for each child, and over 4,500 children were enrolled.

The final evaluation report for the pilot in England is available on the Letterbox Club website (www.letterboxclub.org.uk) or a printed copy can be requested from the Letterbox Club at Booktrust.



How the Letterbox Club works

The Letterbox Club team based at Booktrust in London organise each book selection, 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 local authority, the staff add a personalised letter to the child (using the template provided), put in the appropriate maths games, 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 Year 3/4 receive a different selection of books to those sent to children in Year 5/6 or Year 7/8.

The maths games are organised by level rather than by age range, and each Key Stage 2 child is sent a game at levels 1 and 2, or levels 3 and 4, depending on their initial maths test or a teacher assessment. The games have been chosen to develop the child's understanding of number and their confidence and fluency with key skills in number.

Handwritten text on lined paper. The first line reads "What ever they send" and the second line reads "I like". The text is written in a cursive, child-like script.

(Year 4 girl, Conwy)

The Letterbox Club in Wales: 2009 to 2011

Evaluating the Letterbox Club

This report considers the impact of the Letterbox Club in Wales from the initial pilot scheme in 2009 through to its full implementation in 2011. The Welsh evaluations have followed a similar procedure to that in England. This enables us to compare results across the countries, to see whether there is a similar pattern in the children's and carers' responses.

We used two main methods of evaluation:

(a) Each child who took part was assessed for reading and number, prior to receiving their parcels. These assessments were repeated a few weeks after their last parcel was sent.

(b) The children were sent questionnaires after every two or three parcels, asking them to give their opinion of the books they had been sent, and giving their foster carers a chance to say what they thought of the parcels, too.

In addition, some local authorities collected comments from professional staff as well as from carers and children, as they have arisen during the year.

Administration

The process of administering the reading and number assessments for the 2009 pilot was not without difficulties. Many key staff would have benefited from additional professional development about the process of carrying out individual assessments: the induction days provided early in 2009 were probably most successful for those who came with some previous experience in education. Changes in staff, and shortage of time, meant some local authorities were unable to provide any data. Some staff did not arrange the assessments because they were concerned that children would be made anxious by the process; there was insufficient time and personnel to reassure them that children enjoy the individual attention, and that the information collected is very valuable. Some authorities also found the arrangements for administering the programme quite challenging (although most have found it much more straightforward in their second year and third years).

Sample sizes

2009: Despite the challenges outlined above, we received results from 13 local authorities (out of the 22 participating) for a total of 171 children (approximately 43% of the children in the 13 authorities, or 24% of the total cohort of 700 children). We received questionnaires from 10 local authorities. Some children and carers returned both questionnaires; most returned just one. A total of 185 questionnaires were returned, from about 140 children (approx. 37% of the children in the 10 authorities that returned questionnaires, or 20% of the total cohort).

2010: Reading and number results were not routinely collected in 2010. Questionnaires were completed by a relatively small number of children and their carers, and mainly contributed to a small survey of their views of the Welsh language materials.

2011: Reading and number results were received from 8 of the 22 participating local authorities, involving 45 children from Year 3 and 38 from Year 5. Questionnaires were received from 8 local authorities, with a total of 155 completed forms from about 53 children (5% of the total cohort and 15% of children in the returning authorities).

Figure 1: Map of Wales showing participating authorities in 2009 and 2011.

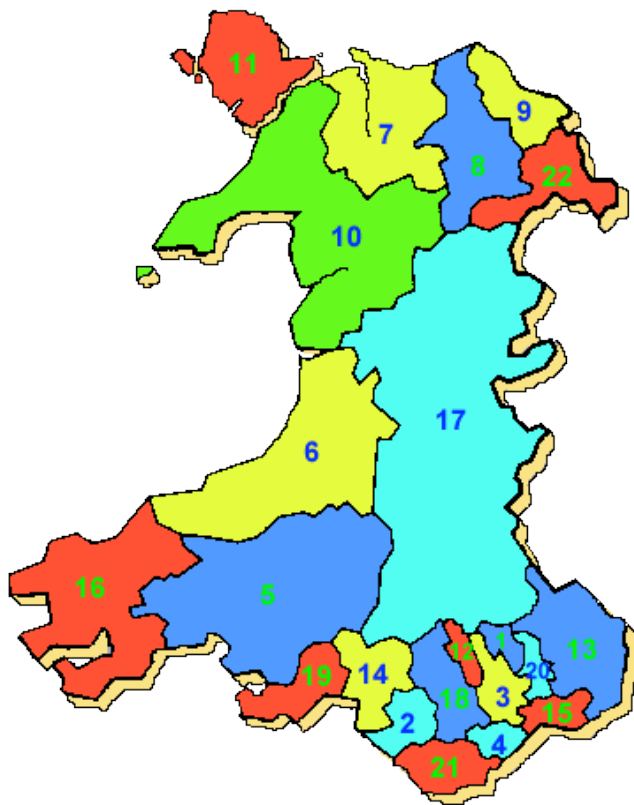


Table 1: Local authorities returning evaluation data in 2009 and 2011

Authority	Reading and/or number assessments		Questionnaires	
	2009	2011	2009	2011
1. Blaenau Gwent	√	√	√	√
2. Bridgend	√		√	
3. Caerphilly	√	√		√
4. Cardiff			√	
6. Ceredigion	√		√	
7. Conwy	√	√	√	√
8. Denbighshire	√			
10. Gwynedd	√		√	
12. Merthyr Tydfil	√	√	√	√
14. Neath Port Talbot				√
15. Newport		√		
16. Pembrokeshire		√		
17. Powys	√		√	
18. Rhondda Cynon Taff	√		√	
19. Swansea	√		√	
20. Torfaen				√
21. Vale of Glamorgan	√	√		√
22. Wrexham	√	√		√

Improvements in Number and Reading

Improvements in number

The assessment materials and the number games included in the Letterbox Club concentrate on work on counting, place value, understanding addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, learning a range of number facts, and using money.

As in the English pilot, children's maths and reading were assessed before and after the children were members of the Letterbox Club.

The mathematics assessments were devised by Rose Griffiths at the University of Leicester, to check children's ability to complete number problems successfully, and also to check their fluency with mental arithmetic (in other words, over a period of time to test not just whether a child can get the right answer to a problem, but also whether they can get it right more quickly and confidently). The teacher administering the test uses a script to ask the child questions, noting whether the child answers each question rapidly (implying that they know the relevant number fact) or whether they need time to work out the answer. These detailed assessments - which do not require the child to be able to read - can show whether a child is making progress, even when that progress is slow.

The Letterbox Club mathematics results can be converted into National Curriculum levels for each child, to give a score of Level 1 or below; Level 2, Level 3; or Level 4 or above. The baseline data for 2009 (i.e. where the children were in May or June) is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Baseline data for Number: percentage of children at each NC level before Letterbox Club (2009).

Mathematics National Curriculum Level	% Letterbox Club
1 or below	14
2	43
3	38
4 or above	5

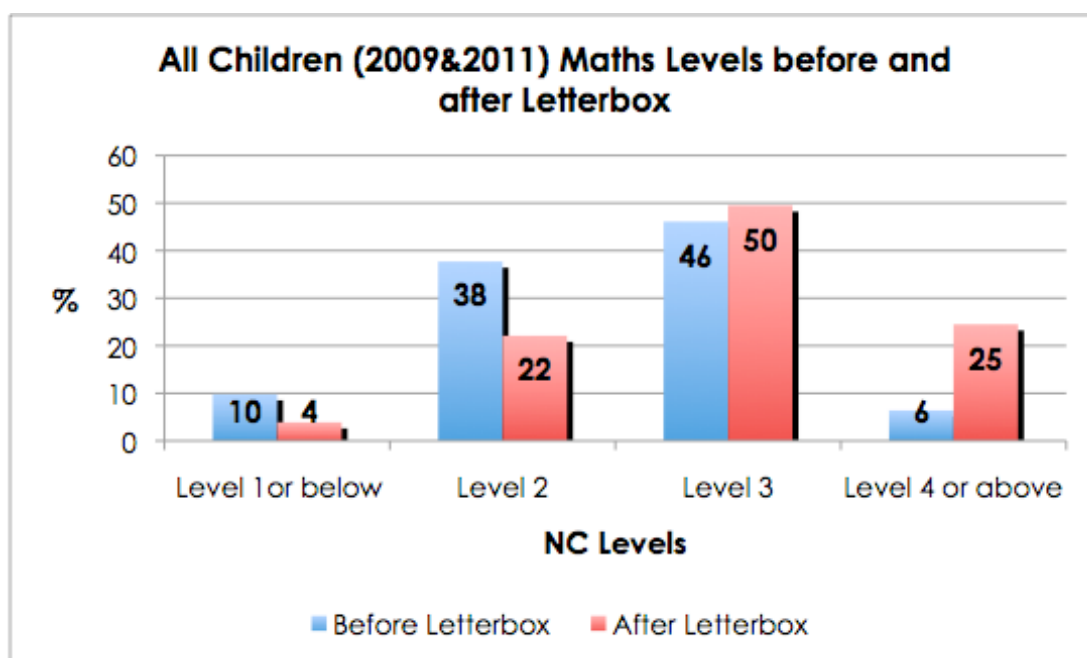
The table shows that while many of the children were, in 2009, starting from below-average levels for their age, there were also some who were very confident in their number work. This pattern is similar to that found in earlier evaluations of Letterbox Club in England.

For children progressing at an average rate, the usual expectation would be that about 33% of pupils would have scores in number that would improve by one National Curriculum level over a period of 6 to 8 months.

In Wales in 2009, almost half (48%) of participating children gained one level – a very positive result. The equivalent figure for 2011 was 32%, which, although somewhat lower, nevertheless represents very encouraging progress for a third of the participating children, particularly since the period of the intervention included several weeks of school holiday, and many of the children had previously been making very slow progress.

In Figure 2, amalgamated data from the 2009 and 2011 evaluations, show children moving out of Level 1 and Level 2, with increasing numbers of children attaining Level 3 and Level 4 or above.

Fig. 2: Movement between levels before and after Letterbox Club (2009 + 2011)



The statistical evidence for these gains was supported by comments from many carers on the questionnaires in both 2009 and 2011:

“It has really helped him with his numbers. The games are brilliant, thank you” (carer of Year 3 boy, Bridgend).

“She is much more confident in her abilities – she enjoyed using the money to play shops” (carer of Year 3 girl, Torfaen)

“The money games are especially useful.” (carer of Year 5 boy, Rhondda).

“Confidence is definitely improving, with maths and reading” (carer of Year 5 boy, Conwy)

Improvements in reading

Children's reading scores (using the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability) were recorded as *standardised scores*. The Neale test was standardised in 1996 by the NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research) using a large sample of children across England and Wales. It is designed to be used with children aged 6 to 12. The reading test uses short illustrated passages of text, graded so that they gradually get more difficult, to check three aspects of a child's reading: accuracy, comprehension and rate (speed of reading). In previous pilots of the Letterbox Club, it was decided to use the 'accuracy' score as the main statistic for comparison.

For a typical child of any age, a standardised score of 100 in the Neale test is regarded as average; if the child makes normal progress over any period of time, their score will stay as 100, because it is adjusted for age. If a child aged 8 has a standardised score of 90, they are about a year behind expectations for their age and have a reading age of 7. If a child's standardised score goes up, it means they are making faster progress than average.

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". These two examples show you how they are linked:

Example One: Jamie

Jamie was 10 years 5 months old when he was first tested. His reading age was 8 years 11 months (so he was about 18 months behind the average for his age; his standardised reading score was 92).

A month after his last Letterbox parcel he was tested again. He was now 11 years 1 month old, and had a reading age of 10 years 1 month (so he was now only 12 months behind, with a standardised score of 95).

Jamie had made about 14 months progress in the 8 months between his two tests. He had gained 3 points on his standardised score.

Example Two: Leanne

Leanne was 8 years 6 months old, with a reading age of 7:10, and a standardised score of 94 when she was first tested.

A month after her last parcel, Leanne was 9 years 2 months old, with a reading age of 9:10 and a standardised score of 105.

Leanne had made about 16 months progress in 8 months between the two tests. She had gained 11 points on her standardized score.

Improvements in reading accuracy

Accuracy scores are the most useful ones to examine, as they are likely to be more reliable than the comprehension scores, over a time period of less than a year.

At the beginning of 2009 pilot, many of the Welsh cohort of children had lower reading scores for accuracy than would be expected for children of their age, with 57% of Year 3 and 47% of Year 5 children having scores below 90. In 2011 the equivalent figures - albeit drawn from a smaller sample - were 59% and 50% respectively. These figures may be compared to the profile of looked-after children in England. For example in 2008, 39% of English Year 3 Letterbox Club children and 44% of the Year 5s had scores of below 90. Across *all* children of any age group in the UK, this figure would be only 23%.

Some of the children in Wales were very good readers, but there were fewer children in this category than the national expectation: 9% of the Year 3s and 8% of the Year 5s in 2009 scored over 110 - with equivalent figures of 5% and 11% in 2011 - compared to 23% nationally.

If all the Letterbox Club children made 'average' progress over the period between their two tests (i.e. 8 months' progress in 8 months), they would have a "gain score" of zero. This would have been good, as this period included the summer holiday and a change of class, and the majority were normally making progress at a slower rate than average.

In fact, the 2009 cohort of children in Year 3/4 made a mean gain score of 4.4, and the children in Year 5/6 gained a mean of 3.5. Both gains are statistically significant (i.e. unlikely to have been caused by chance). In 2011, Y3 children made a mean gain of 2.5, and Y5 children gained on average 3.2, similar to the 2009 cohort. Across the children in the two age groups, the average gain was 4.0 points in 2009, and 2.8 in 2011, in their standardised scores.

The test results for accuracy in 2011 were received from a rather small sample of just 73 children from across Wales, so some caution needs to be taken in interpreting these results. However examination of the two sets of data (2009 and 2011) for reading accuracy does reveal a fairly similar *pattern* in terms of gain above that which would be predicted, which itself is broadly consistent with that of the England evaluations. Aggregating the two sets of data results in a mean gain of 3.4 for the combined sample (191 children), which compare with 4.4 for the English pilot in 2007 (with a sample of 316 children), and 3.9 in 2008 (with 449 children).

In summary, therefore, it appears that the sample of Welsh children have a similar profile to their English counterparts in terms of the positive gains in reading ability, but that these gains are of a slightly smaller magnitude, and start from a somewhat lower base.

Both the pattern and degree of change for this combined Welsh sample are illustrated in Figures 3 to 5.

Figure 3: Changes in reading score: All children (2009 + 2011)

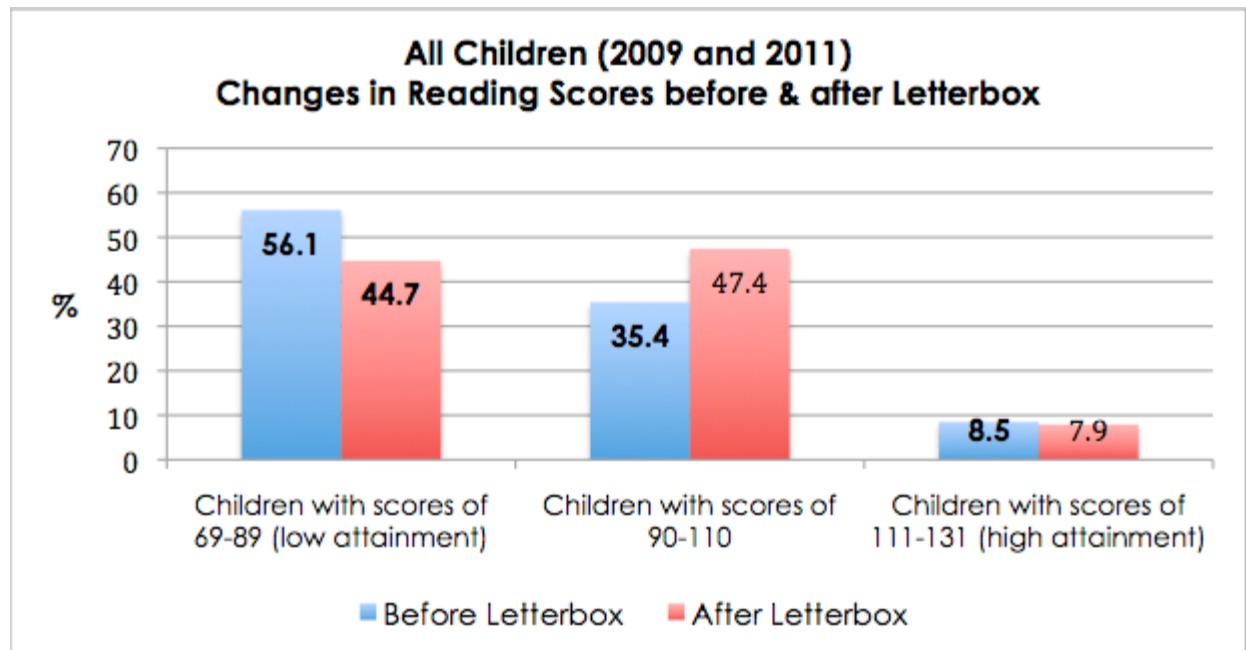


Figure 3 shows a pattern generally consistent with previous Letterbox Club evaluations, whereby there is a clear and positive shift in reading accuracy. This shift is especially notable in the decrease (11.4 percentage points) in the proportion of children in the low-attainment group and the increase (12) in the middle group.

Breaking this down into the two school year-groups, Figures 4 and 5 reveal that this general positive trend is evident for both Year 3 and Year 5 children.

Figure 4: Changes in reading score: Y3 children (2009 + 2011)

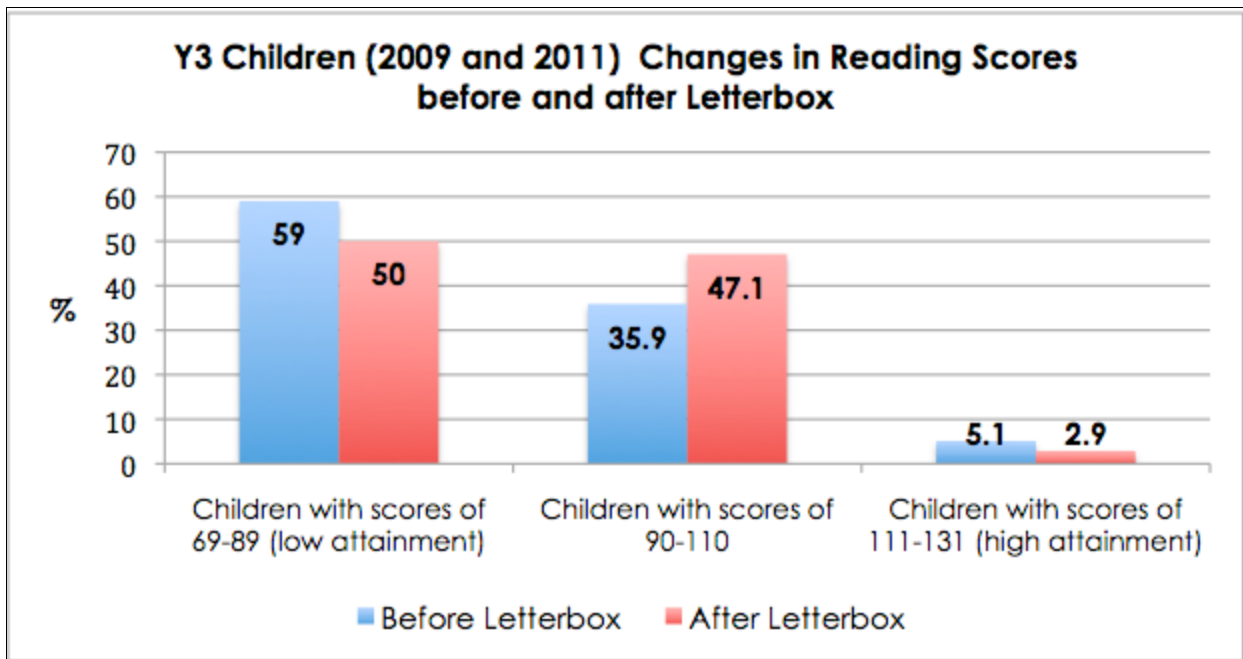
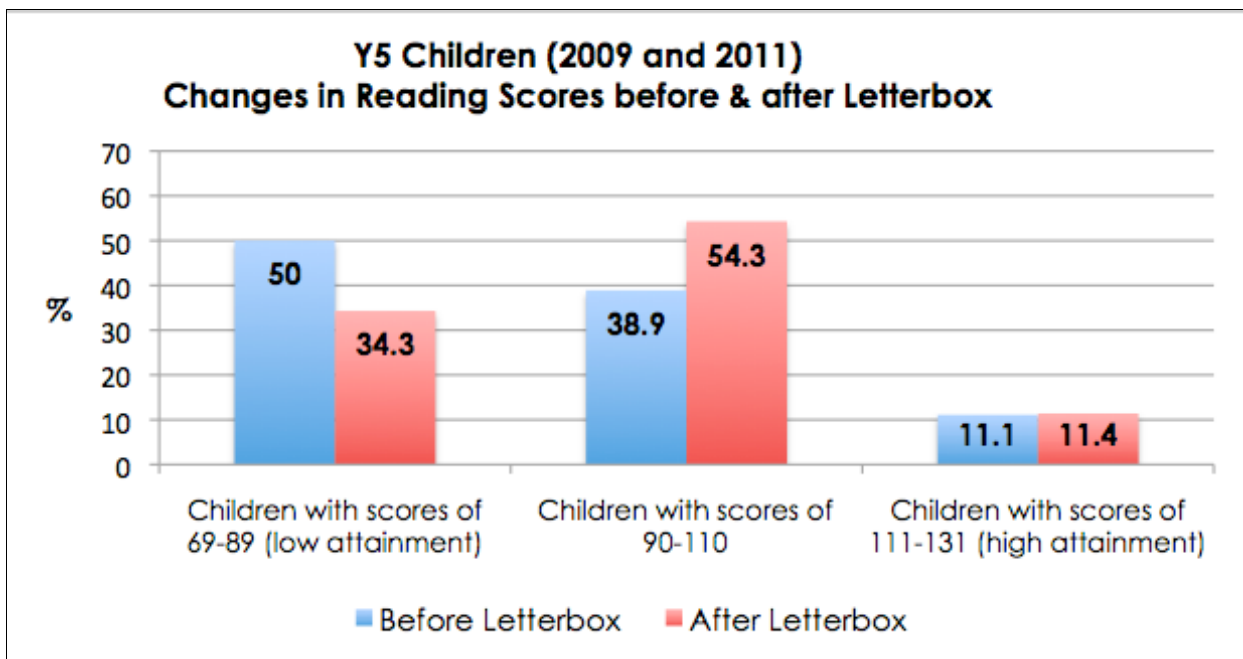


Figure 5: Changes in reading score: Y5 children (2009 + 2011)



While of course it would not be reasonable to attribute all of the children's progress to the Letterbox Club, the evidence does suggest that the project has acted as a catalyst for many children and their carers through providing additional support and encouragement to read. This is explored further, later in this report.

What did children and carers think of the parcels?

Children were sent a questionnaire to collect their views of the books and games in the parcels after each group of two or three parcels. The children were asked to rate each item according to whether they "Liked it", thought it "It was OK" or "Didn't use it". (We recognise that the latter category could include "Didn't like the look of it" or "Haven't used it yet", but we felt that it was important to keep the questionnaire as simple as possible.) There was also space for a comment on each item if wished. A space was also provided for carers to express their views of the Club in general as well as the books, games and other parcel items.

"Satisfaction rates"

The pilot project in England established a baseline 'satisfaction rate' which was also employed in the Welsh pilot of Letterbox Club. That is that across the 12 or 13 books for each age range, each child would find at least 8 or 9 books which they liked or thought were "OK", and only 3 or 4 that they did not immediately want to use: the target was a "satisfaction rate" of about 67%, and "Didn't use it" of 33% or less.

Books in Welsh

In the 2009 pilot the parcels sent to children in Wales included additional books in Welsh, chosen in conjunction with the Welsh Books Council. These were added to the parcels by staff in the local authorities, with the intention of providing a text at a suitable level of reading in Welsh for each child. The overall 'satisfaction rate' in the pilot study for these books (the proportion of children saying that they "liked it" or thought "it was OK") was below 5%.

Comments from both children and carers suggested two main reasons for this rather disappointing outcome; firstly, that many of the children in the sample were not Welsh speakers, meaning that the books had little relevance for them; secondly, that the content was not appropriately matched to the age group and/or language capability of those children who were Welsh speakers/readers.

There were, nevertheless, some positive comment about the Welsh language materials, and not only from native speaking children, as the following response illustrates:

"He is not a Welsh speaker so we were able to include the family members in the books in Welsh - he was thrilled to hear the stories in Welsh. Although he only has a few words of Welsh, these are increasing." (carer of Year 6 boy, Rhondda).

Another carer, of a Year 3/4 boy in Powys, wrote: *“He has taken the ones in Welsh to school as he has one-to-one Welsh lessons.”*

In some cases, the adults who might help the children with reading were not confident in Welsh themselves. *“As I cannot read Welsh I could be of no help”* (carer of Year 3/4 child, Powys). No aural or bilingual materials had been included.

In the light of these findings, a different approach was taken in which the books, chosen centrally by Letterbox Club selection panel in Wales, included a mix of those aiming at teaching vocabulary in a fun way (sticker books and lift the flap books, and snap cards), bilingual books, and provision of two books of the same story, one in Welsh and one in English. This proved to be a successful move, so that in 2010 overall satisfaction rates for Welsh books overall was around 85%, broadly in line with ratings for many of the English books. The same book selection was used as in 2011, and received similar high satisfaction rates. The books are listed on page 29.

For 2011, an attempt was made to find suitable CDs to include, to add an aural element to support children and foster carers whose spoken Welsh was not very strong, but nothing suitable was available. It would be useful to gather more information about levels of oral and written fluency in Welsh of both children and their foster carers, in order to guide the development of new materials to support them.

Favourite books in English

The Letterbox Club Book Selection Panel has used feedback from the children and carers' questionnaires each year, to check that the criteria the panel are using for selection are reasonable, and to help guide the choice of books for each successive year's parcels. A list of the contents of the Wales Blue and Red Parcels in 2009 and 2011 is shown on page 29.

Evidence from the questionnaires returned in both 2009 and 2011 showed high levels of satisfaction with the books in English that were included. For example in 2009, of the 140 children that responded (20% of all looked-after children in Wales), 89%, said that they “liked” the books or thought them “OK”, with just 11% reporting that they “didn't use” them. Similar levels of satisfaction were found in 2011, albeit drawing from a rather smaller sample.

Many children wrote comments about why they liked particular books, and told us whether they had been able to read them independently or if a family member had read the book to them. Children liked the element of surprise, not knowing what books they might get, and carers, too, commented that this

broadened the range of books their children used. The mixture of fiction, poetry, non-fiction and activity books was valued.

Children's comments on the questionnaire reveal both the popularity and educational value of the Letterbox Club reading materials. Reasons for wanting to read a book included having a good title and an attractive cover, while many children mentioned positive links with their personal experience: for example something they had seen on television or a film, a topic they were working on at school, or someone important to them had shown interest in the story or topic. Others simply commented on the pleasure and enjoyment the books brought them:

"I have a book full of pictures I have drawn and coloured. Amazing book to have" (Year 5 girl, Conwy; *How to Draw People*)

"It was funny because the teacher gets turned into a cat!" (Year 3 girl, Vale of Glamorgan: *Me and My Cat*)

Favourite books in 2009 for children in Year 3/4 in Wales included the *Animal Ultimate Sticker Book* (100% "satisfaction rating"), *Mustard, Custard, Grumble Belly and Gravy* (97%), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (97%), *Horrid Henry* (97%), the *Sticker Atlas of Britain and Northern Ireland* (95%), *Dinosaur* (94%) and *Me and my Cat* (94%).

In 2011, the most popular books were *Horrid Henry*, *How to Draw Pets*, *Me and My Cat* and *Puss in Boots*, all of which achieved a 100% maximum satisfaction rating. Five further books - *Human Body*, *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, *Bats*, and the *Animal Ultimate Sticker Book* - achieved satisfaction ratings of over 90%.

Least favourite in Year 3/4, but still scoring above the target of a 66% "satisfaction rating" were *Where's Wally? Wonder Book* (82%) and *Horton Hears a Who* (85%). Similarly, in 2011, no book was rated at lower than 86%.

Children in Year 5/6 in 2009 loved *Jeremy Strong's Laugh-Your-Socks-Off Joke Book* (96%), *Ancient Egypt Ultimate Sticker Book* (94%), *Where's Wally? Mini Edition* (90%), *Dr. Who Funfax* (90%), *Teach Your Granny to Text* (90%), *The Bee's Knees* (88%) and *See Inside Your Head* (87%).

2011 meanwhile saw six books with 100% satisfaction ratings, *Dinosaur Glow in the Dark Sticker Book*, *How to Draw people*, *DK Nature Encyclopaedia*, *See Inside Your Head* and *Where's Wally: In Hollywood*.

Least favourite, but still highly regarded, were *Hansel and Gretel* (76%), *Worry Website* (76%) and *Whizziwig and Whizziwig Returns* (74%). In 2011, as with books for Y3 children, all other English language books were rated at or above 85%.

Number games

As already noted, the maths games have also been well-received, with foster carers commenting that the provision of the games and activities had encouraged them to do more with their foster child. There was also evidence of brothers, sisters, grandparents, and social workers playing maths games with children, often because the child had asked them to play. Some carers reported children using the maths equipment provided in other ways – for example, using the pretend money to play shops.

The Maths games were inexpensively produced, and children (sometimes helped by foster carers) cut them out and made them themselves. While many foster carers commented that children usually enjoyed doing this, a few felt that a higher standard of production would help make the games more attractive. In response to this feedback, from 2011 each child was provided with two full colour games printed on sturdier card, a move which has been well received.

“The games are really fun for us. His favourite game is the bingo.” (carer of Year 3 boy, Bridgend).

Feeling special

Many carers said how important it was that the parcels were addressed to the children and came through the post over a sustained period of time. They had noticed the satisfaction that their children felt in “being remembered” and in being able to organise things for themselves – for example, making the games and deciding what to do with the materials they were sent. Children were excited at receiving a parcel, and most were keen to show others what they had.

“S got very excited when her parcels arrived, showed everyone the contents. She has a special box that she puts the contents in.” (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Merthyr Tydfil).

“L loved the arts and craft book – loved the CD. Wish we could have Letterbox forever –she looks forward to them arriving” (carer of Year 5 girl, Merthyr Tydfil).

“K loves to receive the parcels. She took a couple of books to school to show her teacher.” (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Cardiff).

"The Letterbox Club is great. You get all sorts of different books and it is a surprise when you open them. Please keep it going!" (carer of Year 5 girl, Conwy).

"I wish you could have seen his face light up when he came in from school and saw his parcel waiting for him to rip open – these parcels gave extreme and lasting pleasure." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Rhondda).

"Because they were delivered, it made him feel very special. A marvellous idea" (carer of Year 3 girl, Merthyr Tydfil).

"Brilliant, they loved getting parcels in the post in their own name, they've enjoyed everything and are used a lot." (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Conwy).

"He can't wait for his parcel every month and counts the days down." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Swansea).

It was important that children knew these were books that belonged to them, and that they could keep them. Many carers have commented that the Letterbox Club books were of much more interest to the children, than similar books from school or the library, or books that were already in the family home:

"D says if he was to become the Wizard of Oz he would grant his own wishes and send himself books!" (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Blaenau Gwent).

"We do have a lot of books, but I still do feel this Letterbox has encouraged S to be more interested in books." (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Merthyr Tydfil).

"Yes (we are doing more) because the 'work' of reading, geography etc is coming from someone else for us to share. Even though I provide lots of books, stickers etc she thought the Letterbox was all about her and was more enthusiastic." (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Cardiff).

Enjoying books and games together

Foster carers were asked on one set of questionnaires: "Do you think the Letterbox Club parcels have helped you to do more with this child?" and the response was almost unanimously positive from the 140 carers who replied.

"Do more? Without a doubt, could you please continue." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Bridgend).

"Do more? Yes. K likes to talk about the books she reads, so we discuss them together and she does ask about words she doesn't know. Sometimes we look up the meanings in the dictionary." (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Cardiff).

Many foster carers felt that receiving the Letterbox Club materials gave children the opportunity to form better relationships, because they were spending more time with others in a positive way.

"It was good to have one to one time with A." (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Conwy).

"We have found that A has communicated better with us as a result of these parcels because she would approach us if she failed to understand a word from the books. Thank you." (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Rhondda).

"The books and games are really fun for us... He enjoys me reading the books to him and then he tries to read them after me." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Bridgend).

"It has given us both quality time together. The books have made us laugh and giggle a lot!" (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Caerphilly).

"The games have been good and all the children joined in with them. The books were bright and colourful and did encourage/attract her." (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Merthyr Tydfil).

"C enjoyed the activity games and his cousins also played them with him." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Blaenau Gwent).

"A enjoyed taking these parcels to mum's." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Ceredigion).

There were a few children who said that they used the books but not the games, and some who used the games and stationery but not the books, but most children used all three types of items – and the variety this provided was appreciated.

"I thought all the items were good for the child and she has used every item and enjoyed them – so did I. I really enjoy listening to C reading the story, I found it has helped her with her reading, it has improved a lot." (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Blaenau Gwent).

"These parcels have been great fun both for myself and the child; once the parcel came, he couldn't wait for the next one, learning things without knowing he was. We have enjoyed them together." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Bridgend).

Children reading to others

It was encouraging to see how many children were keen to share their books with siblings and others in their families.

"He read this book a lot with his brother. C and brother had fun with this book." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Blaenau Gwent).

"He enjoyed telling the jokes" (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Cardiff, about the Jeremy Strong Joke book).

"T looks forward to reading the books; a friend is helping. It has encouraged T to read." (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Gwynedd).

"Excellent range of books and parcel contents, he really enjoyed these parcels very much. Whizziwig stories gave his reading confidence a good boost. He enjoyed telling us and friends the stories, which was excellent." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Rhondda).

"Lovely quality books. I have read some to D, he has read others to me." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Powys).

Listening to stories on CD

At least one parcel in each age range included a CD and book. The CDs were often used at bedtime or on car journeys, and many carers have commented that they had not previously thought of using audio stories with their foster child.

"She really enjoyed the money games and the CDs. She listened and listened to the CDs, especially Tracy Beaker. She is now reading a lot more." (carer of Year 3/4 girl, Rhondda).

"I enjoyed listening to the CD and using book." (Year 3/4 boy, Merthyr Tydfil).

"He enjoys listening to the CD and following in the book." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Gwynedd).

"The CD was great for all the family to listen to." (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Blaenau Gwent).

One carer pointed out that listening to the CDs had helped the child to read aloud more expressively: *"Her comprehension of what she is reading has really improved. Also, when she reads aloud she now puts feeling into it herself."* (carer of Year 5/6 girl, Bridgend).

The English pilot had shown that fewer children used the CDs than used the corresponding books, and this often seemed to be because they did not have easy access to a CD player. This was not investigated separately in Wales, but it would be worth examining in future, particularly if it were also possible to provide audio materials in Welsh.

Coping with difficult situations

A significant proportion of children in care will move placement during any year: at least 15% of the UK Letterbox Club members move at least once during the six months in which they receive the parcels. Local authorities needed to work hard to keep their Letterbox Club database up-to-date, so that the parcels followed the child if they moved. This was very important to many children.

Children also appreciated books that reflected their own unhappy experiences or that of people they knew. Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*, which describes how you feel when someone dies, but also offers a positive view of the future, was included with some more light-hearted books in a Year 5/6 parcel. One boy from Rhondda, aged 11, said he liked the book "because it taught what it would feel like to be sad" and that "it helped me with my feelings". Jacqueline Wilson's book *The Worry Website* received similar praise, because it gave children a chance to talk about problems that children might have:

"The worry website helped me to find positive things about my problems"
(Year 5/6 girl, Blaenau Gwent).

"I enjoyed that book because of the worries and everyone has worries." Year 5/6 girl, Cardiff).

Tracy Beaker was another thought-provoking choice:

"D says he hopes Tracy finds a real family like he has and he will be glad for Tracy." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Blaenau Gwent).

Enhancing children's learning

The questionnaires in both 2009 and 2011 provided qualitative evidence, which complemented the test results, indicating that children and carers recognised improvements in the children's interest and attainment in reading and number. Many children have increased fluency and engagement with reading, improved attitude and knowledge in mathematics, and gained enjoyment and appreciation of the factual material – particularly where it is combined with an activity element (e.g. stickers).

"I liked sticking the stickers and working out where it goes." Year 5/6 girl, Cardiff).

"I thought this book was very good because it helped me think what is actually inside my head. It was O.K. because it could help me a bit with school." (Year 5/6 boy, Swansea, talking about *See Inside Your Head!*).

Children enjoyed books at home, and also found links with their school work: the sticker atlas and other non-fiction titles were all commented upon in relation to school projects or work completed in the past.

"I loved this book because I love learning about Egypt." (Year 5/6 boy, Blaenau Gwent).

"His reading is far better than his writing and spelling but I do feel all have improved in 2009 and the parcels really contributed to this improvement and ongoing learning." (carer of Year 5/6 boy, Rhondda).

Carers' engagement with the project

Many carers expressed their own enjoyment with the parcels, as well as the children appreciating them. This had been one of the aims when the number games were chosen, and for the book selection panel for the Letterbox Club: if the foster carers found the books attractive, this could encourage them to take a more active part in encouraging the children to use them.

"We always do a lot of reading but the parcels made it really special." (carer of Year 3/4 boy, Rhondda).

As a result of receiving Letterbox Club parcels, it is hoped that many children (and foster carers) might become more active members of their local library, borrowing books and story CDs. Some foster carers have already encouraged children to do this and some carers asked for lists of further suggestions of books to be included in the packs. Some local authorities (including Bridgend, Conwy, Newport and Rhondda) included information about local libraries as an additional item in their Letterbox Club parcels in 2011, and further links with library services in Wales would be a useful development in the future.

Looking to the future

Continuing impact

In the pilot in England, seven children and their seven carers were interviewed six months after the children had received their last parcel, to find out what they thought about the Letterbox Club and to see whether they still used any of the things they had received. All seven children told the interviewer about their favourite books or games, which they still used. This ongoing impact of the programme was also evident in the pilot in Northern Ireland. Local authority co-ordinators in Wales have reported that the situation is similar in Wales, with children using and valuing their Letterbox Club books and games for many months after their last parcel is delivered.

Consolidating the provision

The number of children in Wales who have been enrolled in Letterbox Club has increased each year, and there are now children in all three current age groups: ages 7 to 9 (Blue), ages 9 to 11 (Red), and ages 11 to 13 (Green); and some children with moderate learning difficulties, who are receiving Letterbox Club Yellow.

A chart showing the numbers of children enrolled in 2011 in each local authority is shown on page 30, as Appendix 2.

Many looked-after children in Wales have now been members twice – in 2009 or 2010, and again in 2011 or 2012.

The funding agreement for 2012-13 is very welcome, as local authority staff can plan with greater certainty, and will be able to encourage foster carers and colleagues in complementary services (such as libraries) to make the most of the opportunities offered by the Letterbox Club in their area.

Extending provision to younger children

During 2013, Cardiff will be part of a group of five local authorities from Wales, Northern Ireland and England, in a pilot year of “Letterbox Orange”, aimed at children aged 5 to 7 and their foster families. This has been funded by the Siobhan Dowd Trust and Booktrust. Several local authorities in Wales have asked us to look at the possibility of starting the Letterbox Club with younger children, and this pilot will help us devise the most suitable materials to include.

Contact us

If you are interested in knowing more about Letterbox Club, please see the website: www.letterboxclub.org.uk or contact us at Booktrust, 45 East Hill, London SW18 2QZ

Our office is open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.
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Appendix One: Letterbox Club Parcel Contents, Wales 2011

Year 3/4 books in English (Letterbox Blue)

Scooby-Doo Search for Scooby Snacks (Ladybird)
Horrid Henry by Francesca Simon (Orion)
How to Draw Pets by Barbara Soloff Levy (Dover)
Me and My Cat? by Satoshi Kitamura (Random House)
Human Body (Dorling Kindersley)
The Story of Tracy Beaker (book) by Jacqueline Wilson (Random House)
The Story of Tracy Beaker (CD) read by Sandi Toksvig (AudioGo)
Sticker Atlas of Britain and Northern Ireland (Usborne)
Bats (Usborne)
Puss in Boots (Ladybird)
Animal Ultimate Sticker Book (Dorling Kindersley)
Where's Wally? by Martin Handford (Walker)
Batpants! by Jeremy Strong (Puffin)
Mustard, Custard, Grumble Belly and Gravy (book/CD) by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake
Oliver Twist (Usborne) retold by Mary Sebag-Montefiore, illustrated by Barry Ablett

Year 5/6 books in English (Letterbox Red)

Dinosaur Glow-in-the-Dark Sticker Book (Dorling Kindersley)
The Worry Website (book/CD) by Jacqueline Wilson (Random House)
How to Draw People by Barbara Soloff Levy (Dover)
The Borrowers (book) by Mary Norton (Puffin)
The Borrowers (CD) read by Samantha Bond (Puffin)
DK Nature Encyclopedia (Dorling Kindersley)
The Bee's Knees by Roger McGough (Puffin)
Michael Rosen's Sad Book by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake (Walker)
Starring Tracy Beaker (book) by Jacqueline Wilson (Random House)
Starring Tracy Beaker (CD) read by Dani Harmer (AudioGo)
See Inside Your Head by Alex Frith and Colin King (Usborne)
Where's Wally? In Hollywood by Martin Handford (Walker)
Hansel and Gretel (Ladybird)
Sticker Atlas of the World (Usborne)
Doctor Who Official Annual 2012 (BBC)

Year 3/4 books in Welsh (Letterbox Blue)

First Picture Welsh A lift-the-flap book to help with learning Welsh

Yn Y Wlad Bilingual Welsh and English, giving a view of the country

Snap in Welsh Card game with everyday objects labelled in Welsh

Caneuon a Symudiadau Lyrics of popular Welsh children's songs

Y Can Gair Cyntaf Bilingual 'First 100 Welsh Words' sticker book

O Diolch Nain! / Cold Jac Welsh and English editions of the same story

Hugan Fach Goch / Little Red Riding Hood Bilingual traditional tale

Year 5/6 books in Welsh (Letterbox Red)

Cymraeg mewn lluniau / First Picture Welsh A lift-the-flap book to help with learning Welsh (also included in the Blue selection)

Yn Y Dref / In the Town Bilingual view of life in the town

Dot I Ddot Dot-to-dot activity books on dinosaur or nature themes.

Ble Mae e, Jac? / It's gone, Jac! Welsh and English editions of the same story

Star in the Custard A book of poems set in Wales; in English

Y Feipen Enfawr / The Gigantic Turnip Welsh and English editions of the same story

Maths Games, Blue and Red parcels:

(Games sent depend on child's level of attainment)

- **Parcel One:**
£30 game or £100 game
- **Parcel Two:**
One to Nine Bingo and Tens and Teens Bingo or Times Tables Bingo and One Hundred Bingo
- **Parcel Three:**
Counting Cats game and Sums which make 10 or Calculator Race and Rough Total game
- **Parcel Four:**

- Make 5 game and Fifty Pence Game or Eighteens game and 999 game
- **Parcel Five:**
Add or Take Away game and Elevens game or What's Missing? and Forty Nine game
- **Parcel Six:**
£20 game and £50 game or £500 game and £600 game

Stationery and other items

- Exercise books (one in each parcel)
- Pencil case
- Scissors
- Handwriting pen
- Zip top wallet (one in each parcel)
- Felt pens (set of 12)
- Pencil and rubber
- Pencil sharpener
- Calculator
- Blue and black biros
- Ruler
- Highlighter pen
- Bags of plastic £1 and £2 coins
- Token £5, £10 and £50 notes
- Dice and counters
- Sticky notes
- Letter from Jacqueline Wilson
- Letter from Michael Rosen

Appendix Two

Number of children in Letterbox Club in each Local Authority in Wales in 2011

Local Authority	Letterbox Club			
	Blue	Red	Yellow	Green
1. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council	11	5	5	5
2. Bridgend County Borough Council	22	20	7	18
3. Caerphilly County Borough Council	10	14	1	0
4. Cardiff County Council - 2010 parcels	30	35	0	65
5. Carmarthenshire County Council	15	17	4	0
6. Ceredigion County Council	3	4	3	0
7. Conwy County Council	13	15	3	9
8. Denbighshire County Council	10	12	1	11
9. Flintshire County Council	18	11	4	0
10. Gwynedd County Council	6	6	2	6
11. Isle of Anglesey County Council	7	7	0	0
12. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council	8	10	6	15
13. Monmouthshire County Council	2	2	0	6
14. Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council	11	11	5	12
15. Newport City Council	15	18	4	18
16. Pembrokeshire County Council	7	7	7	10
17. Powys County Council	8	15	2	0
18. Rhondda Cynon Taff	31	33	5	0
19. Swansea City and Borough Council	57	50	20	78
20. Torfaen County Borough Council	17	14	3	16
21. Vale of Glamorgan Council	8	14	5	15
22. Wrexham County Borough Council	25	22	6	30
Totals	305	307	94	249

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