

# Inside story

A quarter of children finish primary school with reading difficulties. Meet two charities and their volunteers, who are doing their bit to boost children's literacy

## SILVER STORIES

While driving in their car, Cornwall-based Elisabeth and David Carney-Haworth had a light-bulb moment.

At the time, Elisabeth was a nursery and infant school headteacher who wanted her pupils to have a richer reading experience. 'Children tend to only read to a teacher or teaching assistant, or to a busy parent. But I have always had such a love of reading, and books have opened so much of the world to me, that I wanted to enable my children to develop that same love of reading.'

And David was then a police sergeant, who knew older people in the area were often lonely. 'During one particularly cold snap, I worked with Age UK, knocking door to door, making sure that the older generation were fine. And I discovered that some were shrouded in loneliness.'

So the couple – both now retired – thought, why not bring child readers and older listeners together by telephone once a week? And Silver Stories was born.

It started in Elisabeth's school, and the reaction was fantastic. 'The model was that a school would become a Silver Stories school and use their local community to find Silver Listeners (older people who would welcome contact)

**Silver Stories has about 250 listeners linked with children aged three to 14**



for their Silver Readers (children undertaking the reading),' explains Elisabeth. 'The Silver Listeners could either volunteer direct or via, for example, a care provider.'

Then Covid struck. 'We knew that children were at home with parents struggling to get them reading, and that many older people were suddenly housebound and isolated. So we decided to link children directly with Silver Listeners, wherever they were in the country.'

Now, Silver Stories has about 250 Silver Listeners – from Cornwall to Scotland and even overseas – linked with children aged three to 14 either directly or through schools. 'As long as you've got that telephone connection, you can do this from anywhere in the world,' says Elisabeth. 'And to safeguard everyone, addresses aren't shared and a parent or teacher is in the room when children are reading.'



It's a simple scheme but the effect is profound, with children developing greater fluency, confidence and expression in their reading, and both children and Silver Listeners benefiting socially and emotionally, due to the positive relational experience at the heart of Silver Stories.

To volunteer for Silver Stories, visit [www.silverstories.co.uk](http://www.silverstories.co.uk) or call 07535 792621.

## SCHOOLREADERS

For Jane Whitbread, who set up Schoolreaders, it wasn't a light-bulb moment that inspired her – it was a dream!

'I was a governor of my local village primary school for 10 years, so was aware there was a shortage of reading volunteers,' she says.

Then Jane had the dream – 'a very unusual dream that included the whole model of how it would work, the Schoolreaders name and a picture of what could be achieved!'

For two years, the idea niggled away at her. Then, in 2013, Jane decided to go for it.

'Once I looked into the state of child (and adult) illiteracy in this country I was galvanised even more. Even before the pandemic and school disruption, one in four children were leaving primary school not reading to the expected standard.'

And poor reading in primary school goes on to affect secondary education and adulthood too. 'Sadly, one in seven adults in this country are poorly literate and aren't able to read a medicine bottle or fill in such things as a job application form. Plus, poor literacy affects self-esteem and means that reading for pleasure is denied. In addition, many of society's problems are exacerbated due to

illiteracy. For example, 57% of our prison population have a reading age of 11 years or less.'

Over 11% of primary schools in the country are now registered with Schoolreaders, which has over 1,000 volunteers in more than 600 schools, supporting around 10,000 children one-to-one every week.

And those volunteers make a huge difference. 'Reading out loud helps children develop their vocabulary and pronunciation

**Poor reading in primary school goes on to affect secondary education**

and enables our volunteers to gently probe to check that a child understands what a word means.

'Our volunteers are in great demand and we are currently being asked for a further 6,000 by our partner schools,' says Jane. 'We prioritise schools in the most deprived areas with the most disadvantaged children – the children who also lost out most from the disruption during the pandemic,' adds Jane. 'We want every child to have the opportunity to learn to read well and have the life chances that this provides.'

To volunteer for Schoolreaders, visit [www.schoolreaders.org](http://www.schoolreaders.org) or call 01234 924111.



The idea for Schoolreaders came to Jane in a dream

Turn the page to hear from two dedicated volunteers

