

**Under strict embargo until 00.01 on Wednesday 17 January 2024**

## **CHILDREN'S LAUREATES UNITE WITH URGENT CALL ON RISHI SUNAK FOR NATIONAL INVESTMENT IN EARLY YEARS READING**

Read the Children's Laureates Open Letter to Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer [here](#)  
[booktrust.org.uk](http://booktrust.org.uk) | #ReadingTogether

*'For our children and for us, reading is the great pathway to knowledge and understanding and empathy. We know it to be deeply enriching and fulfilling. This path can take us on a lifelong journey, as new horizons, new possibilities and new notions open up before us. Books are the good companions who help us on our way, that open eyes and hearts and minds, that help us through good times and bad, help us understand ourselves and others, and the world about us. They provoke, and challenge and excite and comfort us.*

*But we also know that sadly in this country there are still millions of young children who never have the opportunity of finding this pathway. We know, that the earlier we develop the joy and fun of reading in our children, the more likely it is that they will reap the rewards of the fulfilling education they all deserve.*

*And we know that those children who come from disadvantaged homes are the most likely never to discover the joys and benefits of being readers, of loving books, of fulfilling their aspirations in life, of developing their talents. These are also the most likely children to be suffering from mental health issues, from lack of self-worth and from family problems at home. These are the very children who most need to find the pathway to fulfilment and achievement that books can bring.*

*We are the storytellers, the parents, the families, the teachers, the librarians, the publishers and booksellers, the society, who can help make this happen, at home, at school, in the library, in the hospital, wherever. We can help transform the lives of children everywhere. But we need the Government to lead the way.*

*So, I am writing to the Government to ask for their commitment in helping all families – whatever their circumstances or challenges – become a reading family.*

*Let's do it. Let's do it for our children.'*

**Sir Michael Morpurgo, President of BookTrust and former Children's Laureate**

**London, 17 January 2024:** The President of BookTrust, former Waterstones Children's Laureate and beloved author, Sir Michael Morpurgo OBE, together with the current Children's Laureate, Joseph Coelho, and every single Children's Laureate from the past 25 years, have called on the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to commit to a long-term investment in books and reading for children under seven.

In an unprecedented open letter published today they ask Rishi Sunak's Government and the Leader of the Opposition to commit to helping every low-income family become a family which reads together because **'it is not right that children from poorer backgrounds are deprived of a life that is rich in reading.'**

The authors and illustrators – who represent Britain's best-loved creators of books for children – highlight compelling evidence for the wide-ranging benefits given to children who are read to early on, citing a profound impact on educational success, language development, mental well-being and relationships. Children who read are more likely to overcome disadvantage – **but alarming statistics reveal how little family reading is actually happening.**

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Despite 95% of parents with children under seven knowing how crucial reading is<sup>1</sup>, new statistics conducted this year for BookTrust show that one in five children aged 0-4 have a book read to them less than once a month<sup>2</sup>. These findings underscore further BookTrust research which indicates that less than half of children are read a bedtime story<sup>3</sup>, and only half of children aged between one and two from low-income families are read to daily<sup>4</sup>. Statistics, also from this year, indicate that around a quarter of parents (26%) with children aged 0-7 find reading with their child challenging<sup>5</sup>.

With an increasing number of children in the UK living in poverty due to the cost-of-living crisis, the Laureates are calling for comprehensive support for low-income families, explaining that without a national approach more and more children will miss out.

**Cressida Cowell, internationally bestselling author-illustrator of the *How to Train Your Dragon* series, said:** *'A child who is read to has a much better start in life than a child who is not. That's not fair because all children should have the same chances, the same opportunities, no matter what their circumstances. Together we can help make this happen, but it must be something that Government invests in – which is why all the Laureates have come together to support this urgent call for national investment in early years reading.'*

Writing as the President of BookTrust, Michael Morpurgo's letter comes as the UK's largest children's reading charity launches its 'Reading Together' campaign, outlining what needs to be done to support families to become regular reading families in the early stages of a child's life.

**Sir Michael Morpurgo, said:** *'Reading Together, BookTrust's inspired new and timely initiative, will aim to ensure that millions more of our children have the sure start they need to discover early the enjoyment of reading, and so have the opportunity to hear and read stories and poems, that is their right.'*

'Reading Together' is informed by the charity's decades of experience of working with millions of families and thousands of local partners, including health visitors, nurseries, schools, libraries and food banks. Within the 'Reading Together' paper, BookTrust outlines four proposals intended to prompt a national debate about how the UK can lay down foundations for a child's start in life and establish a comprehensive programme for under 7's reading. The proposals aim to:

- Embed reading in the life of every low-income family by providing books, resources and reading experiences
- Provide sustained support, books and resources to help vulnerable children and families who can benefit most from the special characteristics of reading together
- Help midwives, health visitors, librarians, family support workers and early years teachers promote family reading
- Help primary teachers become even more powerful advocates for reading for pleasure

**Diana Gerald MBE and CEO at BookTrust, said:** *'Children who missed out on critical development opportunities during the pandemic have fallen behind in terms of language development, literacy and communication skills. Their social and emotional well-being has been affected. There is significant risk their attainment at school and their long-term life chances will suffer. We know that reading can help address these issues, and we want our 'Reading Together' campaign to start the conversation around how we can transform children's lives because there has never been a more urgent time for us to inspire a new generation of children on their reading journeys.'*

For further details on 'Reading Together' please visit [www.booktrust.org.uk/readingtogether](http://www.booktrust.org.uk/readingtogether).

**ENDS**

<sup>1</sup> BookTrust. (2023). 'Children's Reading Habits in the Early Years'. Available at <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/research/family-survey-briefing-1-reading-in-the-early-years-2023-1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Nielsen BookData (2023) 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer 2023 survey' (Base for analysis: 500 families 0-4)

<sup>3</sup> BookTrust. (2022). BookTrust Family Survey 2022.

<sup>4</sup> BookTrust. (2023). 'Children's Reading Habits in the Early Years'. Available at <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/research/family-survey-briefing-1-reading-in-the-early-years-2023-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> BookTrust (2024). YouGov online survey, January 2024 (Base: 1,036 UK parents with children aged 0-7)

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## NOTES TO EDITORS

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### **About BookTrust**

We get millions of children reading, especially those from low-income families or vulnerable backgrounds. Children who choose to read and who read regularly are happier and healthier. They form stronger bonds and relationships. They do better at school and are more creative. They enjoy more success in life. This is why we work with families, supporting them to start sharing stories and books together from the earliest possible age. Our carefully selected books and well-researched programmes are delivered by thousands of local partners, bringing the magic of reading to children in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### **About Michael Morpurgo**

Michael Morpurgo is the former Waterstones Children's Laureate and best-selling author of over 150 books, including *Private Peaceful*, *Kensuke's Kingdom*, *The Butterfly Lion*, and *War Horse*, which became a hugely successful production from the National Theatre and a movie by Steven Spielberg. In 1976, Michael and his wife, Clare, started the charity Farms for City Children which offers children and teachers from urban primary schools the chance to gain hands-on experience of the countryside. Michael received a Knighthood in 2018 for services to literature and charity. [www.michaelmorpurgo.com](http://www.michaelmorpurgo.com) | [www.farmsforcitychildren.org](http://www.farmsforcitychildren.org)

### **About the Waterstones Children's Laureate**

The Waterstones Children's Laureate is the foremost representative of children's literature, awarded biannually to a renowned writer or illustrator in recognition of exceptional talent. Managed by BookTrust – the UK's largest children's reading charity – and sponsored by Waterstones, this prestigious role celebrates creativity and storytelling, promotes the vital importance of reading and children's literature, and champions the right of every child to enjoy a lifetime enriched with books and stories. The Children's Laureate role was originally created by Poet Laureate Ted Hughes and author Michael Morpurgo, and each Laureate brings their own passion and themes to create a unique legacy.

The current Waterstones Children's Laureate is Joseph Coelho, award-winning performance poet, playwright, and children's author. The previous eleven Laureates are: Quentin Blake (1999-2001), Anne Fine (2001-2003), Michael Morpurgo (2003-2005), Jacqueline Wilson (2005-2007), Michael Rosen (2007-2009), Anthony Browne (2009-2011), Julia Donaldson (2011-2013), Malorie Blackman (2013-2015), Chris Riddell (2015-2017), Lauren Child (2017-2019), Cressida Cowell (2019-2022).