



Bracken Hill School

Phonics Policy

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Policy Type: Whole School

This policy is reviewed biennially to ensure compliance with current regulations

The Governors of the school recognise that all staff play a vital role in the achievement of high standards and in providing our pupils with the best opportunities matched to their needs.

INTENT

At Bracken Hill School, we are committed to providing high-quality phonics teaching that meets the diverse needs of our learners. We recognise that many of our pupils require a tailored approach to phonics that differs from mainstream expectations. Phonics is a crucial foundation for reading and writing, and we aim to develop each child's skills at an appropriate pace to ensure confidence, success, and a lifelong love of literacy.

IMPLEMENTATION

Phonics Programme

Phonics is taught using Pearson's Bug Club Phonics, a systematic synthetic phonics programme designed to support early reading and spelling. The programme is adapted to meet the specific needs of our pupils, ensuring that teaching is accessible, engaging, and delivered at an appropriate pace.

Grouping and Assessment

- Children are assessed and grouped within Phase 1, Phase 2, and, where necessary, Phase 3, ensuring they receive targeted teaching at an appropriate level.
- Assessment is ongoing and informs planning, grouping, and intervention strategies.
- Progress is reviewed regularly to ensure children are consolidating their learning before moving on.

Pacing and Progression

- Children are taught phonics at a pace that suits their individual needs. This often differs from the mainstream expectation of the programme.
- Some children require extended time within a phase to develop confidence and fluency.
- Once children complete a phase, they will move on to the next; however, if further consolidation is needed, they will focus on language development until they are ready to progress.

Intervention and Additional Support

For children who require extra support, the following strategies are implemented:

- Repetition of sounds to reinforce learning.
- Segmenting and blending activities to develop decoding skills.
- Precision teaching to provide focused, repeated practice of key phonics skills.
- 1:1 or small-group interventions to revisit specific phonemes and graphemes as needed.

Beyond Phonics Phases

- Children who complete Phase 6 will continue to develop their reading and spelling skills through targeted spelling sessions.
- These sessions will focus on spelling patterns, rules, high-frequency words, and application in writing.

Teaching Structure

- Phonics is taught 3-4 times per week, depending on the needs of the children and their school phase.
- Sessions are delivered by teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) who are trained in the Bug Club Phonics programme.

IMPACT

Through this structured yet flexible approach to phonics, children at [School Name] will:

- Develop their ability to decode and encode words at their own pace.
- Build confidence in reading and spelling.
- Have access to high-quality teaching that meets their individual learning needs.
- Be supported in their transition from phonics to broader language and literacy skills.

This policy ensures that all children receive the support they need to become successful, confident readers and writers.

PRE-PHONICS LEARNERS

At Bracken Hill School, we recognise that for many of our learners, early reading begins long before formal phonics instruction. A number of pupils require a pre-phonics, developmental approach that prioritises communication, sensory engagement, and meaningful interaction with people, objects, and the environment.

For these learners, pre-reading and early reading skills are built on the foundations of communication, interaction, and exploration of the world around them. These skills prepare children to access Phase 1 of the Bug Club Phonics programme when they are developmentally ready.

Pre-phonics learning includes opportunities to develop:

- Understanding through objects of reference, symbols, and pictures, helping children make connections between spoken and visual language.
- Engagement with environmental print and everyday signs, supporting early recognition of familiar symbols, logos, and functional print.
- Shared reading experiences, using books, photographs, sensory stories, and multimodal texts that encourage anticipation, participation, and enjoyment.
- Early communication strategies, including facial expressions, gestures, eye gaze, vocalisations, and body language to support both understanding and self-expression.
- Auditory discrimination, rhythm, and listening skills through music, rhyme, and sound play—crucial foundations for later phonological awareness.

Staff create rich, communication-focused environments that encourage curiosity and engagement with print, symbols, and meaning. Through playful interaction, repetition, and responsive communication, pupils begin to understand that symbols, sounds, and words carry meaning. This early exposure strengthens the foundations required for future phonics learning and supports a smooth transition into the formal stages of the phonics programme.

CORE WORD PROGRAMME

The Core Word Programme we have chosen is the one developed and made available by Sensory Classroom.

- It is an AAC-friendly, communication-first programme designed for children with developmental / cognitive literacy ages roughly 0–4 years. It supports non-speaking, minimally speaking, PMLD, AAC users and other learners for whom a traditional phonics route is not yet appropriate.
- The programme focuses on a small set of “core words” (drawn from a research-informed list — the first 40 core words recommended for AAC and early communicators). These are high-frequency, functional words (e.g. want, more, help, go, stop, you, it, in, out, on, off etc.).
- For each core word, the programme provides multi-modal, flexible activities: symbol or AAC boards, signing (e.g. Makaton) songs, visual and video clips, sensory stories, interactive games, play-based and group activities, reading or story reading linked to the word, writing or tracing tasks (where appropriate), and repeated exposure over time.

In sum: rather than teach individual letter sounds, the Core Word Programme builds meaningful communication first — giving pupils access to useful, functional language that supports interaction, choice, and comprehension. This respects the learning profiles of many of our explorer learners (e.g. AAC users, gestalt-language processors, pre-symbolic or pre-verbal learners).

INTENT

Purpose-driven communication before phonics — For many explorer children, learning the purpose and function of language (to request, comment, express needs, choices, feelings) is far more immediate and meaningful than learning to decode letters and sounds. The Core Word Programme ensures that children have a voice and a way to communicate meaningfully as early as possible.

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- Inclusive and developmentally appropriate — The programme is designed specifically for children with complex communication needs, non-speakers, AAC users, and those whose developmental age means phonics would not yet be accessible or meaningful.
- Flexible and multi-modal — By offering AAC symbols, signing, spoken language, sensory stories, play, music, visual supports, and reading-related activities, the programme accommodates different learning styles, sensory needs, and communication preferences.
- Foundational for later learning — Gaining a functional core vocabulary supports attention, communication, understanding that language carries meaning, and an early link between symbols (visual, AAC, signed) and meaning. This builds a strong foundation for future literacy — whether via phonics or other literacy pathways.
- Respecting individuality — We recognise not all children follow a “typical” developmental phonics path. For some, the traditional phonics route may not make sense; the Core Word Programme provides a valid, evidence-informed alternative. As the creators note: “before a child can link a letter to a sound, they need to understand that communication has purpose.”

IMPLEMENTATION

- Weekly or regular “Core-Word Sessions”: Staff will introduce 1 new core word each week (or at a pace suitable to the cohort), using the full range of AAC modes, signing, symbols, and where possible, sensory stories / play / songs / media.
- Multi-modal modelling by staff: In each session, staff will model the core word using whichever mode(s) the child uses or is familiar with — e.g. AAC device, symbol board, signing, spoken word, gestures.
- Interactive and motivational activities: Sessions will include play-based activities, sensory experiences, games, songs or videos containing the core word, shared reading or story-telling linked to the core word, and opportunities for the child to use the word in meaningful contexts (e.g. request, choice, comment).
- Integration across daily routines: Core words won’t be limited to “special sessions” — staff will embed them throughout the day (register, snack time, transitions, free play, care routines), to encourage generalisation and functional use.
- Flexibility & differentiation: The programme will be adjusted to meet each child’s developmental, communication, and sensory needs. Not all children will do every activity; some may revisit words across multiple weeks; some may use low-tech AAC, others high-tech, some may use symbols only, some may also use signing, etc.
- Tracking & review: Staff will monitor each child’s responsiveness, comprehension and use of core words. For children who begin to show readiness (e.g. functional use of multiple core words, receptive language, understanding of symbols, attention readiness), the team will review and — where appropriate — consider transitioning into formal phonics (see below).

Co-existence with Phonics for Some Learners

We recognise that using the Core Word Programme does not necessarily exclude phonics for all learners. For some children — especially those who already have a functional core vocabulary and show readiness in communication, attention, symbol understanding — we may continue or begin phonics alongside the core word programme. In these cases:

- Core words remain reinforced regularly (for meaningful communication).
- Phonics is introduced carefully, at a pace appropriate for each child’s developmental level.
- The pathway is personalised, ensuring that each learner’s communication and literacy development is respected.

EVALUATION

This policy will be reviewed biennially – December 2027

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