**Theory of Change Narrative**

**for**

**The Letterbox Club (ages 5-13)**

**Section 1: Introduction**

**What is a Theory of Change?**

A Theory of Change is a visual or written description of how and why a programme makes a difference. It breaks down the main components of what a programme does and tells the story of how these activities lead to meaningful outcomes, or change, over time.

**What is the Letterbox Club?**

The Letterbox Club is a programme which aims to inspire a love of reading and engagement with numeracy in children aged 3-13 years who are looked-after or vulnerable. It is run by BookTrust, in partnership with the University of Leicester. Local authorities and schools in England purchase the programme for their children, and BookTrust works with these partners to deliver the programme[[1]](#footnote-1). In 2017, over 11,000 children took part across the UK.

Parcels containing carefully selected books, stationery and number games are sent to children’s home addresses once a month for six months, usually from May to October. The parcels also contain letters to the child, which are personalised by the local authority or school before they are sent to the child at their home. Some parcels contain additional items, such as writing activities or letters from children’s authors. Children aged 7+ are also given access to the members’ area of the BookTrust website, where they can access exclusive content including author videos. Carer advice and tips are available to help carers engage with their children through the programme, and further support for carers is currently in development. Practitioners are also provided with support and resources to help them deliver the programme.

There are six different parcel sets for children and young people of different ages:

* Letterbox Purple - for children aged 3-5 in the Early Years Foundation Stage[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Letterbox Orange - for children in Year 1, to follow them into Year 2
* Letterbox Yellow - for children aged 7-9 who are not yet reading independently
* Letterbox Blue - for children in Year 3, to follow them into Year 4
* Letterbox Red - for children in Year 5, to follow them into Year 6
* Letterbox Green - for young people in Year 7, to follow them into Year 8

The age recommendations are just a guide, so if partners are supporting a child working at a lower or higher level, they can choose the parcel that is most suited to them.

**How was the Theory of Change for the Letterbox Club developed?**

The Theory of Change for the Letterbox Club was developed by the Research team and Additional Support team at BookTrust. The research team develop and deliver programme evaluations and research projects to help BookTrust understand, articulate and improve the impact of its programmes. The Additional Support team manage the development and delivery of programmes and projects for children and young people who need additional support to engage with books and develop a love of reading. This includes children who are looked-after, children who are vulnerable, children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), etc.

The Letterbox Club programme founder, Professor Rose Griffiths, was consulted on the initial draft of the Theory of Change model and her feedback was incorporated into later iterations.

Similarly, external partners were consulted on the first draft of the Theory of Change model. Practitioners delivering the programme in local authorities took part in small group workshop sessions during which they provided feedback on the content of the model, which was incorporated into later iterations.

The Theory of Change is an ongoing process, and will therefore continue to develop. Further research is needed to test the Theory and some of the outcomes and processes within the model. Further consultation will take place as the Theory of Change model is updated.

**What is the purpose of the Theory of Change for the Letterbox Club?**

The Theory of Change for the Letterbox Club programme will be used for the following purposes:

1. Research and evaluation

The Theory of Change will ensure that the programme can be thoroughly evaluated against its stated aims and outcomes. It will allow gaps in evidence and knowledge to be identified and measured through research, monitoring and evaluation activities. This will include a review of the evidence base relating to the Letterbox Club Theory of Change.

1. Programme improvement and development

The Theory of Change will inform programme development by highlighting areas where activities should be improved and developed to help the Letterbox Club meet its aims and outcomes.

1. Communication

The Theory of Change will allow BookTrust to clearly and effectively communicate the aims and outcomes of the Letterbox Club, and the rationale and evidence on which these are based.

**Section 2: Context**

**What is the aim of the Letterbox Club?**

The overall aim of the Letterbox Club is to inspire a love of reading and engagement with numeracy in children and young people who are looked-after or vulnerable.

**Who is the programme for?**

The Letterbox Club is for children aged 3-13, and is primarily delivered to children in foster care. It can also be delivered to other children who local authorities or schools feel would benefit from participation in the programme, such as children on the edge of care, children who have recently been adopted, children eligible for Pupil Premium, etc.

**Why is the Letterbox Club needed?**

The Letterbox Club was initially developed in response to the significantly lower academic attainment of children who are looked-after compared with children not in care (e.g. Sebba et al., 2015). The Letterbox Club does not directly aim to improve academic attainment, but aims to address some of the reasons that children who are looked-after underachieve generally. In particular, the programme was designed to fill a gap in providing support for children who may be at risk of disengaging or falling behind, and encouraging carers, who may be less aware of their role in supporting their child’s learning (Maddern, 2010), to engage in reading and other learning activities with their child at home.

While it is likely that children who are struggling academically will be participating in school- or literacy-based interventions to support their learning, the Letterbox Club aims to provide additional support through engaging children with reading for pleasure and fun number activities at home.

This is aligned with BookTrust’s mission of inspiring a love of reading. Research shows that, as well as being linked to attainment (e.g. Sullivan & Brown, 2013), reading for pleasure / shared reading has a range of important benefits for children, including:

* developing relationships and bonds with carers (Seden, 2009; Osborne et al., 2010; Rix et al., 2017)
* better socioemotional outcomes (Seden, 2009; Baker, 2013)
* increasing self-esteem and confidence (Stevens et al., 2008)
* positive mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015).

**How does the Letterbox Club address this need?**

All of the resources included in the Letterbox Club parcels are intended to engage children and young people with reading for pleasure and numeracy. A wide variety of books are selected to appeal to a range of interests and reading levels. The stationery and writing activities allow children to engage with reading-related activities in different ways (i.e. other than books). The number activities are intended to be a fun way to engage with numeracy. The parcels are not connected to school or homework, and children are empowered to choose when and how they engage with the parcels. Finally, a key focus of the parcels themselves (and the programme as a whole) is to make children feel valued and give them choice and independence.

**Section 3: Causal pathways**

**Activities**

In the Theory of Change diagram, the activities (along the bottom of the diagram) refer to the resources and support that the programme provides:



**Outcomes**

The outcomes included in the diagram are based on the stated aims and outcomes of the Letterbox Club. The outcomes are the changes that we expect to happen as a result of the programme.

Short-term outcomes are positioned above the activities (in paler shades), and they link upwards via the arrows to the medium-term outcomes, and finally long-term outcomes at the top of the diagram.

The short-term and some of the medium-term outcomes are direct outcomes of the programme which have either been evidenced in programme evaluations, or will be assessed in upcoming evaluation projects.

Longer-term outcomes are above the dotted **line of accountability**, which means that they are not expected to be direct outcomes of the programme, but are linked to the short- and medium-term outcomes and are supported by wider research evidence. Whilst the Letterbox Club makes a contribution to these long-term outcomes, the programme alone is not sufficient to produce them.

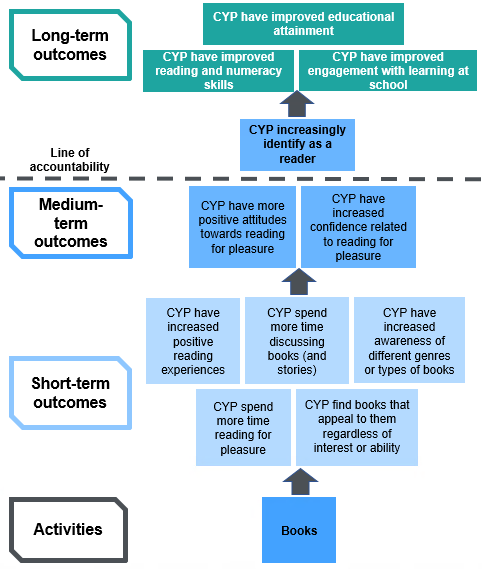
For example, the figure below, taken from the full Theory of Change diagram, shows how the books in the parcels lead to short term outcomes, such as children and young people (CYP) spending more time reading for pleasure and finding books that appeal to them. Evidence from programme evaluations supports this, e.g. in an evaluation of the Letterbox Club in Birmingham, over half of children said that they had been reading more since taking part in the programme (Harris, 2017).

These short-term outcomes then lead to the medium-term outcomes of children having more positive attitudes towards reading for pleasure and more confidence around reading for pleasure:

*‘It makes me feel much more confident.’*

Young person, Letterbox Green, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

The medium-term outcomes are linked to the long-term outcomes above the line of accountability. For example, wider evidence has repeatedly shown that children who have more positive attitudes towards reading have higher levels of reading skill and academic attainment over time (Twist et al., 2007, Clark, 2014). Studies have also found that children’s confidence in reading, as measured by their self-efficacy (i.e. beliefs in their ability), is related to their reading success (e.g. Bostok & Boon, 2012, McGeown et al., 2015). However, this relationship is bidirectional, with children’s perceptions of their reading competence being shaped by their previous success in reading (Wigfield et al., 2004).



Please note that we are aware that not all children will travel upwards through the model in a linear way. We know that children in care may be more likely to suffer setbacks and face challenges that may affect this development. We are seeking to understand this further through evidence reviews and evaluation.

**Key pathways**

This section describes the ways in which the activities of the Letterbox Club programme lead to the outcomes shown in the diagram. The Theory of Change model shows the key links between activities and outcomes. We know that the links and interactions between activities and outcomes are complex and numerous, e.g. practitioner outcomes may support outcomes across the whole programme, carer outcomes may support reading outcomes, etc. However, these links cannot all be portrayed in a single model, so the Theory of Change diagram represents the most direct pathways.

This section includes some examples of evidence from evaluations of the Letterbox Club and wider research to illustrate the links between the activities and outcomes. However, a thorough and detailed analysis of the evidence base underpinning the Letterbox Club Theory of Change will be completed by Autumn 2018. A meta-evaluation of the existing Letterbox Club research will also be undertaken this year. Together, these will allow us to assess the strength of the evidence underpinning the Theory of Change, identify any gaps in evidence to be measured through further monitoring and evaluation, or parts of the Theory of Change that may need to be amended.

*Pathway:* ***The Letterbox Club programme as a whole***

Overall, the resources included in the parcels lead to the short-term outcomes of increasing children and young people’s access to books and other resources, and children and young people independently engaging in more learning activities at home. This is illustrated by the quotes below:

*‘[She] enjoyed all the interactive games. She loved that she is starting to build up her very own library of books.’*

Carer, Letterbox Orange, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

*‘She now likes to go and do more things on her own. She’ll disappear, and we’ll shout upstairs ‘What are you doing?’ and she’ll say, ‘Oh I’m reading’ or ‘I’m playing with my dominoes’.’*

*‘Yeah, I agree with that to a degree because when we first get it because it’s his, he wants to cut everything out, he wants to organise it all […] and he’s in charge of what book we read so it gives a bit of responsibility.’*

Carers, Letterbox Orange, Westfield Infant School (2017)

The stationery and writing activities provide children and young people with an opportunity for other types of reading-related experiences that are not directly connected to books. For example, evidence from the Letterbox Club parcel contents review has suggested that the stationery items are universally very popular with children and young people, and therefore may be important to help children to engage with the parcels initially (Harris, 2018).

Research has highlighted that access to and ownership of books is linked to reading enjoyment, reading frequency and reading attainment (e.g. Clark & Poulton, 2011). While the direction of causality of this relationship is difficult to determine, carers and children have consistently reported that the parcels and their contents had led to multiple outcomes. This is discussed in more detail throughout the following sections.

Much qualitative feedback suggests that the personalised delivery of the programme, i.e. parcels and letters addressed and delivered directly to children, is exciting for children and makes them feel important and valued. This feedback has been reported across many formal evaluations of the Letterbox Club, as well as through anecdotal feedback (see examples below).

*‘I think the best thing was the fact that the children got a parcel which was addressed to them, which was personal to them, and that it was something that they could own. It was their property, they could decide what they wanted to do with it, whether they read the books or not.’*

Carer, Letterbox Scotland (2014)

*‘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, Letterbox Wales (2009-11)

*‘It was exciting receiving a parcel just for me with my name on it.’*

Young Person, Letterbox Birmingham (2016-17)

*‘Making children feel loved and appreciated by someone apart from the household.’*

Carer, Letterbox Birmingham (2016-17)

*‘Jumping up and down, happy to have post especially a parcel. Felt important. Immediately tries out everything in pack.’*

Carer, Letterbox Red, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

*‘Our children really appreciate receiving their parcel through the post with their name on. It shows them we care and know who they are and where they live. It also encourages reading as they look forward to receiving the parcels and to see which book they are having.’*

Practitioner, Letterbox Club coordinator survey (2016)

Further reviewing of wider research is needed to explore the potential longer-term contribution that this outcome could have on children’s self-esteem, and wider health and wellbeing outcomes.

*Pathway:* ***Reading******outcomes***

The books in the parcels are carefully selected by an independent panel of experts to ensure that there is a broad, suitable and engaging range of books, so that children will be able to find some books that appeal to them regardless of interest or reading level. The books selected for each parcel are pitched at a slightly lower reading age than the target age group, whilst being appropriate to children’s interest levels. This is to ensure the resources are accessible and suitable for as many children as possible, as children in care are more likely to be working below the expected level for their age.

The books in the parcels lead to the short-term outcomes of: children and young people spending more time reading for pleasure and discussing books and stories; children and young people finding books that appeal to them regardless of interest or reading level; children and young people having increased awareness of different genres and types of books; and children and young people having increased positive reading experiences.

These outcomes have been evidenced through evaluation of the programme. For example, in an evaluation of the Letterbox Club in Birmingham, three quarters of carers said that the Letterbox Club had made a positive impact on their child’s engagement with different kinds of books and 72% said it had a positive impact on the amount of time their child spent reading (Harris, 2017).

Qualitative feedback from carers and children across different evaluations has also supported this:

*‘He reads loads more and enjoys different books’*

Carer, Letterbox Blue, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

*‘[He] has had the opportunity to read books he wouldn't have otherwise and has practised his skills with the resources and games!’*

Carer, Letterbox Red, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

These outcomes are linked to the medium-term outcomes of children having increased confidence and more positive attitudes towards reading for pleasure. For example, there is growing evidence of the positive effects of access to interesting, relevant, and diverse reading materials on children and young people’s motivation for reading (e.g. Barillas, 2014; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Evidence has also suggested that frequent and enjoyable shared reading from an early age is linked to children’s interest and motivations towards shared reading or reading for pleasure (Lyytinen et al., 1998; Makin, 2006).

Programme evaluations of the Letterbox Club have supported this link. In an evaluation of the Letterbox Club in Birmingham, three quarters of carers said that the Letterbox Club had made a positive impact on their child’s confidence and enjoyment of reading.

Qualitative feedback from both carers and children across various evaluations has also supported this.

*‘I did not like reading but now I do.’*

Young person, Letterbox Red, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

*‘He’s not afraid to try now, that was a wee thing. He was afraid to try and read in class. I think it’s building his confidence.’*

Carer, Letterbox Scotland (2014)

*‘Letterbox is a fantastic scheme, it has changed [him] from a child you would have to fight to get him to read, but now he enjoys reading.’*

Carer, Letterbox Green (2010)

*‘It has made me want to read more and has made me more confident about maths.’*

Young Person, Letterbox Birmingham (2016-17)

In turn, these outcomes are linked to the long-term outcomes of engagement with learning at school, reading and numeracy skills, and ultimately educational attainment. As referenced earlier, children’s confidence and attitudes towards reading are positively linked to their reading skills and educational attainment (McKenna & Kear, 1990; Bostok & Boon, 2012). Similarly, children who are read to more, or read for pleasure more, have improved literacy development (e.g. OECD, 2011; OECD, 2012).

Additionally, evidence has repeatedly found that shared reading and reading for pleasure is linked with attainment across a range of subjects other than language and literacy, including maths (e.g. Sullivan & Brown, 2013; Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Castro et al., 2015).

Whilst these are longer-term indirect aims of the programme, early pilots (across the UK and different age groups) found that children made statistically significant gains in reading, although these could not be solely attributed to the Letterbox Club, due to the lack of a control group for comparison (e.g. Griffiths et al., 2009, Griffiths and Comber, 2010). However, these findings were not replicated in a recent randomised controlled trial of the programme in Northern Ireland (Mooney et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, qualitative feedback from carers and children has also suggested perceived improvements in children’s learning as a result of the programme:

*‘It's making it so much better for her maths, reading and writing. It's also fun which we like a lot.’*

Carer, Letterbox Red, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

*Pathway:* ***Number******outcomes***

The pathway for number-related outcomes is similar to the reading pathway, with the resources in the parcels leading to children and young people spending more time on number activities and having increased positive experiences working with numbers.

Again, these outcomes are supported by evidence from evaluations of the Letterbox Club. For example, in an evaluation of the programme in Birmingham, over half of carers said that the Letterbox Club had made a positive impact on their child’s confidence and enjoyment of maths (57% and 55% respectively) (Harris, 2017).

Qualitative feedback also provides support for this:

*‘Has developed much more interest in maths and enriched her exposure to more wonderful books.’*

Carer, Letterbox Blue, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

Early pilots of the programme found that children made progress in number, above and beyond expectations whilst taking part in the Letterbox Club, although again these could not be solely attributed to the programme due to the lack of a control group (e.g. Griffiths et al., 2009, Griffiths and Comber, 2010).

However, qualitative feedback has supported this with some carers and children suggesting improvements in learning as a result of the programme:

*‘He knows his two and three times tables, which is a big achievement for [him] and that’s just through the books, games and the wee money game as well.’*

Carer, Letterbox Scotland (2014)

*‘I have struggled with maths but when I had letterbox I got so much better.’*

Young person, Letterbox Blue, Parcel Contents Review (2017-18)

*Pathway:* ***Carer involvement******outcomes***

Additional support for foster carers is currently in development. BookTrust have recently undertaken several research projects to inform the development of carer support and resources, including:

* a UK-wide survey of foster carers, and interviews with a small number of families (Rix et al., 2017);
* interviews with practitioners in a range of roles supporting foster carers across Wales (Harris et al., 2017);
* surveys with local authority Letterbox Club coordinators and schools;
* follow-up telephone interviews with local authority coordinators.

The carer support and resources that we develop will aim to help carers with reading with their child. It is hypothesised that this will provide further support for the carer outcomes in the Theory of Change model. In particular, carer support will help carers to spend more time sharing books and activities with their child, talk to their children more about reading and stories, and have increased awareness of different types and genres of books for their child. In the medium-term, this will increase carers’ confidence and knowledge about how to share books and activities with their child.

Ultimately, this could lead to children having improved relationships with their carer. Evidence from a UK-wide survey of foster carers supports this: 90% of carers who read with their child said that it had improved their relationship (Rix et al., 2017). Qualitative studies have also found that shared reading contributed to strengthening the emotional bond between parents/carers and children (Blake & Maiese, 2008; Swain et al., 2016).

Qualitative feedback from Letterbox Club evaluations provide support for the role of the programme in achieving these outcomes:

*‘Found it a great way to bond with my daughter. It’s definitely encouraged me to do more.’*

Carer, Letterbox England (2007-09)

*’It has given us both quality time together. The books have made us laugh and giggle a lot!’*

Carer, Letterbox Wales (2009-11)

*‘Promoted positive engagement for both children and as a family with learning activities that were enjoyable. Enabled access to quality resources for children who do not have much access to this within the home. Greater sense of self-esteem and feeling valued’*

Practitioner, Letterbox Club coordinator survey (2016)

Positive relationships with carers could logically link to the longer-term outcome of improved health and wellbeing for children and young people, although more research is needed in this area (Luke et al., 2014).

As acknowledged earlier, the Theory of Change diagram is simplified and does not represent all of the pathways and interactions between the variables. In particular, carer outcomes are closely linked to children’s reading outcomes. Research has long suggested that the pleasure of sharing a book with an adult can evoke and sustain a child’s interest in reading. Adults who make reading enjoyable by being responsive and conveying delight during the times spent reading to their children, ignite a love for and desire to read (Bingham, 2007; Newland et al., 2011). Research has shown that parent/carer involvement in children’s reading activities and their beliefs about reading are linked to, and have a causal impact on their reading motivation and achievement (Baker et al. 1997; Baker 2003; Senechal and Young 2008). Rix et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of carers as reading role models for their children, with carers reading behaviours and attitudes being significantly linked to the amount they read with their children and the types of materials their children read:

*"Being a good role model in reading is one of the best things you can actually do."*

Carer, Reading in Foster Families (2017)

It is important to note that carer engagement with the programme may be more important and relevant for some children, e.g. to help younger children access the resources, to help children who may need additional support to engage with the resources, etc. Similarly, the outcome relating to independent engagement with activities may be more relevant for older children, or children who are more confident with reading and working with numbers.

Pathway: ***Practitioner outcomes***

The supporting resources for practitioners aim to ensure that local authorities and schools delivering the programme feel better able to support a love of reading and engagement with numeracy for children who are looked after. For example, BookTrust provides template letters for practitioners to include in the parcels, to make it easier for them to be personalised. The carer support resources currently in development will further enable practitioners to support carers and families to read for pleasure with their children.

Annual surveys give practitioners the opportunity to give feedback on the programme and delivery. Most practitioners find the process of delivering the Letterbox Club easy and most access the supporting resources on the website, including template letters for children and carers, parcel contents and programme information, and evaluation materials (Harris, 2016). However, further evaluation is required to understand the extent to which these resources are effective in supporting practitioners in promoting a love of reading and engagement with numeracy.

**Section 4: Enablers**

The following factors are likely to enable the programme to work more effectively and improve its impact.

*Delivery-related enablers*

**Partner engagement with the programme** at all levels (from virtual school heads to practitioners delivering the programme) is important to maximise the impact for children who are looked-after. Partner engagement with the coordinators’ area of the website and with BookTrust is likely to help them to deliver useful messaging to families, and support them to engage with the programme. Local evaluation of the programme, and engagement with larger-scale BookTrust-led evaluation, may help partners to develop the way they deliver the programme and improve its impact for children in their area.

**Good communication between agencies / multi-agency working** is important to ensure the programme is delivered effectively, and opportunities for communication about the programme with relevant partners are taken. For example, the Letterbox Club could be discussed at Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, or through communication between the virtual school and the child’s school.

**Good communication between agencies and carers / children and young people** is also important to ensure that families can engage fully with the programme and access any further support they may need. For example, coordinators could give carers information about the programme in advance using the template letters and materials provided on the coordinators’ area.

**Personalisation of the programme** may enhance its impact. As highlighted earlier, personalisation is an important factor in achieving the outcomes related to children feeling valued and having ownership over the contents of the parcels. Therefore, partner capacity to personalise and include the child letter is important in maximising effectiveness. Similarly, if partners are able to tailor the parcels to children’s needs (e.g. checking that all contents are suitable for particular children, and swapping resources if necessary), this is likely to enhance the impact of the programme.

**Effective management of programme delivery** could help to avoid any potential negative impacts. For example, there has been a small amount of anecdotal evidence related to other children in the home feeling left out if they are not taking part in the programme. It is also possible that children receiving the programme could feel singled out or stigmatised, rather than valued and important. Therefore, the way the programme is delivered and communicated to children, is crucial and should be considered by practitioners and carers.

**Carer engagement** **with the programme** is likely to provide additional benefits for children, and may be especially beneficial for younger children who may need more support with reading and accessing the activities. Therefore, it is important that carers are aware of how to support children to access the programme, and the benefits of engagement with reading for pleasure and number activities. Additional support for carers to help them to engage with the programme and support their children is currently in development.

*External factors*

The **availability of appropriate, high-quality books** suitable for children in care is an ongoing concern. Research has suggested a lack of suitable books for children in care, e.g. high-interest / low-reading level books, books about issues relating to children’s lives, etc. (Rix et al., 2017, Harris et al., 2017). However, BookTrust works closely with publishers and an independent panel of experts to ensure the selection of appropriate and engaging books for the programme.

**Placement / school stability** is also likely to affect the impact of the programme, with children in relatively stable home and school placements likely to experience greater benefits from the programme.

The **availability of other services in the local area**, such as libraries, may help to support and create ongoing benefits of the programme (i.e. access to books for further reading for pleasure).

**Other interventions that children are taking part in** may affect the impact of the Letterbox Club in a positive or negative way. For example, if a child is involved in a number of reading interventions, this may have a negative impact on the reading for pleasure elements of the programme.

**Section 5: Assumptions**

The following information describes the main assumptions that the Theory of Change for the Letterbox Club is based on. These assumptions are critical for the relevant outcomes of the programme to be met, and therefore for the Theory of Change model to be valid.

**Assumption: Engagement with the books and other resources will be a positive experience (relative to children’s previous experiences with reading and numeracy).**

Evidence to support assumption:

* There is overwhelmingly positive feedback from children and carers relating to their enjoyment of the resources provided in the Letterbox Club across many evaluations of the programme.
* Children can decide whether or not to engage with the resources. The programme is not related to school or homework, and children are not obliged to use all or any of the resources.
* Books are carefully selected by an independent panel of experts to ensure that the parcels include a broad, suitable and engaging range of books, so that children will be able to find some books that appeal to them regardless of interest or reading level.
* Partner knowledge of children’s needs, preferences, and history should allow them to tailor the parcels (e.g. swapping books, removing resources) to ensure no negative effects (e.g. books containing triggering issues or items which may not be suitable for particular children).
* Some practitioners have reported that children in care may be less engaged with reading, maths and school, for a range of reasons. For example, children may have experienced trauma or neglect leading to behavioural and emotional issues making it more difficult for them to engage with reading and learning. Additionally, if children have experienced interruptions in their learning, they may have fallen behind in their reading and feel less confident and positive about reading as a result (Harris et al., 2017).

However:

* While the majority of feedback on the resources has been positive, it is unrealistic to expect that all resources will be suitable and enjoyable for all children, and the programme evaluations encourage suggestions for improvements.
* We are unable to influence whether the parcels are tailored to children’s needs or preferences, and practitioners may not have capacity to do this.
* We are not aware of children’s previous experiences with reading and number, and make an assumption that they may have been negative. Feedback from practitioners supports this, but it is not likely to apply to all children, i.e. some children will have had positive previous experiences with reading and number.

**Assumption: Partners (in local authorities and schools) are delivering the programme as intended.**

This includes:

* Partners having capacity to deliver the programme, e.g. budget, storage, staffing.
* Partners keeping up-to-date records of children and young people’s addresses to ensure children receive all six parcels. This could include children moving placements, leaving care, being adopted, changing schools, and partners having continued access to funding, e.g. Pupil Premium Plus, etc.
* Partners having knowledge of children’s needs to allow them to order the most suitable packs for their age and stage.
* Partners delivering the programme according to the model of delivery, i.e. one parcel a month from May to October, including personalised letter and parcels delivered through the post, every other year, to children of the relevant age.

Evidence to support assumption:

* The terms and conditions (agreed at the time of registration by all partners) outlines BookTrust’s expectations for administration and delivery of the programme.
* Knowledge, such as up-to-date records on children’s addresses, care status, and educational needs, are part of the general safeguarding remit of the local authority / school in terms of their duty of care for the children involved.
* The majority of Letterbox coordinators in local authorities report that they deliver the programme as intended, i.e. always delivering the parcels once a month, for six months, from May to October (83%), and delivered them through the post (89%).
* The Letterbox Club has been evaluated based on the suggested delivery model (i.e. one parcel per month, from May to October, including the personalised letters, to the suggested year groups, through the post). Different delivery schedules may not produce the same benefits. For example, if children were to receive the programme every year in its current format, they would receive the same colour parcel two years running, with the same number activities and stationery, perhaps affecting the impact of the programme.

However:

* Partners may have limited capacity available to deliver the programme.
* The Letterbox Club can also be delivered through schools. Feedback from schools indicated that they are more likely to deliver the programme in a different way, with the majority handing the parcels directly to children (61%) rather than posting them. They were also less likely than local authorities to say that they delivered the parcels once a month, for six months, from May to October, with only 46% saying that they always did this.
* Alternative delivery methods may have different benefits. For example, whilst schools were less likely to deliver the parcels as intended, they were more likely than local authorities to say that children always received all six parcels in the programme (91% compared to 68%). This could be explored further through evaluation projects with partners who are delivering the programme in a different way, or through pilot projects. For example, the programme could be administered via different delivery methods (postal, face-to-face), working with different partners (local authorities / virtual schools, schools, charities), frequency (between parcels and between cycles). There may be benefits of different methods for different children in different situations. Future evaluation is planned in order to explore this further.

**Assumption: The Letterbox Club model is appropriate for children in different situations.**

This includes:

* The programme is appropriate for children in different types of placements, i.e. children placed with kinship carers, children in long term placements, children in short term placements, etc.
* The programme works in the same way across the UK, i.e. findings from different countries are generalisable.
* The model is appropriate for children of different ages.

Reasons for assumption:

* Evaluation of pilots of the programme when expanded to Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and to different age groups, have generally produced similar positive results.

However:

* While most studies of the Letterbox Club have found similar positive impacts of the programme, one small study in Northern Ireland did not replicate these findings.
* Further independent evaluation is needed to find out more about any differences in the impact of the programme for different groups of children, i.e. children in different types of placement, of different ages, in different areas, with different needs, etc. as this has not previously been explored.
* A recent review of the parcel contents suggests that the contents of the older age parcels (particularly Letterbox Green) are less popular with children, and rated as less suitable by carers. Similarly, the contents of Letterbox Yellow were less popular with children and rated as less suitable by carers. The targeting of this parcel may need to be reviewed or clarified (Harris, 2018).

**Section 5: References**

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1. Please visit the BookTrust website to find out more about how the programme works in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Please note: The current Theory of Change relates to the programme for 5-13-year olds, not including children receiving Letterbox Purple. Letterbox Purple is a recent development of the Letterbox Club and is currently being piloted. As such, the outcomes for this part of the programme are still being refined. As Letterbox Purple is for younger children aged 3-5, a separate Theory of Change may be needed, with a greater focus on shared reading and carer-related outcomes. This programme element will be revisited when the Letterbox Purple pilot in Wales is complete in summer 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)