Turning the Key:
Improving the literacy skills of people
with experience of homelessness
Low literacy causes homeless people problems and can impact on the effectiveness of key working. We need to know about someone’s literacy needs — and the difficulties they cause — in order to support them.

By providing an accessible service, we can help to build confidence in service users. From this foundation, we can support more formal steps towards developing their literacy skills.

As a background, this toolkit starts with a summary of Thames Reach’s action research report, Turning the Key: Portraits of low literacy amongst people with experience of homelessness.

Following the summary, Sections 3, 4 and 5 provide a model of key working to support individuals with literacy needs.

Each section provides top tips and practical tools to be used in key work sessions.

Examples of experiences and good practice are shared throughout.
Introduction

Client profile data collected by the homelessness agency Thames Reach indicates that at least 14 percent of service users regularly raise literacy as a support need.

We know that poor literacy in adults can contribute to their social exclusion. Disadvantages for those with low basic skills include limited academic achievement, reduced prospects of employment, economic hardship and low self-esteem.

Identification of the reading and writing needs of service users, and an understanding of the specific issues they face, can make a positive difference to the effectiveness of support planning.

This report was written with the following aims in mind:

- To promote a greater understanding of low literacy in adults.
- To describe the specific nature of dyslexia and the difficulties arising from it.
- To develop a practical toolkit to help agency staff identify the needs of low literacy service users and to make decisions about support.

Here is a summary of our research:

“60% of service users wanted support with literacy”

“50% of service users have problems with writing”
Illiteracy and social exclusion

It is well established that low literacy in adults can lead to impoverished life chances, poor social and political participation, mental health needs, and breakdown of personal relationships.

A particularly vulnerable group is the estimated 18% to 32% of rough sleepers in the UK who were in local authority care during childhood. Research has indicated that they are more likely to have weak literacy and low educational attainment. Additional needs such as dyslexia create an even greater risk of later being without education, training or employment.

In adulthood, men and women with the lowest levels of literacy tend to enter the workplace earlier and are more likely to be unemployed by the age of 23. For those in jobs, these are the least likely to be full-time position or to include training or opportunities for promotion.

To halt the cycle of inequality caused by poor literacy in adulthood, the government established the Skills for Life programme in 2003. The London Skills Commission (London Development Agency, 2006) identified both the homeless and adults with learning difficulties (including dyslexia) to be amongst those who are less well served by current provision. It has been suggested that the ‘marginally homeless’ should be targeted for skills training, breaking a pattern of drifting in and out of homelessness.

Developmental dyslexia – causes and characteristics

Developmental dyslexia has been recognised by the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) as being a substantial disability for some individuals. It has a genetic basis, being found in around 10% of the population including people of all ages and levels of intelligence.

Characteristics that distinguish dyslexia from other causes of low literacy are:

- extreme difficulty in grasping the relationship between spoken words and the way we write them down (‘phonological’ skills).
- inefficiencies in working memory.
- slow speed of processing and inability to become completely automatic in literacy skills.

Some dyslexic people learn to live successfully with their difficulties, while for others they create a real and humiliating disability. It is not uncommon for dyslexic men and women to have developed poor expectations of themselves, feelings of shame, and resentment towards those who have failed them.

If not addressed, low self-esteem can become a primary handicap that limits progress towards overcoming dyslexia and gaining literacy.

“low self-esteem can become a primary barrier to gaining literacy”
‘Turning the Key’ follows RD’s progress during 18 months of dyslexia support with a specialist tutor, put in place by Thames Reach. His story raises issues that may need to be considered by key workers and tutors when literacy support is being planned, for example:

- The service user’s resilience, motivations and determination.
- Expectations about a course of learning, its demands and its outcomes.
- Ongoing support required from key workers.

RD would like his story to provide others with the confidence to tackle their own reading and writing problems.

“\[If I can do it, so can anyone\]”
Low literacy, dyslexia and homelessness – an exploration of prevalence, attitudes and experiences

A survey of Thames Reach service users was carried out amongst 101 people living in supported housing, aged between 22 and 84 years.

The findings in relation to low literacy are presented, however, a screen for dyslexia did not prove reliable because of factors commonly found amongst this group of people. For example, poor short-term memory is a characteristic of dyslexia, but can also be a consequence of substance misuse or ill health.

Survey results

Literacy difficulties

- Over 33% of respondents have difficulty understanding what they read.
- Around 50% have problems with writing.
- Almost 10% indicated that they are functionally illiterate.
- 55% need help to fill in forms.
- 46% have trouble writing letters.
- Roughly 25% of those with practical reading and writing difficulties reported that poor literacy had prevented them from getting jobs, training, or going to college.

Adult literacy learning

- Over 25% have attended literacy classes since the age of eighteen, the majority finding this a positive experience.
- 13% reported having gained one or more qualifications at the end of their courses.
- Less than 1.0% have accessed one-to-one literacy lessons. A similar percentage felt that they would have benefited from this kind of support.
- 60% of participants would like the chance to further improve their reading, their writing or both.
- People under the age of 40 are more likely to recognise their support needs.
- Older people may need encouragement to develop their skills in order to become more independent.
Literacy interventions for vulnerable adults – research and good practice

The causes of low literacy in adulthood are, put most simply, missed or inadequate education. Since 2003, the government’s Skills for Life initiative has made it possible for many adults to address their underachievement in courses run by adult education colleges, third sector and other agencies, or in the workplace.

Many people have benefited from this provision, often going on to gain perhaps their first ever academic qualification by taking the national literacy tests.

It can be difficult to assess the quality of adult literacy programmes and harder still to judge how suitable they will be for vulnerable learners. Many adults, although motivated to improve their literacy, find formal study very difficult.

“Many adults, although motivated to improve their literacy, find formal study very difficult.”

Here are some things to consider when looking at learning options for service users:

- People who have experienced homelessness may be vulnerable learners because of low levels of resilience, self-esteem and life skills.
- Dyslexic adults in particular can find college administrative processes confusing, classrooms too noisy, and the pace of lessons too fast.
- Low literacy learners, particularly those who are dyslexic, require well-structured, multi-sensory programmes. Letter-sound relationships (phonics) should be taught explicitly, so that the relationship between spoken and written words is understood.
- Homelessness agencies can work in partnership with literacy providers to reinforce learning. They might set up opportunities to practise reading, or offer help with homework.

The full report, Turning the Key: Portraits of low literacy amongst people with experience of homelessness, can be read at: www.thamesreach.org.uk/publications/research-reports/
When we talk about literacy, we are referring to a whole range of communication skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking, understanding and remembering.

Literacy skills impact on the lives of service users in many ways, for example: maintaining their tenancies; staying in touch with family and friends; using community resources; finding and keeping a job or taking up learning opportunities.

Knowing about a service user’s literacy needs, and the impacts these have on their day-to-day life is an important part of support planning. However, people can find it difficult to talk about the problems they have with reading and writing.

The tools in this section are designed to provide a foundation for structured conversations with service users about their literacy strengths and needs.

We’re looking for information here, but there’s no expectation on you as key workers to assess skills. Instead, you should use this information to assess the key working techniques you use to support each service user.
## Identifying literacy skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Follow up action needed &amp; things to consider for key work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 First, let’s get some background information on factors that might affect your literacy</strong></td>
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<td>Is English your first language?</td>
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<td>Do you wear glasses?</td>
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<td>Or do you think you might need glasses?</td>
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<td>Have you ever been tested for dyslexia?</td>
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<td>Did you learn to read and write at school?</td>
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<td><strong>2 Next, let’s find out how confident you are doing everyday tasks that involve reading, writing, and having conversations</strong></td>
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<td>Do you need help to fill in forms?</td>
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<td>Do you need help to write letters?</td>
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<td>Do you need help to read letters?</td>
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<td>Do you need help to use new routes on public transport?</td>
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<td>Do you need help to find the things you need in shops?</td>
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<td>Is your handwriting easy to read?</td>
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<td>Do you have trouble remembering long lists or instructions?</td>
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<td>Can you remember the important points from conversations?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can you put your ideas into words easily when you speak or write?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>3 Finally, if you want to get support, let’s think about what might work for you</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you been to literacy classes before?</td>
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<td>Were the classes useful?</td>
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<td>Would you like to do a course?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What other support might you need?</td>
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The flowchart below gives some examples of how to start supporting service users with their literacy skills.

**Step 1: Identifying literacy skills**

**Identifying literacy strengths and needs**
- Discussion with service user

**Skill spots**
- Things I can do independently
  - Support tip: Use support planning to give the service user responsibilities that involve using this skill.
  - Support tip: Build confidence by talking about how these skills can be used in work or training opportunities.

**Skills gaps**
- Things I need help to do
  - Support tip: Be explicit: relate literacy skills development to support plan and goal setting.
  - Support tip: Use support plan and needs assessment to establish goals for meeting skills needs.
  - Support tip: Adjust key work to take needs into account. Build in timeline for shifting responsibility to service user.

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“Confidence breeds confidence, and change is easier if you are confident of success.”
Wondering if dyslexia is the reason for literacy difficulties?

This check list isn’t definitive, but it is a useful tool to start talking to someone about the possibility that they are dyslexic.

Dyslexia might be an issue if:

- You have been told you are dyslexic.
- Despite trying, you have found learning to read very difficult.
- Low literacy is not explained by missed schooling or quality of teaching.
- You have had a life-long weak working memory (not explained in the past by trauma, substance abuse or other lifestyle causes).
- You were made to feel ‘lazy’ or ‘stupid’ as a child.

People with dyslexia may also have difficulties with these specific skills:

- Reading unfamiliar words.
- Understanding or remembering what has just been read.
- Pronunciation of longer words.
- Expression – finding the right word when you speak or write.
- Remembering spoken information.
- Left and right are still confused.
- Personal organisation and sense of time.

These difficulties are not a sign of low intelligence; they may be a sign of dyslexia.

Now what?

The two most frequently available assessments for dyslexia are either simple screening tests or full assessments.

It should be borne in mind that it is more difficult to accurately identify dyslexia in people whose childhood education was disrupted and who may now have weak memories due to lifestyle factors, including substance use, or other factors such as mental health issues.
**Dyslexia screening tests**

These are usually administered in places of learning such as adult education colleges, and sometimes in job centres. They are often carried out on the computer, following a short interview.

**Benefits**

- They are inexpensive, and often free to individuals taking the test.
- They provide a quick indication of whether a person is dyslexic.
- Immediate feedback can be given.
- They can be followed up by a full assessment.
- Computer tests are often preferred by people who are apprehensive about assessment.
- A brief written report may be provided.

**Disadvantages**

- They can only indicate, not confirm dyslexia.
- They do not provide detailed information about a person’s strengths and weaknesses.
- They do not identify all types of dyslexia.
- The results of a computer test can cause distress to some people, particularly if not followed up by discussion with a specialist.
Discussion tool for key workers to identify literacy and related support needs

Full assessment

**Benefits**

- Dyslexia is more likely to be confirmed with a strong degree of confidence.
- An individual’s strengths as well as their weaknesses are identified.
- The assessor can reassure the individual and clarify issues throughout the assessment.
- A detailed written report will always be provided.

**Disadvantages**

- Full assessments are expensive and can cost several hundred pounds. Funds may be raised through: Access to work grants, Employers, Colleges, Charities.
- They are lengthy, taking two hours or more to complete.
- Some adults become very anxious about the prospect of a full assessment.

**Follow-up**

Follow up support from key workers will be required to help service users access literacy pathways and additional dyslexia support.

Dyslexia confirmed – now what?
People who have lived with literacy needs may have a level of anxiety about their lack of skills. Effective key workers put people at ease. That’s because it’s the most productive place from which to motivate and challenge someone to change: confidence breeds confidence and change is easier if you’re confident of success.

**Evidence of the need**

In 1996 researchers compared the results when they gave a spelling test to two groups of adults – one with dyslexia and the other without – followed by a series of visual memory and reasoning tasks.

The adults with dyslexia performed less well on the memory and reasoning tasks. The researchers deduced that this was because of the anxiety caused by the previous spelling test.

Non-dyslexics, for whom spelling tests are less likely to arouse anxiety, did not show this reduced efficiency in the subsequent memory and reasoning tasks.

Long-term failure in one area may lead to underperformance in others, particularly when stress has been increased.
Adjusting key working

Knowing that anxiety carries over from one task to the next, here are some tips to make key work sessions stress-free and productive:

- Organise key work sessions to do the easy things first; leaving tasks likely to cause anxiety for the end.
- Offer safe space to practice difficult skills. Often confidence is related to what you don’t know you can do, not what you can’t do.
- Build confidence by reinforcing success.

A case study of ‘MR S’

Despite many educational interventions Mr S, a 33 year-old dyslexic man, had been unable to make any headway in his skills. He was caught up in a vicious circle of literacy difficulties and loss of self-belief. These had caused constraints on his living arrangements and activities, and provoked counter-productive, destructive behaviour.

I could not tell people that I was not able to read and write. That was too shameful for me to do.”

Incorporating emotional and practical support

Following an assessment of Mr S, it was judged that literacy work would continue to be unsuccessful without concurrent psychotherapy. He embarked on a combined two-year programme, and progress began to be made at last.

As his skills increased, however, Mr S became fearful about the responsibility of greater independence. His resolve began to falter. Two factors were central to his persistence with the programme. First, and crucially, Mr S continued to be strongly motivated to improve his life circumstances. Then, psychotherapy supported his determination to improve his reading and writing, which in return helped to resolve his emotional issues. The outcomes for Mr S were positive and long-lasting.
Here are some practical tips for ensuring that support work is sensitive to three of the key areas effected by literacy needs—reading, verbal communication and organisational skills.

**Reading**
Understanding written information might be difficult and stressful for a person with poor literacy.

- Keep it short and simple: Do not overload a page with too much information.
- Use font styles that are the easiest to read: for example, Arial, Tahoma, or Microsoft Sans Serif.
- Use size 12 or larger font.
- Use 1.5 or double line spacing.
- Use clear headings to explain the context of the text.
- Use simple, clear language.
- Use bullet points where possible.
- To make print less tiring, try printing on off-white or coloured paper.

**Listening and understanding**
Some people have trouble understanding verbal communication or putting their own thoughts across.

- Meet in a quiet place.
- Be explicit in what you say.
- Repeat information in different ways.
- Keep it brief.
- Provide information in small chunks.
- Give the service user time to reflect and express their ideas.
- Ask the service user to tell you what they have understood at stages throughout the meeting.
- At the end of the meeting, go over the main points again.
- Provide a visual reminder of key points.

**Organisation**
Service users with literacy needs may also have difficulties with their organisational skills. Good habits may take longer to become automatic because memory can easily become overloaded. You can support helpful skills and strategies such as:

- Keeping a diary or personal organiser.
- Prioritising tasks using to-do lists and other tools.
- Promoting good filing systems for important papers (e.g. tenancy agreement, correspondence with DWP, National Insurance Number, GP details, etc).
- Using post-it notes and other visual reminders of upcoming appointments and tasks.

“emotional issues may need to be addressed as well”
**Learning leads to learning**

Nick hadn’t mentioned literacy as a support need during key work, but the clues were there: ‘he’d make excuses like forgetting his glasses and get me to read things for him,’ said his key worker.

Nick decided to go to college to improve his literacy after doing Thames Reach’s Moving In Moving On (MIMO) painting & decorating course.

He realised there that his literacy was holding him back from his work goals. ‘He’s really enjoying the course,’ says Nick’s keyworker. ‘He’s delighted to be addressing something that’s been an issue for a long time.’

**Power to the people**

Janice’s worker met with her weekly, more than average for floating support, because she wasn’t reading her letters and needed help managing her debt.

Janice was linked in with an agency that offered literacy courses, but it was at too high a level for her skills. They were able to offer some individual support, but it wasn’t enough.

Janice took up individual tutoring so she got the time and attention to start at the beginning.

‘It was an empowering thing for her. It meant she could be more independent,’ says her key worker. ‘Now she reads her letters to me.’

**Building motivation to address literacy needs**

- Write letters to friends
- Get a job
- Go to college to learn a new skill
- Read to your children
- Get out of debt
- Be more independent at home

Adults with low level literacy skills have been living and coping with their needs for a long time. Improving their literacy may not be one of their priorities. Talking about literacy as communication skills and drawing the connection between these skills and their personal goals can be very motivating, as in these examples of Thames Reach service users.
Overcoming barriers

Five key goals to support effective take-up of literacy support:

1 Help the service user find the reason why they want to improve their skills.

2 Build the confidence to get started.

3 Maintain the motivation — it’s a long haul and in parts a steep climb.

4 Joint working and support from other services might be needed.

5 Make sure that you have ready access to information on local resources and services that will support learning.

Potential barriers

Poor organisational skills

These skills often go hand in hand with literacy needs. They can make all the difference to both starting and sticking with a course.

Suggested solutions

- Buy a diary for the service user and spend time explaining how to use it.
- Post signs at home with the dates and times of sessions.
- Offer reminder phone calls or texts.
- Plan when homework will be completed.

Navigating college administration

Going to college may be a new and scary experience.

Signing up for a course often involves substantial literacy skills, which can be off-putting.

- Find out how to apply ahead of time so you know what to expect and what paperwork to bring.
- Offer to go to the college with the service user to enrol.
- Stick around for a coffee afterwards to talk about their experience.

Maintaining motivation

Learning literacy skills requires dedication and practice. It’s hard work and progress may be slow at times. But keep going and the rewards are huge.

- Talk about it! Use key work sessions to review progress and discuss problems.
- Reinforce success—offer praise in words and actions: as reading improves, shift the responsibility for reading tasks to the service user.

There are obvious benefits to taking formal steps to improve literacy skills:

- Improved skills
- Improve job prospects
- Improved confidence

But these selling points alone may not be enough to overcome some of the fears and anxieties associated with a lifelong need. Of the 101 service users interviewed for the Turning the Key research:

- 60% wanted support with literacy
- 28% had attended a literacy course
- 19% of these completed their course
- 13% achieved a qualification

“don’t let cost act as a barrier to taking up literacy support – find out what financial assistance is available locally”
### Question

I want to improve my skills because...

I would like to learn...
( e.g. in a group, on my own, online, during the day, in the evening, near to home... )

I expect my course to be...
( e.g. difficult, fun, exciting, slow-going, loud, full of people younger than me, etc. )

In order to succeed, I think I’ll have to make these changes in my life...
( e.g. cut down on drinking, make time to do homework and practice, work with others, etc. )

By the end of the course, I expect to be able to...
( e.g. fill out forms on my own, travel to new places, read a map, write a letter, get a job )

If I need support, I can get it from...
Local literacy resources and support

List your local resources and contacts (e.g. adult education provision, community programmes, other relevant agencies...).