

PlayTalkRead Annual Report



April 2025-March 2026

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PlayTalkRead (PTR)

A national mobile programme under the banner of the Scottish Government's Parent Club initiative. Through an extensive and practical programme of delivery, PTR engages directly with families utilising our attractive bespoke vehicles and skilled play practitioners. We demonstrate and deliver key messages on the benefits of positive engagement to support children's development through playing, talking and reading together and provide a host of ideas for low cost play at home.



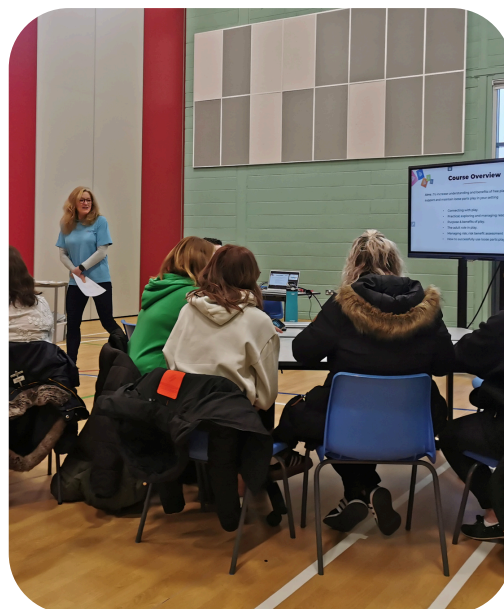
Pathways Through Play (Pathways)

An extension of PlayTalkRead providing play and storytelling sessions with a focus on early speech, language and communication. Pathways aim is to promote the importance of the home learning environment for early language development. Our play and storytelling sessions are delivered in Early Learning and Childcare settings (ELC's), Family Learning Centres, libraries and community based venues in partnership with family support services such as Family Nurse Partnership and Home-Start.



Smart Play Network

The national membership play organisation supporting a wide range of play settings across Scotland from local toy libraries to regional play associations. We have delivered the PlayTalkRead programme since 2017.



Scottish Government Policy and Priorities

The PlayTalkRead programme supports Scottish Government priorities in early years, education, health, and tackling inequality. Specifically, it aligns with national strategies that focus on giving every child the best start in life, improving early speech, language and communication development, reducing inequalities, and strengthening family and community support. This year, we have worked with families and practitioners in all of Scotland's 32 local authorities prioritising our delivery with key partners who work with families most in need and in areas where early intervention can have the biggest impact. We have worked with a wide network of partner organisations, and together with our training and workshop delivery, help drive the growth of Early Child Development while creating lasting benefits that go beyond the immediate. Throughout, we have supported the following Scottish Government policy areas across the country.

Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan

Named as a key national initiative supporting children's early speech, language and communication development:

"Our transformational early years policies, including the expansion of funded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours per year, the Family Nurse Partnership, Universal Health Visiting Pathway, Bookbug, PlayTalkRead and Scotland's Baby Box, give children the best possible start in life and provide the opportunity to support children's early SLC development."

Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Smart Play Network is the play sector representative for the Scottish Government's Early Childhood Development Guiding Coalition tasked with developing a programme of Transformational Change focused on early child development from pre-birth to three.

Bringing Hope, Building Futures; Tackling Child Poverty Plan

Our priority target groups are families that fall within the Scottish Government's definition of "vulnerable" children and young people and the 6 priority family types identified in the Bringing Hope, Building Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-2031.

/continued

Scotland's Play Vision Statement and Action Plan

PlayTalkRead supports learning and development in the home environment, giving parents the confidence to play, talk and read with their children from birth. We offer free, accessible play opportunities for families in Scotland and form part of the Play Vision Strategy Action plan implementation group.

"To support the promotion of free, accessible opportunities for play the Scottish Government is funding the national universal programme PlayTalkRead, which is delivered by Smart Play Network. PlayTalkRead promotes the importance of the home learning environment for early language development and delivers key messages to parents and carers about playing, talking, and reading with their child from birth."

National Outcomes

As a national programme, we reach communities across all 32 local authorities including the Highlands and Islands. We can demonstrate support for the majority of Scotland's 11 National Outcomes. However, the three key National Outcomes directly supported by our work are:

- **Children and Young People** – We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential.
- **Communities** – We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe.
- **Education** – We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society.

Supporting Dads With Play

We are part of a Scottish Government working group (alongside Scottish Book Trust and Fathers Network Scotland) tasked with increasing opportunities for Dad's to play with their children following a marked decline. This work aligns with wider Scottish Government priorities: Early Child Development; Strengthening Parent Club Resources and Support for the Early Years (SPARSEY); the Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025 –2030.

Some Collaboration Highlights



Delivering sessions with FNP teams - Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Highlands, Dumfries & Galloway, Fife, North Lanarkshire and Grampian.



Partnering with Edinburgh Pre-school under 5's Vaccination team autumn drop-in venues created opportunities to increase the take up of nasal spray for 2-5 yr olds and share health information with hard to reach families across the city.



National Early Language and Communication Team (NELC) support with continuity of messaging, including review of resources and literature



Pathways Through Play workshops for practitioners supporting early learning through play and storytelling at Fife College and West Lothian College.



Moray and Western Isles Equity and Excellence Leads collaboration for In-service staff training days.



Home-Start Edinburgh home visit volunteer pilot project



Wonderful World/Pathways Through Play/Western Isles Gaelic language celebration



Community outreach sessions supporting especially vulnerable families through new partnerships with both East Dunbartonshire House Project (care experienced young mums) and with Barnardos projects in 3 Local Authorities - Threads (Renfrewshire), Nurture (Inverclyde), Equally Safe (Falkirk)



Represent PTR/SPN/Play on the National Speech, Language and Communication Stakeholder Reference Group



We ran a successful pilot project between Pathways and Scottish Book Trust in Dumfries & Galloway which will inform further support of the gifting of the Explorer bags.

Programme Outcomes

Parents increase their confidence to Play, Talk and Read more with their children

Parents have increased their confidence to play, talk, sing, and read with their children, strengthening secure attachments and relationships. Through our simple, low-cost activities, take-home resources, and collaboration with practitioners and partners, we have created lasting change—empowering families to engage at home, reduce barriers to play, and embed playing, talking and reading in their everyday lives.

Increased awareness and engagement with parent hub, services, and online resources

We promoted Parent Club, Scottish Government, and Local Authority Early Years initiatives across all 32 local authorities through nationwide tours, social media, and partnerships. Our branded vehicles served as mobile 'billboards' and engagement hubs, sharing key messages, distributing resources, and modelling positive parent-child interaction—ensuring support reaches families who need it most.

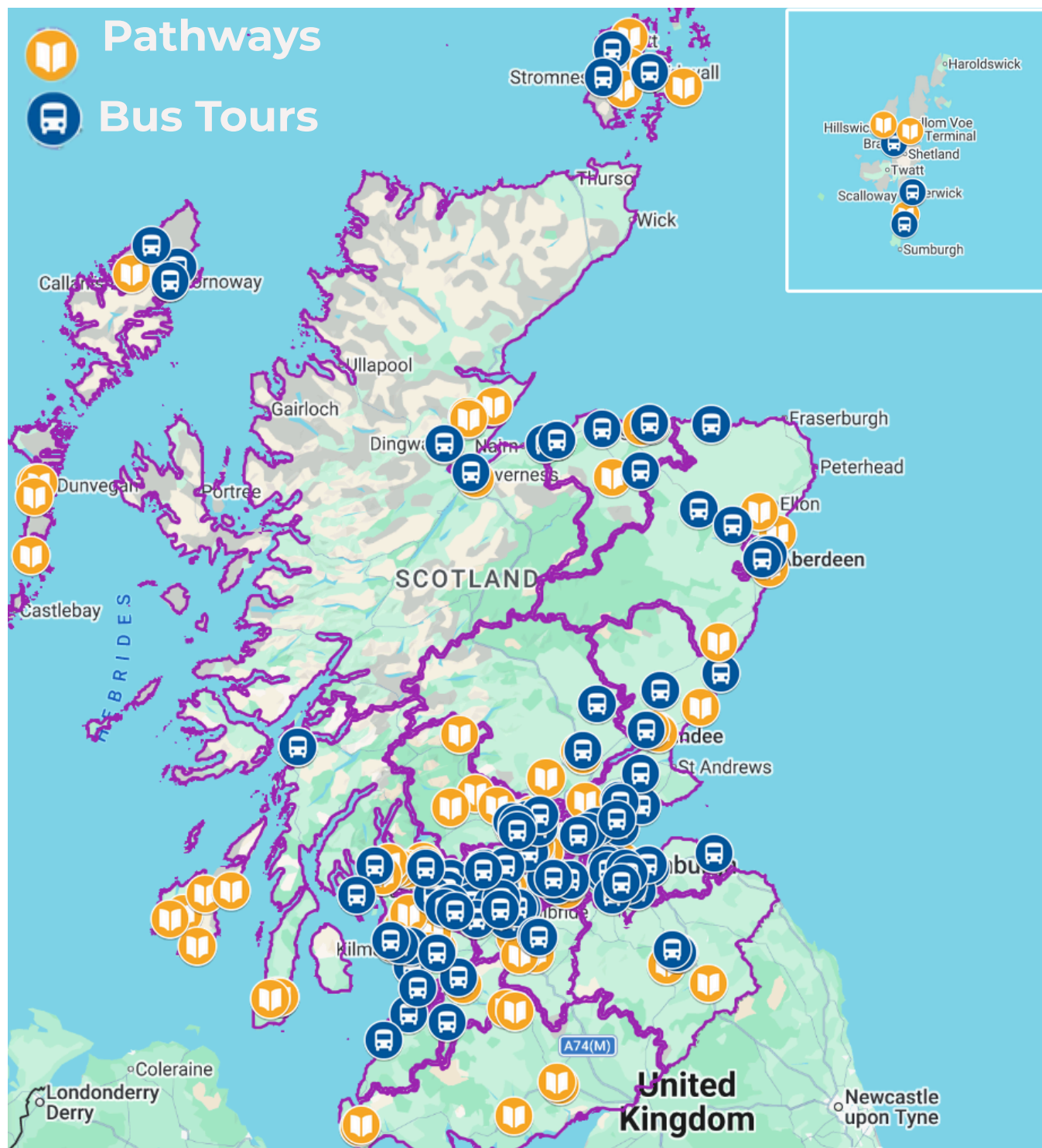
Children's health, wellbeing and development is supported and strengthened

Children's health, wellbeing, and development has been strengthened through early intervention, socialisation, and parental engagement in play, talk, and reading. Our accessible activities, parental reassurance, and peer networks empowered families to build secure relationships, navigate challenges, and sustain positive engagement at home with ongoing partner support.

Capacity of Families, Partners and Policy Makers is increased

PlayTalkRead has built sustainability by strengthening the capacity of families, partners, and policymakers. Through face-to-face engagement and resources, we have empowered parents to support their child's development, enhanced community connections, equipped practitioners with tools and confidence, and fed lived experiences into policy to ensure lasting impact.

Delivery across all 32 Local Authorities



Miles Travelled

42641Equivalent to 6.5 Trips
around the moon!

Overview

PlayTalkRead Tours & Pathways Combined

Sessions in 32
Local Authorities

945

Families Engaged

8170

Packs Delivered

10520

Children at
Sessions

12070

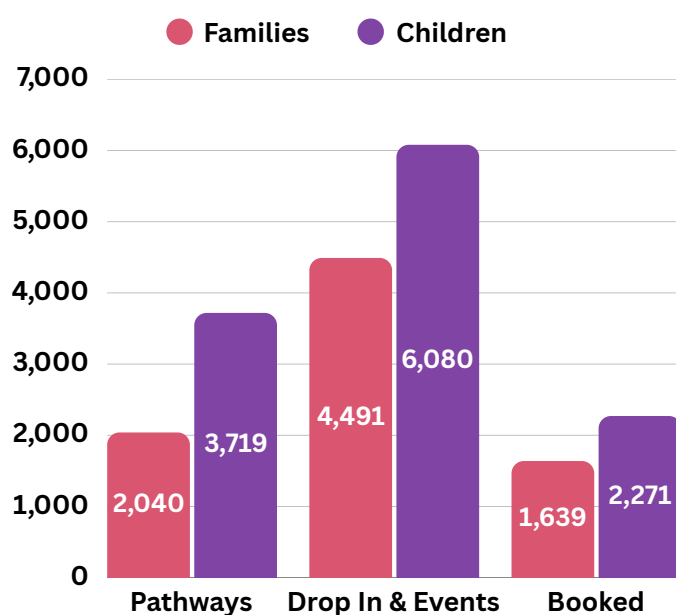
Practitioners
worked with

1170

Parents at
Sessions

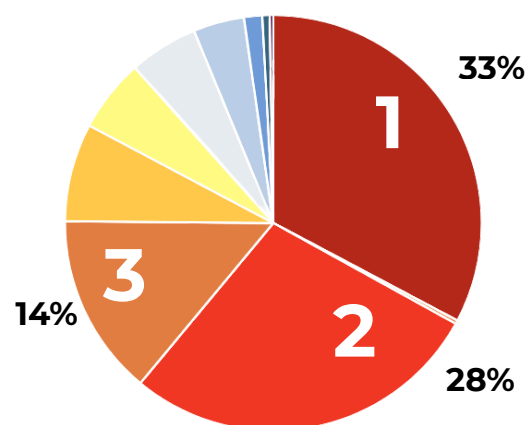
9489

Reference Numbers by Project



Delivery by Areas of Multiple Deprivation

All Sessions PTR & Pathways



75% of all Delivery was in SIMD areas 1-3

PlayTalkRead Tours

Benji (Drop in Delivery)

Benji is our double decker bus and is eye catching for adults and children alike. Benji parks in higher footfall areas within communities and attends community partnership events. Sessions on Benji tend to be a drop-in format for families which lends itself to parents who may struggle to book ahead or need flexibility over the time spent onboard. Benji allows for an introduction to group settings for those who may lack confidence in a more structured environment.



"Thanks for making my son feel included and able to stay and play when we visited on Wednesday. He was struggling with the noise and different environment, he has autism, but the team offered him ear defenders and he was then able to participate and enjoyed his time on the bus with his sister, thanks again." - Parent, Edinburgh

Bonnie (Booked sessions)

Bonnie is our bespoke vehicle with an extendable pod to increase floor capacity. Bonnie is able to travel to more rural areas and smaller partner venues which allows for a large geographical reach. Bonnie offers up to 4 families at a time the opportunity to enjoy 50 minutes of Pathways delivery onboard through the use of pre-booked tickets. We also use Bonnie for specialist tailored outreach sessions with especially vulnerable families working with our partner agencies.



"What a fabulous resource! Great opportunities for children and their families to learn and play together provided by two highly motivated people! The bus is kitted out so creatively and gave me some simple ideas to try at home. Thank you ... and look forward to seeing you next time !!" - Parent, East Ayrshire

Planning a Tour

1



Identify Local Authority & Chosen Vehicle

Localities within each LA are selected using SIMD data, as well as Council reports that highlight levels of child poverty using more recent data. Each of our vehicles lend themselves to different types of delivery, as a result, this influences our decision to either use Benji for highly populated areas, as well as balancing where Bonnie's more targetted approach may lend itself better to the level of need.

2



Confirm Parking Venues

Parking is priority one, our extensive contact list means we have a variety of parking availability that aligns with the needs of either vehicle. Authorisation is sought from Local Council Parking & Roads Departments, Supermarkets, Libraries, as well as independent third party organisations to guarantee a suitable space for our vehicle, as well as the families attending. Where possible, parking venues are selected where there are services that support families, and may have a community pantry/foodbank/cafe to diversify access to additional resources.

3



Link In With Local Charities & Organisations

Once parking is confirmed, contact is then made with any services operating in the wider local area such as Home-Start, Aberlour Children's Charity, Children First, Action for Children etc to highlight whether closed sessions would be of benefit - e.g 10am-1pm being reserved for families supported by Social Work. This helps to further prioritise space on our vehicles for families who may be unlikely to attend without the reassurance from a support worker, or may find a busy Benji too overwhelming. Feedback tells us that this is well received and has encouraged families to come along themselves the next time we're in the area.

4



Marketing Launch

The launch of our marketing happens in two phases:

Two weeks before the tour is scheduled to take place, posters & links are sent to our partners to prioritise sessions for families receiving support from the venue, and any intensive family support services. This is to guarantee the team are engaging with families that fall within the 6 priority family groups as highlighted by the Scottish Governments Tackling Child Poverty Agenda. Following this, the marketing is then published to the Play with PTR Facebook page the week prior, where families can book onto remaining booked sessions, or come along to the confirmed drop-in times.

Reaching Families on Tour

Partnership

We partnered with over 135 organisations & local groups this year to connect with more families in key areas. These partners help us reach those that need us most, and connect with isolated & vulnerable groups

135+

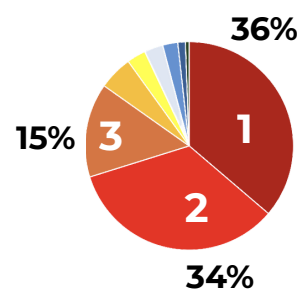
Signposting

Over 60% of bookings for booked sessions came from families signposted by our local partners. These early private booking periods allowed them time to contact & register families in advance of the social media launch.

60%

Areas of Deprivation

85% of tour delivery took place in or were immediately accessible to SIMD areas 1-3 (within a few minutes walk). Many of the higher SIMD areas were in isolated communities, such as the Hebrides, Shetland, & Orkney.



Social Media

Page Reach 820,000

Page Visits 65,000

Post Views 2,600,000

Engagement 12,500

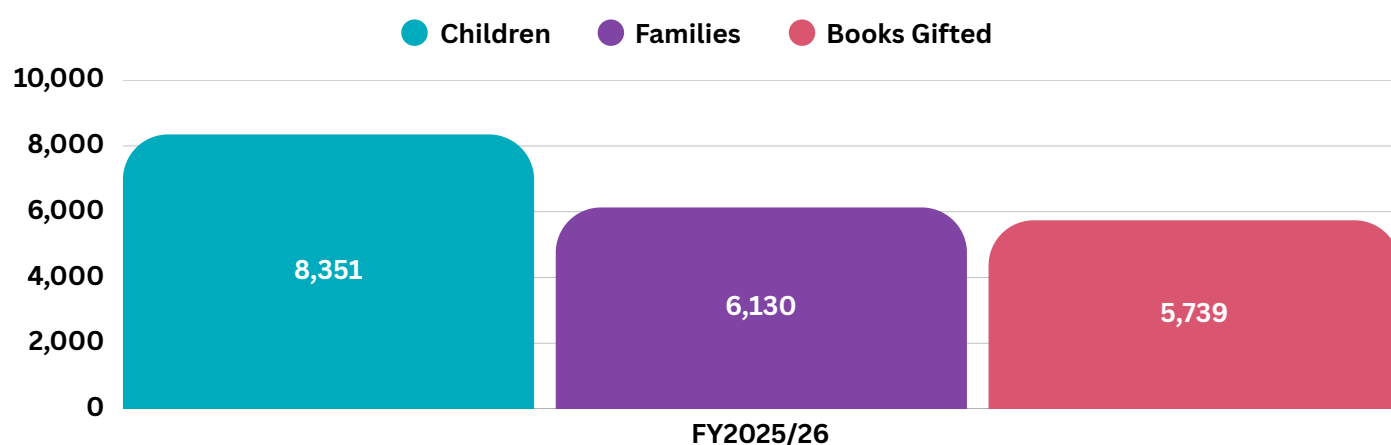
New Follows 3,500 (+31%)

Link Clicks 3,600

Approximately 40% of booked session attendance comes from social media. Drop in sessions receive even more digital attention, with Benji drawing hundreds of tags and shares for areas like Fife and the Lanarkshires.

This year we engaged with more families in areas of multiple deprivation by working with partners with strong community links. Through these partnerships, we were able to connect with harder to reach families who we might otherwise miss via our own social media and messaging. The combination of familiar community settings and our approach and vehicles, offered the security and confidence needed for families to try something new and attend our sessions. Feedback from practitioners indicated our sessions have created opportunities for families to bond together and that they left with ideas for nurturing their child's development and wellbeing through low cost and accessible play.

PlayTalkRead Tours Statistics



Feedback from Parents

- Parents reporting enjoying the book with their child
- Parents reporting they felt signposted to additional resources
- Parents reporting exploring activity book ideas



“Staff were wonderful, the activities were appropriate and held onto my child’s interest well and has given me ideas on how else to play and use every day things to play “

“We will make better time for interactive play”

Tour Gallery



Pathways Overview

Early Learning Centres

Our PTP Early Years sessions take place in ELCs across Scotland. We work closely with our partners to meet the individual needs of each setting, while providing family play sessions that promote the importance of the home learning environment for early language development and deliver key messages to parents and carers about playing, talking and reading with their child from birth.

This year PTP visited 66 settings, working with 2,358 children. This year we were able to visit every ELC on Islay as part of our Argyll and Bute visit. Parents who came along to these sessions said "There is no library on Islay so things like this are so great-going to really love reading the book at home".

"It was especially lovely to see one of the parents (a dad), who doesn't particularly engage with ELC events, and whom we weren't expecting to attend, participate in all activities with his daughter. Afterwards he told us it had been really great and thanked us for asking him along."

Community Outreach

Our community sessions are focused on the needs of our partners as often they take place with already established groups, for example a toddler group run by a local charity. These community sessions allow us to reach families that perhaps would not feel comfortable coming along to one of our public sessions, or those families whose children are not yet in nursery. These sessions also allow us to work closely with practitioners to support them deliver play sessions that make language learning fun, and model to parents and carers how books can be used in engaging and creative ways.

This year PTP worked with 46 community groups, working with 953 children. One of our main community partnerships is with Home-Start. One parent who attended a Home-Start Orkney session with us said "Much appreciated the offer to be included in the small group with Home-Start as I'm not confident to book and go on my own."

"Excellent storytelling. At home we just "read" a book. This just shows how good making it interactive is. Will definitely give more thought to how we tell stories in the future."

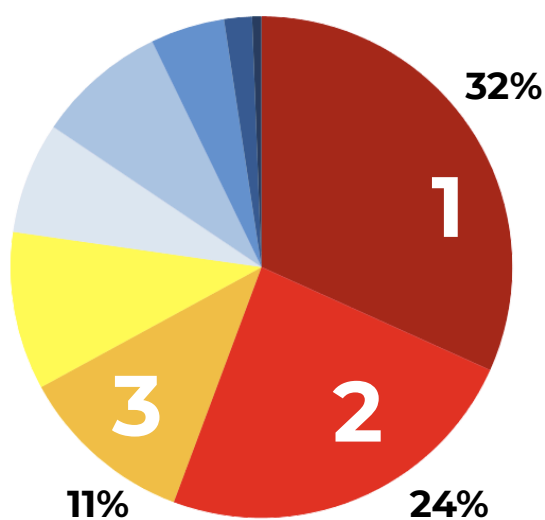
Pathways Deliverables

Early Years sessions **302**Packs Shared **3549**Community sessions **153**Partnerships **140**Events & Workshops **19**Partner resource packs **1150**

- Families that said we gave them new ideas on activities to do with their children
- Families felt more confident about their child's speech, language, and communication development
- Partners who said that they would be interested in a staff training session

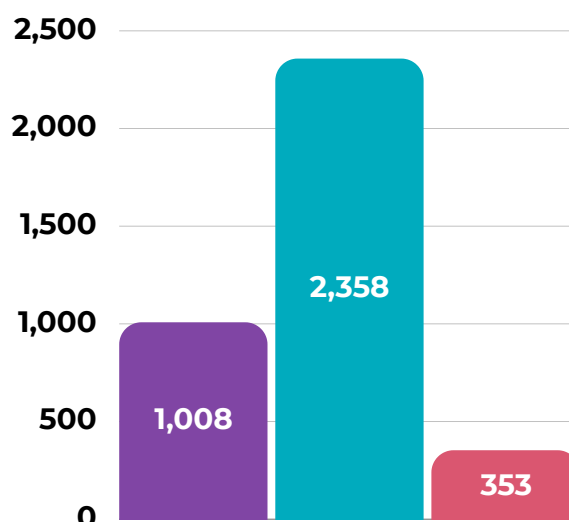


% of Delivery by
SIMD



Children

- Outreach & Community Settings
- Early Years Settings
- Events



Training workshops/legacy

Early Learning Centre Training (ELC's)

Throughout our work with ELC's it has been highlighted to us that many practitioners do not feel confident in reading aloud, bringing books to life and incorporating play to support speech, language and communication.

Over the past year we have delivered workshops to support practitioners and build their confidence to do this across Scotland. The majority of workshops were delivered as part of staff training and development on in-service days, notably in the Western Isles and Moray Council areas. These highly successful workshops added an opportunity to share ideas around interactive storytelling and play activities and supported practitioners to look at creative ways to improve parental engagement and involvement.

19
Workshops

410
Practitioners

99%

Felt more confident
using interactive
reading approaches

100%

Of participants said training provided them with
new play and storytelling ideas

College students

We continued to provide workshops for childcare students at Fife College, and established a strong partnership with West Lothian College. This included workshops and participation in new Pathways initiatives, including our Wonderful World book celebration. This year students shared a highlight with us around their work to create outdoor play opportunities in partnership with local ELC's



"Your team has upskilled our staff to such a high standard that they now confidently lead our own monthly Stay and Play sessions for children and families. These sessions begin and end with a Bookbug session, with a range of engaging learning stations in between, allowing families to explore how rich learning opportunities can be created through everyday resources... Pathways Through Play is now fully embedded within the culture and ethos of our centre, and we are incredibly grateful for the role your team has played in that journey."

Pathways Spotlight 1

Wonderful World

To celebrate 4 years of PTP we chose the book 'What a Wonderful World' illustrated by Tim Hopgood, as a theme. We collaborated with previous settings who participated in special events to bring children and families together throughout February and March. The book, full of positive messages and vibrant colour, is based on the well known song by Louis Armstrong. This familiar and uplifting text, empowered practitioners to confidently deliver engaging sessions, fostering strong connections between children, families, and learning environments.

In the Western Isles, we engaged with all early years settings and sourced and gifted Gaelic versions of the book to support Gaelic language week in February. Elaine, a Gaelic Early Years Curriculum Teacher, highlighted the impact the book has had in settings:

“Seeing our young learners so confidently and joyfully using this resource has been incredibly encouraging and has supported practitioners to create rich language environments where Gaelic feels natural, playful and very much part of our culture and everyday life. The children have been very engaged with the message of the story, and the gifting of the book has created very positive early experiences of Gaelic for our young learners.”

In March, 13 local authorities joined in with Wonderful World, with each setting receiving resources and sessions plans for their delivery including books to gift to what totalled **920** participants for continued use in the home. Feedback highlighted increased practitioner confidence, enriched language experiences, and high levels of child engagement, with widespread community involvement demonstrated through strong participation and shared celebrations on social media.



Pathways Spotlight 2

Family Nurse Partnership

Our partnership with Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) teams across Scotland was once again strengthened, providing FNP practitioners with the tools to offer more targeted support for families who may feel isolated or excluded from community groups. During our workshops for FNP practitioners, we offered an increased focus how books and play resources are gifted to each family and the simple activities that they could demonstrate to encourage play and reading in the home environment.

This year we also used our vehicles to support the introduction of group activities for FNP clients. By using our vehicles as welcoming, safe spaces, we created accessible opportunities for parents and babies to experience the benefits of shared play, books, and social interaction. These bespoke sessions on both Benji and Bonnie, plus additional outreach sessions in community settings, provided a gentle and effective introduction to group participation, building confidence among parents and positive early experiences for their children, particularly sharing shared experience with other families and the joy of having fun with books.

When we asked for feedback from one FNP team we were told that;

“The client we had signed up for a 1:1 to session [on Bonnie] has never attended any sort of club or group for her baby and she attend one of these sessions and loved it. The nurse has mentioned how proud she was that the client attended”



PTR Team Insights

"The Lady that ran the toddler group came to ask for one bag as she was feeling inspired after seeing the story session on Benji. She shared her concern of not knowing whether children are being read to at home, so she is going to add the story to her session & knows the idea of the booklet will help her come up with more ideas."



"We witness so many little breakthroughs. Recently, a Mum attended a session with her two wee girls, she let us know early on that both her girls have autism and was almost apologetic in saying that they likely wouldn't focus very well. She was so pleasantly surprised to see both girls listening attentively to the story and engaging throughout the session with all the activities. As they left Mum seemed genuinely inspired to recreate the activities at home and was so proud of how well her girls had participated."

"Mum was lacking in confidence about her child's ability to participate. She said quite quickly into the session that her daughter "doesn't really speak" however she said a few words to the surprise of everyone and was relaxed, happy and laughing. This interaction is a great example where a different environment can help a child do something they might not do elsewhere thereby positively changing the expectations of family members."

What's Next: 2026 - 2027



PEEP/PTR prison pilot - Preparatory work has been completed to support children and families where the male parent is in the care of Sodexo/SPS. Each participating individual and family is being gifted books and resources that will be used at home and at PEEP sessions in prison, to connect each dad to the storytelling and play experience taking place in their absence. This is being trialed at HMP Addiewell over the next 3 months, with 40 families. We hope to roll this out to HMP Kilmarnock subsequently.



Phoenix Futures - We are ready to begin work with Phoenix Futures delivering both workshops for therapeutic staff and sessions for families staying at Harper House - a specialist whole family service offering safe, structured support to address drug and/or alcohol use and improve mental health and quality of life.



Pre-birth parental engagement - We are keen to reach parents before the birth of their baby and we will engage with services which support families through pregnancy, including Barnardo's and FNP, with plans to extend this reach throughout the year ahead.



Bookbug (Scottish Book Trust) - Following a successful pilot project in D&G, we will continue to support the gifting of Explorer Bags. We know that vulnerable families value direct contact with SBT practitioners to make best use of the resource, therefore we support the staff team and provide the activity ideas to complement the theme of the book.



NHS vaccination teams - Bringing Benji to drop-in preschool autumn flu clinics to encourage families of under 5's to access health information and result in higher take up from hard to reach families in Edinburgh, we hope to include all Lothians this year.



Collaboration:

- Partnering with Local Authority Whole Family Wellbeing teams to support tour locations and families
- Chatting Together project with NELC team
- Small Test of Change project supported by CYPIC
- Participation in Supporting Dads with Play Working Group with Scot Gov Early Years team, SBT and Fathers Network Scotland



Crumpet and Flapjack!

Very exciting and coming soon, our very own story book publication supporting early speech and language development written and illustrated in house.