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Literacy
Trust**

Change your story

Children and Young People's Listening in 2023

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Introduction

The National Literacy Trust began reporting on children and young people's listening in 2020, with a literature review on the benefits of audiobooks in supporting literacy (Best, 2020). Questions about listening attitudes and behaviours now sit alongside reading and writing in the Annual Literacy Survey, and 2023 is the first year where we can report on listening trends year on year. The following report outlines those findings, showing how listening enjoyment and behaviours have changed, while also providing deeper insight into listening in 2023.

As outlined below, audio listening (such as audiobooks and podcasts) has seen a slight increase following a drop in 2022. This is encouraging in the context of a market where growth slowed for the first time in the first half of 2022 according to Nielsen BookData. However, as report author Jaclyn Swope noted, while this might be in part attributable to the cost-of-living crisis, it also makes sense given the accelerated growth that took place during the pandemic (quoted in Brown, 2022). Indeed, this growth spike was supported by children and young people's listening, reading and writing behaviours, where enjoyment saw a similar increase during school closures.

Also, for the first time this year, we asked children and young people whether they enjoyed hearing stories in formats other than listening to audiobooks or podcasts, such as being told a story by a teacher or family member. Encouraging teachers to read aloud to students has been highlighted as a priority in the industry: in 2019, Alison David, Consumer Insights Director for Egmont Publishing, commented that story time should be an 'intrinsic part of the school day' even into teens (quoted in Flood, 2019). The below findings support this, suggesting that there is an appetite for hearing stories even from older children and young people.

Finally, in addition to questions around the benefits of listening and listening in different formats, this year we looked at possible connections between listening enjoyment and listening confidence. As highlighted in the Department for Education's 2023 Reading Framework, listening is a skill that must be developed: "Teachers need to develop listening skills over time, deliberately building up the time that the children listen with attention and concentration." (Department for Education, The Reading Framework, 2023 p. 26.) Too often, listening is characterised as a deficit behaviour defined by children sitting still and not talking or disrupting a lesson or by paying attention to instructions. However, listening to

audio is so much more and, as outlined here and previously (e.g. Best et al., 2022), has many additional benefits. Here we explore how those benefits might include building and supporting active listening skills and confidence.

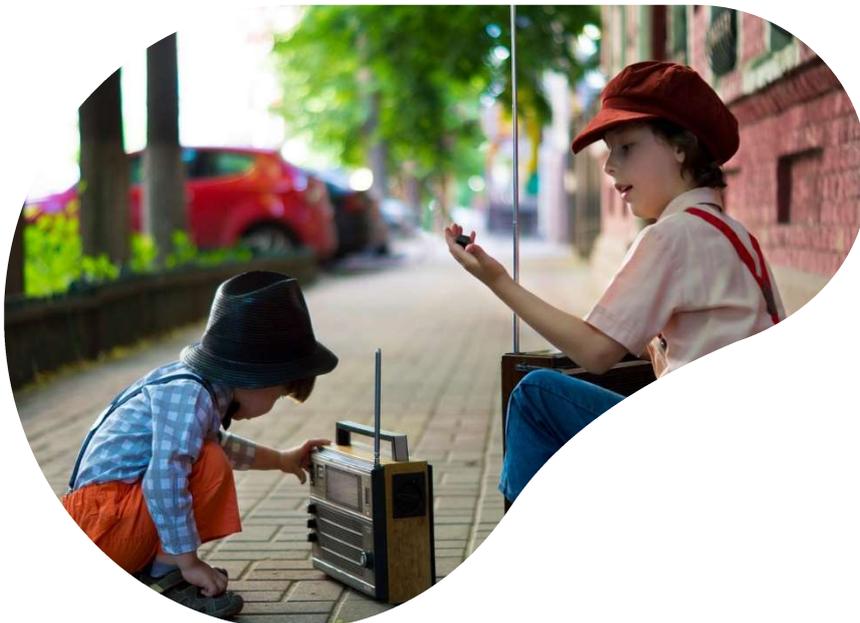
Method

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and the middle of March 2023. We made two surveys available: one for children aged 5 to 8 (Year 1 to Year 4, or Primary 2 to Primary 5 for Scotland) and one for children and young people aged 8 to 18 (Year 4 to Year 13, or Primary 5 to Secondary 6 for Scotland). The surveys contain similar questions but the one for the younger age group is shorter and more pictorial. It was up to the teacher's discretion which of the surveys their Year 4 pupils completed.

71,351 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 285 schools in the UK participated in this online survey: 7,285 children were aged 5 to 8 and 64,066 children and young people were aged 8 to 18.

To capture more of the listening experiences and opinions of children and young people, the online survey also contained numerous open-text questions that have been themed and analysed to help contextualise findings in this report.

Most of the below findings refer to responses from children and young people aged 8 to 18, although we also include some of those from children aged 5 to 8. Where findings are from the younger age group, this will be highlighted.



Key findings

Overall listening

- 2 in 5 (39.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoyed listening to audio in 2023.
 - This was a slight increase from 2022 (37.5%) but still lower than 2021 (43.8%).
 - As in previous years, this was slightly lower than reading (43.4%) but slightly higher than writing (34.6%).
- Nearly 1 in 2 (46.0%) children and young people listened to audio at least once a week.
 - This was a slight increase from 2022 (39.7%) and closer to – but not quite at – the level of 2021 (48.7%).
- 1 in 2 (50.5%) children and young people enjoyed listening to stories.
 - Enjoyment of listening to stories was highest for those aged 8 to 11 (7 in 10 or 69.3%)
- 1 in 4 (25.8%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 had listened to an audiobook, podcast, or radio show with their family in the past four weeks.
 - Nearly 2 in 5 (36.6%) of those aged 5 to 8 said they had listened to an audiobook in the past four weeks.
- Around 1 in 4 (25.8%) of those aged 8 to 18 said that they had listened to an audiobook, podcast or radio show with their family and just over 1 in 5 (22.1%) said that they had downloaded or streamed audiobooks or podcasts in the past four weeks.

Demographics

- Slightly more boys than girls said they enjoyed listening to audio (40.6% vs 37.8%) and slightly more of those who didn't receive Free School Meals (FSMs) said they enjoyed listening to audio compared with those who did (40.0% vs 37.6%).
- Gaps between gender, age and FSM uptake were consistently smaller for listening to audio than for reading or writing.
- The biggest difference for listening enjoyment was age, where 1 in 2 (51.4%) of those aged 16 to 18 said that they enjoyed listening to audio compared with fewer than 2 in 5 (38.6%) of those aged 8 to 11 and 11 to 14.

- 1 in 2 (53.3%) girls who enjoyed hearing stories enjoyed hearing a friend tell them compared with 2 in 5 (41.4%) boys in this group.
- Slightly more children and young people in receipt of FSMs enjoyed hearing stories read or told to them by a teacher or librarian compared with their peers not receiving FSMs (57.8% vs 51.5%).
- Over half of children and young people aged over 14 who enjoyed hearing stories enjoyed hearing them read or told to them by a parent or carer, and around 2 in 5 by a teacher or librarian.
- Across England, the region with the highest level of listening was London, where 42.0% said that they enjoyed listening and 49.3% said that they listened at least once a week.

Links with other behaviours

- More of those who enjoyed listening to audio also enjoyed reading in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy listening (52.2% vs. 37.6%).
- More of those who enjoyed listening also enjoyed writing in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy listening (40.0% vs. 31.0%).
- Open-ended comments suggest that listening could lead to reading, such as where a book might be recommended on a podcast.

Benefits of listening

- Of those who said that they enjoyed listening:
 - 46.5% said it helped them understand a subject.
 - 45.8% said it helped them relax.
 - This was the only benefit with a difference in agreement by gender, with 42.7% of boys agreeing vs 48.5% of girls.
 - 44.8% said they used their imagination more than when they watch videos.
 - 35.5% said it made them want to talk about a subject.
 - 30.6% said it had got them interested in reading.
 - 22.7% said they enjoyed listening to accents that sounded like their own.
- Open-ended comments suggest that other benefits included expanded horizons and improved empathy, as well as offering access to stories when books are prohibitively expensive or difficult.

Different formats

- 20.3% of children and young people aged 8 to 18 listened to audiobooks. This was a slight increase from 2022 when 16.6% said they were listening to audiobooks.
- There was a similar increase in podcast listening, with 28.5% saying they listened compared with 23.6% in 2022.

Listening to stories

- 7 in 10 (69.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to stories did so on video-streaming sites like YouTube.
- Most children and young people preferred to hear stories directly from adults including parents/carers (59.7%) and teachers/librarians (53.4%).
- Just under half (47.7%) also enjoyed hearing stories read or told to them by a friend. However, 1 in 2 (50.9%) also enjoyed hearing stories in recorded or digital formats (i.e. audiobooks and podcasts). Open-ended comments highlighted that many children and young people value hearing stories told to them by loved ones, particularly true stories from, for example, their grandparents.
 - Of those who enjoyed hearing stories, more than half of children and young people aged 14 (50.7% of those aged 14 to 16 and 50.8% of those aged 16 to 18) enjoyed hearing a story read to them by a parent or carer, and over 2 in 5 (42.4% of those aged 14-16 and 41.5% of those aged 16 to 18) read to them by a teacher or librarian.
- Over 9 out of 10 (93.4%) children aged 5 to 8 said that they enjoyed hearing stories read to them by a teacher or parent.

Listening confidence

- 4 in 5 (77.9%) children and young people felt that they were good listeners.
- Confidence levels were relatively stable across demographics, but the biggest difference was between FSM (72.2%) and non-FSM (79.9%), suggesting that young people from lower-income backgrounds could benefit in particular from greater support in this area.
- Listening behaviours correlated with increased listening confidence: 85.2% of those who enjoyed listening said that they were good listeners compared with 73.2% of those who did not enjoy listening, and 84.1% of those who listened frequently said they were good listeners compared with 69.6% of those who never listened.

- The biggest differences in listening confidence relative to enjoyment and listening frequency was found for boys (84.9% of those who enjoyed listening compared with 71.4% who did not) and for those in receipt of FSMs (80.9% of those who enjoyed listening compared with 67.0% of those who did not).

Enjoyment of listening to audio

In 2023, 2 in 5 (39.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed listening to audio. As shown in Figure 1, this was a very slight increase from 2022, but still slightly lower than levels of listening enjoyment we recorded in 2021. As in previous years, it was slightly lower than reading (43.4%) (Clark et al., 2023a) but slightly higher than writing (34.6%) (Clark et al., 2023b).

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to audio between 2021 and 2023



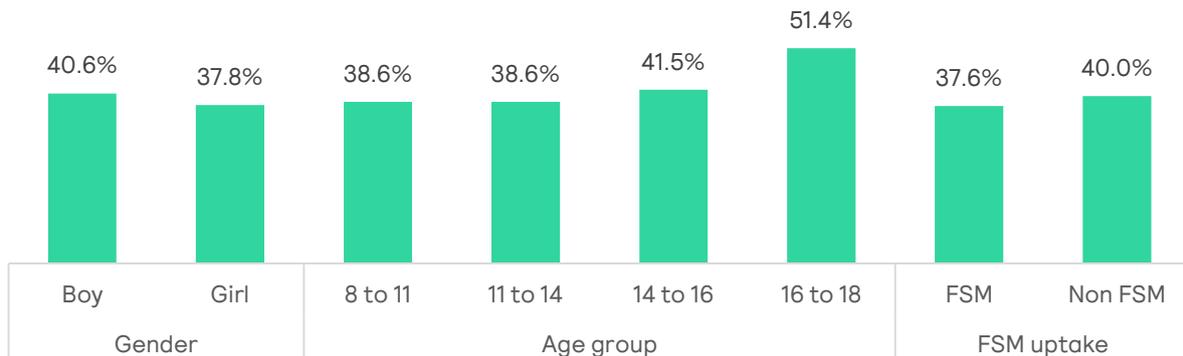
39.4%

**Children and young people
enjoyed listening to audio
in 2023**

Listening enjoyment by gender, age group and FSM uptake¹

As shown in Figure 2, we saw the highest level of listening enjoyment for those aged 16 to 18, where just over half (51.4%) said that they enjoyed listening to audio. This was also the biggest difference between age groups, with an increase of 12.8 percentage points (pps) from those aged 8 to 11 and aged 11 to 14. Meanwhile, slightly more boys than girls said they enjoyed listening to audio (40.6% vs 37.8%) and slightly more of those who didn't receive FSMs said they enjoyed listening to audio compared with those who did (40.0% vs 37.6%).

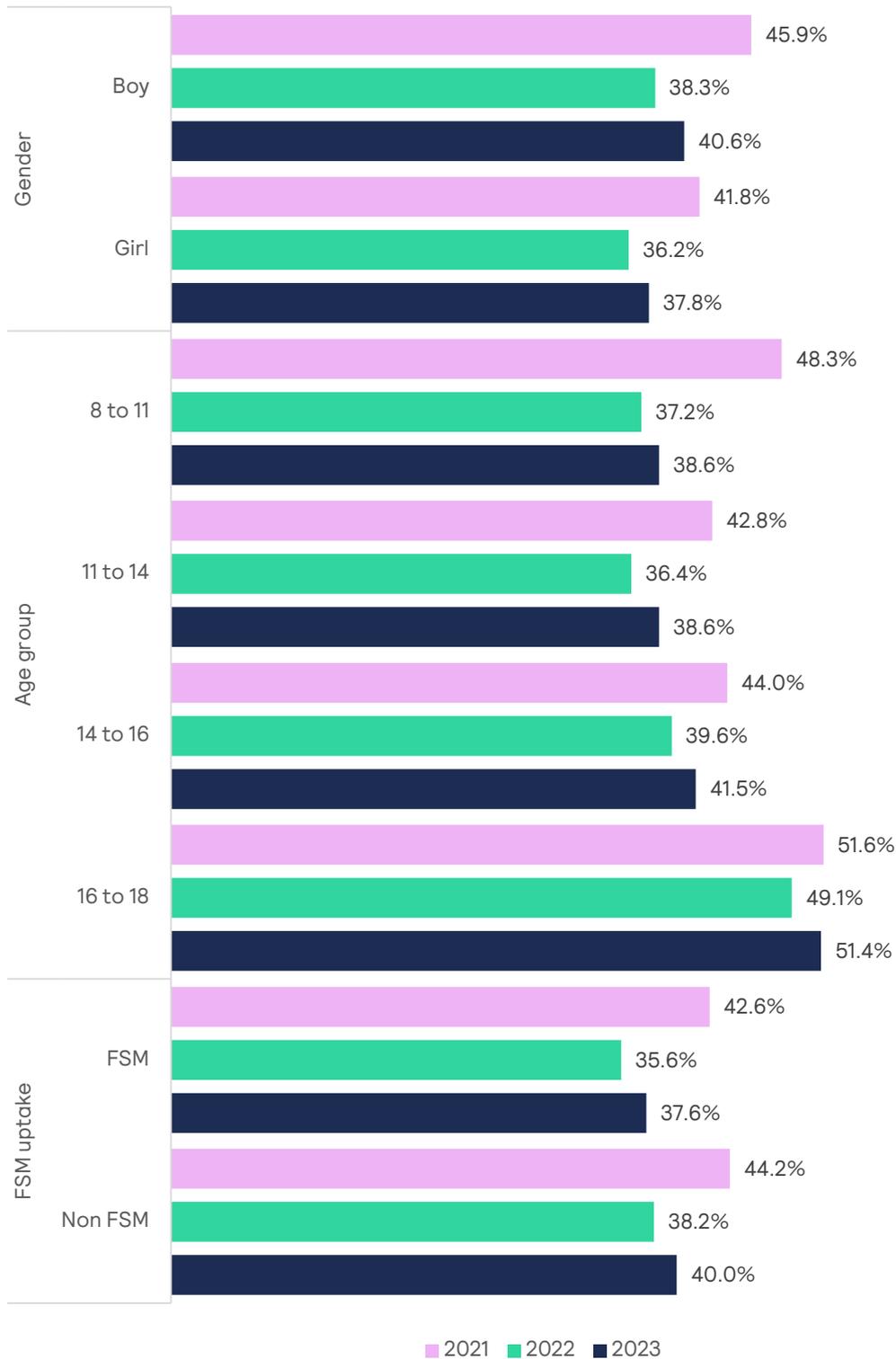
Figure 2: Children and young people who enjoyed listening in 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal (FSM) uptake



Looking at listening enjoyment year on year (Figure 3), these demographic differences mirrored the overall figures, with enjoyment levels in 2023 being higher than 2022 but still lower than 2021. However, where for those aged 16 to 18 enjoyment rates have stayed relatively stable across all years with a difference between 2021 and 2023 of just 0.2pps, for those aged 8 to 11 there was a drop between 2021 and 2022 of 11.1pps that has failed to recover in 2023, with a 9.7 pp gap between 2021 and 2023.

¹ Boys aged 5 to 8: 46.4% (n = 3,383), girls aged 5 to 8: 49.2% (n = 3,587), 0.7% (n = 54) described themselves another way, 3.6% (n = 261) didn't want to state their gender. Boys aged 8 to 18: (n = 30,077, 46.9%), girls aged 8 to 18: (31,076, 48.5%), 2.3% (n = 1,485) didn't want to specify their gender and 2.2% (n = 1,428) described themselves another way. Aged 5 to 8 = 9.2% (n = 6,444); aged 8 to 11 = 15.8% (n = 10,127); aged 11 to 14 = 66.4% (n = 42,523); aged 14 to 16 = 15.1% (n = 9,667); aged 16 to 18 = 2.7% (n = 1,749). For those aged 8 to 18 only: FSM: 16.3% (n = 10,418); non-FSM: 72.0% (n = 46,116); didn't want to say: 1.6% (n = 1,046); didn't know: 10.1% (n = 6,486). The demographic make-up of our 2023 sample was largely comparable with that of 2022 and previous samples.

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to audio in 2021, 2022 and 2023 by gender, age and FSM uptake



Enjoyment of listening across demographics compared with reading and writing

Figure 4 shows how the gaps in listening enjoyment across demographics compared with those for reading and writing enjoyment. While there was variation across groups, listening enjoyment was less variable than other formats. In the case of gender, the difference was four times smaller than for writing (2.8 pps vs. 10.6 pps for writing (Clark et al., 2023)) and slightly smaller than the difference for reading (4.8%).

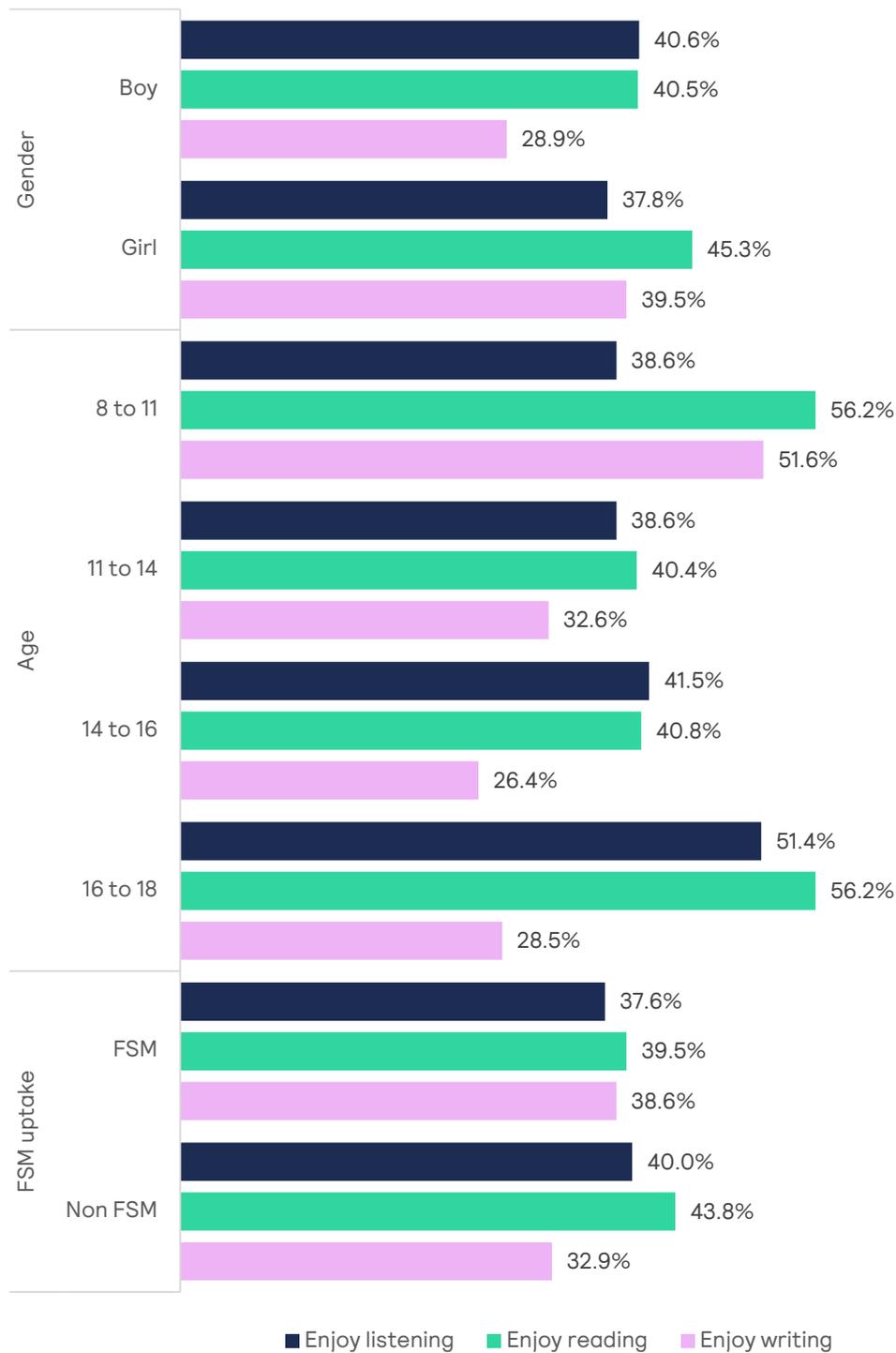


For boys, listening and reading enjoyment levels were almost identical where writing enjoyment was lower, whereas for girls, listening enjoyment was more on a par with writing, while reading was higher. Indeed, listening was the only activity where boys reported a higher (if only slightly) level of enjoyment than girls.

Considering FSM uptake, there was little difference between those who received FSMs in their reading, writing and listening enjoyment. There was, however, a much wider difference for those who didn't receive FSMs, with just 32.9% of children and young people in this group enjoying writing compared with 40% enjoying listening and 43.8% enjoying reading.

Meanwhile, considering age groups, listening enjoyment was much lower than reading or writing for younger groups but, for older groups, it has overtaken writing and is closer to reading enjoyment levels.

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said they enjoyed listening, reading and writing in 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal (FSM) uptake

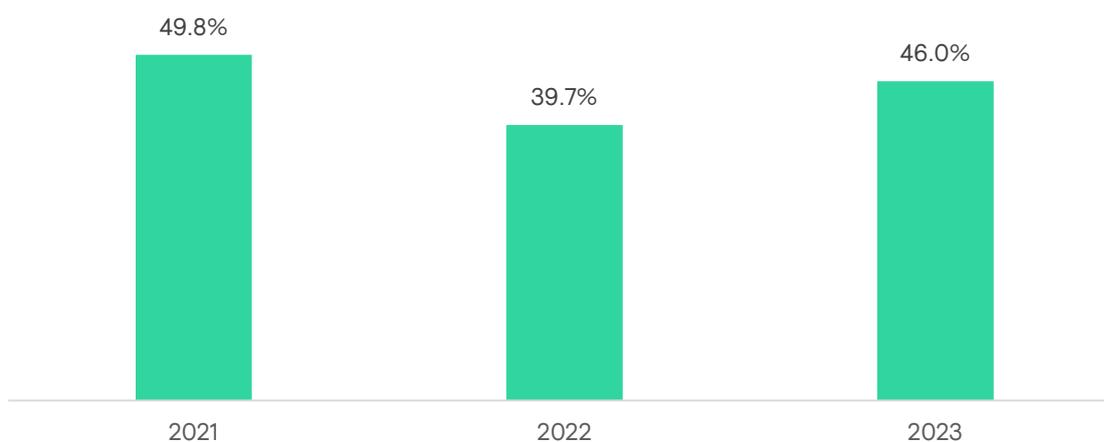


Listening behaviours

Frequency

In 2023, just under half (46%) of all children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they listened to audio once a week or more. As with enjoyment of listening, and as shown in Figure 5, this is an increase from 2022, if not quite reaching the levels of 2021.

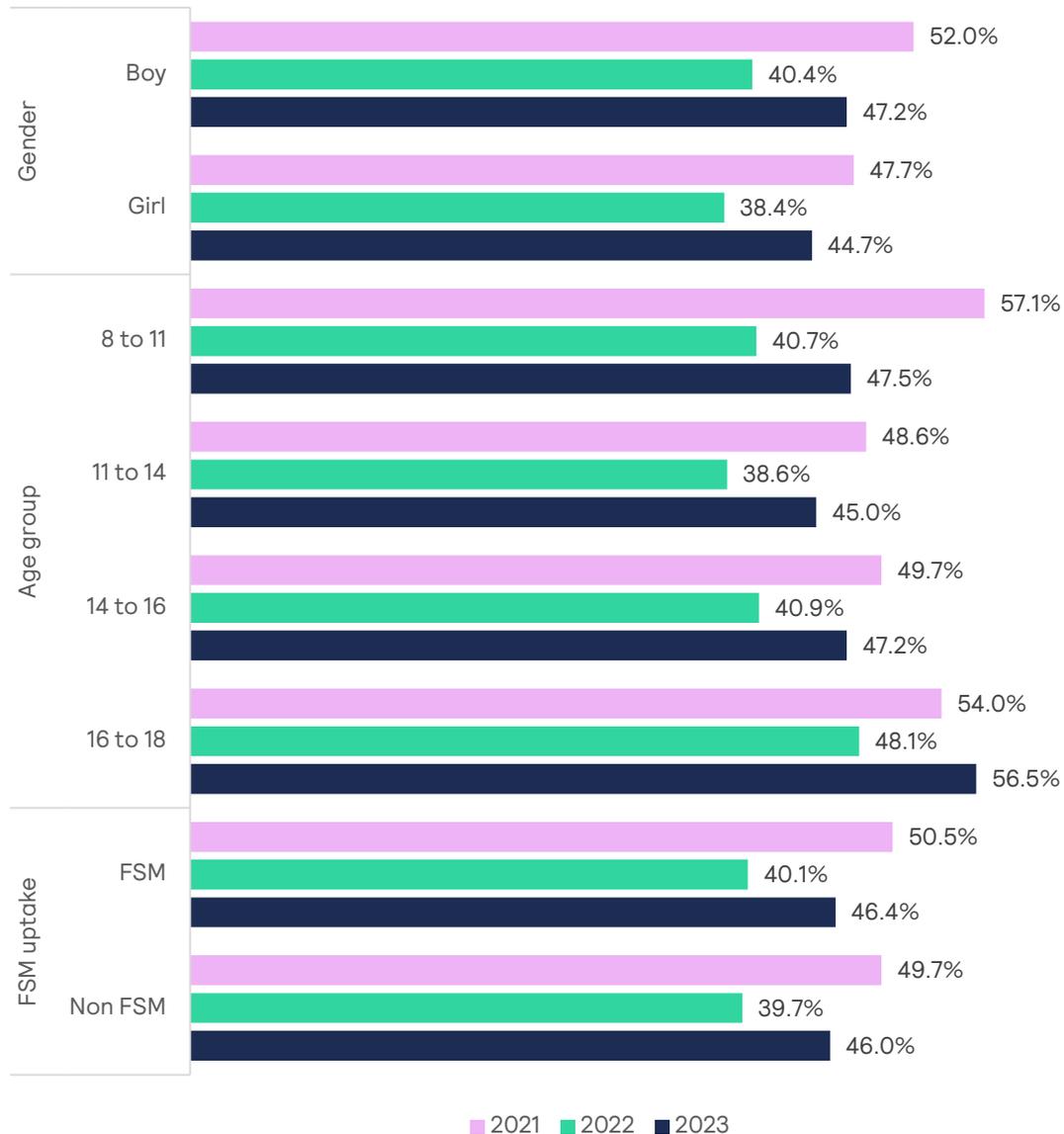
Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who listened to audio at least once a week between 2021 and 2023



Again, looking at the year-on-year data by different demographics (Figure 6) shows a similar pattern, with 2023 levels returning across the board to those of 2021 following a dip in 2022. Where enjoyment of listening had remained stable for those aged 16 to 18, it is notable that listening frequency actually increased for this age group from 2021, with a difference of 2.5 pps.

It is perhaps less encouraging to see that for the youngest age group (8 to 11), while there has been an increase from 2022, this has not reached the 2021 level where nearly 3 in 5 (57.1%) children were listening at least once a week.

Figure 6: Children and young people who listened to audio at least once a week between 2021 and 2023 by gender, age and FSM uptake

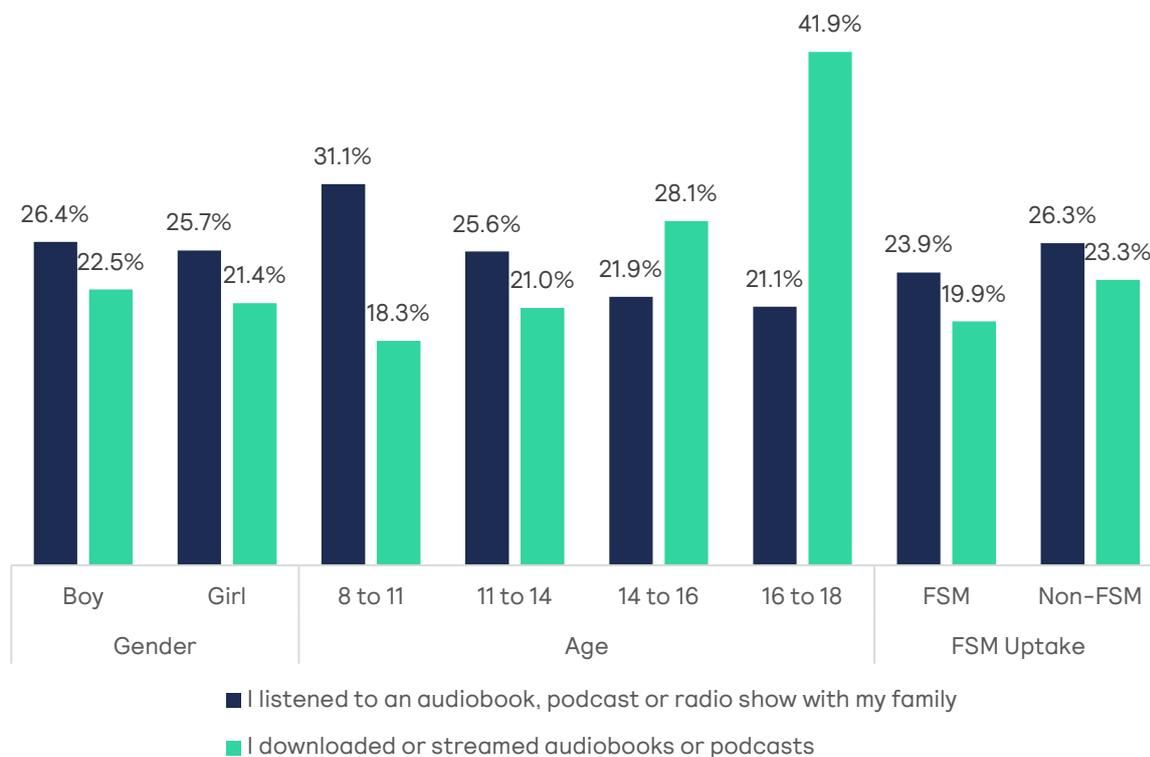


Recent engagement with audio

We asked children and young people whether they had engaged in a range of literacy-related behaviours in the past four weeks, including those related to listening to audio. 1 in 4 (25.8%) said that they had listened to an audiobook, podcast or radio show with their family and 1 in 5 (22.1%) said that they had downloaded or streamed audiobooks or podcasts. Figure 7 shows that, as in other areas, this varied most significantly by age. For listening to an audiobook or other

form of audio there was a steady decline from the youngest to oldest, with 31.1% of those aged 8 to 11 having done this in the previous four weeks compared with 21.1% of those aged 16 to 18. Conversely, there was an increase from youngest to oldest in those who downloaded or streamed content, going from 18.3% of those aged 8 to 11 to 28.1% of those aged 14 to 16, before a marked increase to 41.9% for those aged 16 to 18.

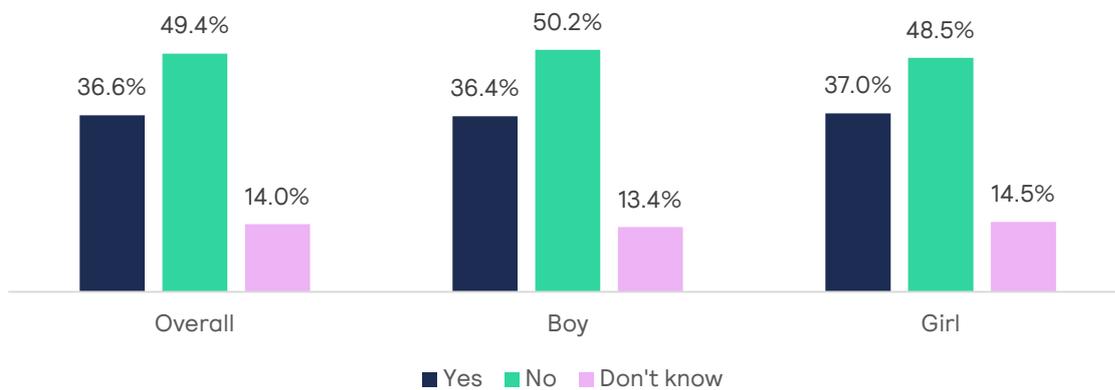
Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who engaged with audio in the previous four weeks by gender, age and FSM uptake in 2023



We also asked children aged 5 to 8 a simplified version of this question, with the option being 'I listened to an audiobook'. As shown in Figure 8, more children aged 5 to 8 agreed with this than older children and young people, with nearly 2 in 5 (36.6%) of those aged 5 to 8 saying they had listened to an audiobook. Also, notably, there was hardly any difference between boys (36.4%) and girls (37.0%). In addition, the percentage of those who said they did not know (14.0% overall) was significantly higher than for the 8 to 18 group (9.3%), but there was a decrease here by age (13.7% of those aged 8 to 11 compared with just 5.1% of those aged 16 to 18). This raises the possibility that more younger children were listening to audiobooks,

but they were perhaps unaware of the format as it was being controlled by a parent, teacher or other adult or family member.

Figure 8: Percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who had listened to an audiobook in the previous four weeks in 2023



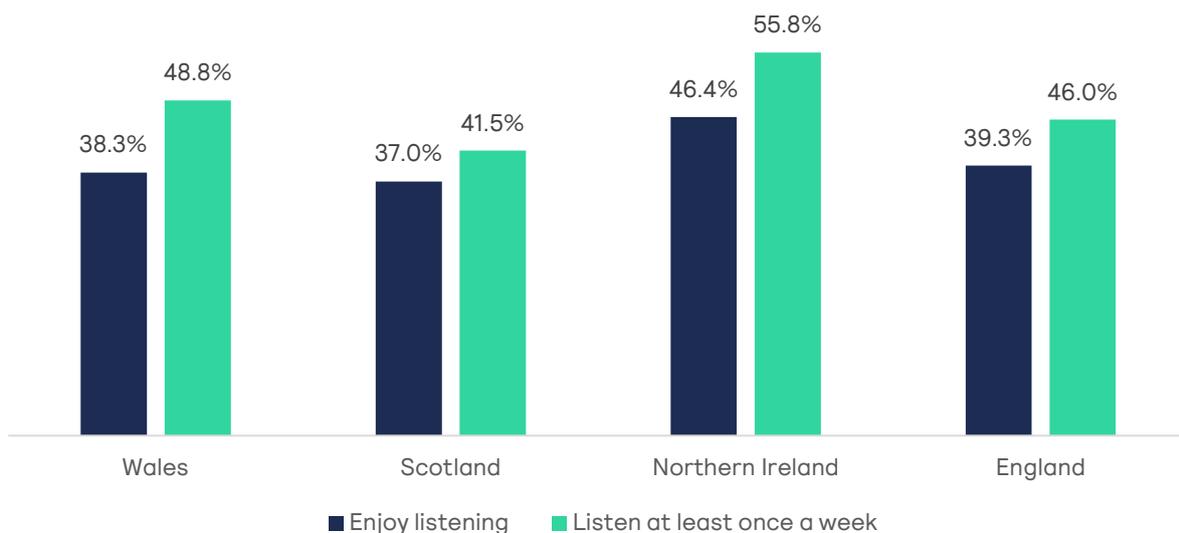
1 in 4

children and young people aged 8-18 said that they had listened to an audiobook, podcast or radio show with their family in the past 4 weeks.

Listening enjoyment and frequency by region²

There were some differences in children’s listening enjoyment based on location; regions in England and nations of the UK are outlined in Figures 9 and 10. Across the UK (Figure 9), levels of enjoyment and listening frequency were the highest in Northern Ireland (46.4% enjoyed listening and 55.8% listened at least once a week). It is important to note, however, that the sample size of Northern Ireland (see below) was much smaller than that of other nations, occupying just 0.2% of the cohort overall.

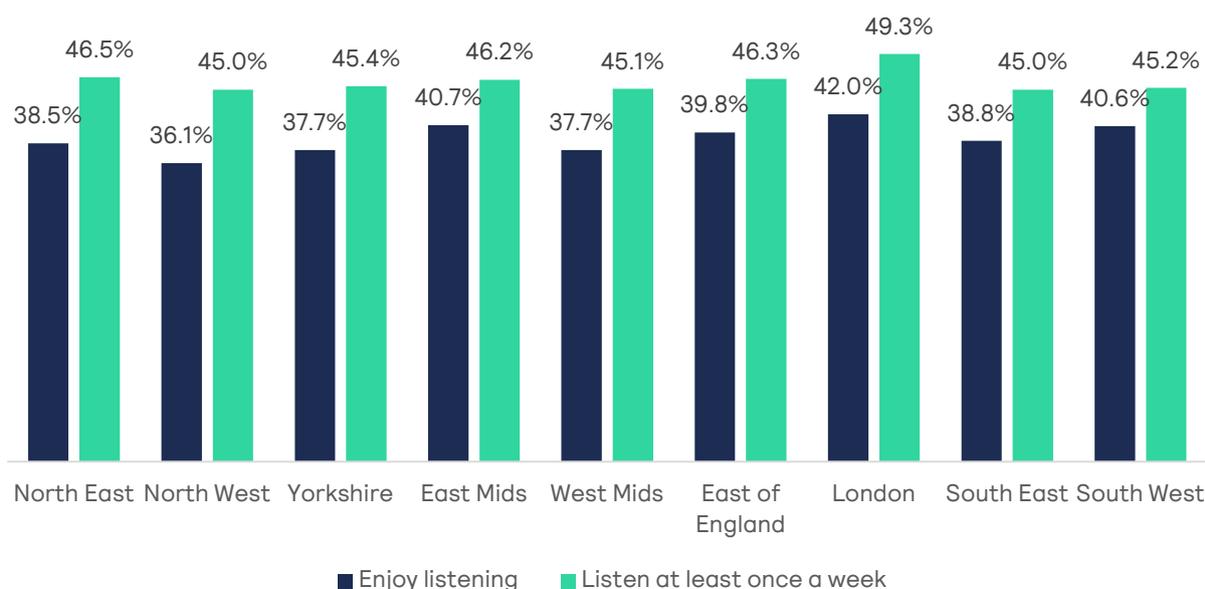
Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to audio and who listened to audio at least once a week by UK nation in 2023



As can be seen in Figure 10, levels of enjoyment and listening frequency were highest in London (42.0% and 49.3%) and lowest in the North West and South East (36.1% and 45.0%).

² England regions: North East: 6.8% (n = 4,350), North West: 7.2% (n = 4,559), Yorkshire: 9.4% (n = 6,015), East Mids: 7.8% (n = 4,965), West Mids: 7.3% (n = 4,650), East of England: 17.1% (n = 10,907), London: 11.9% (n = 7,580), South East: 16% (n = 10,206), South West: 12.7% (n = 8,097). UK nations: England: 96.3% (n = 6,1329), Wales: 1.7% (n = 1,058), Scotland: 1.8% (n = 1,141), Northern Ireland: 0.2% (n = 138)

Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to audio and who listened to audio at least once a week by regions in England in 2023



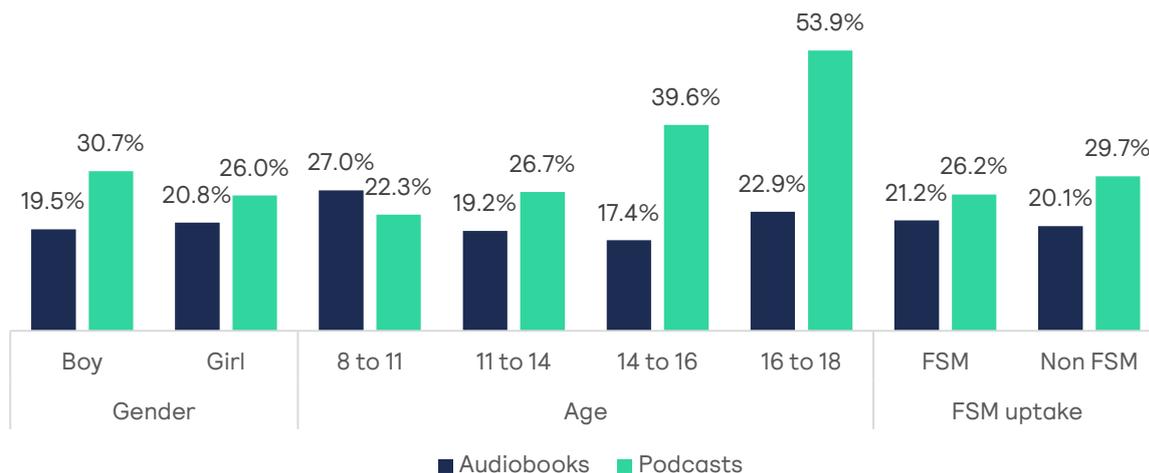
Different formats

In addition to overall listening to audio, we asked children and young people whether they listened specifically to audiobooks and/or podcasts. 1 in 5 (20.3%) of children and young people said they listened to audiobooks in 2023. This is a slight increase (3.7pp) from 2022 when 16.6% said they were listening to audiobooks. There has been a similar increase in podcast listening, with 28.5% saying they listened compared with 23.6% in 2022, an increase of 4.9pp.

As shown in Figure 11, audiobook listenership remained stable across demographics, with a spike for those aged 8 to 11. In fact, this is the only group for whom audiobook listenership is higher than podcast listenership. Podcasts, meanwhile, varied much more by age, with more than twice the percentage of those aged 16 to 18 listening (53.9%) compared with those aged 8 to 11 (22.3%).

There was also a bigger difference (if still small when compared with age) by gender and FSM eligibility for podcasts than audiobooks: a 4.7pp difference between boys and girls for podcasts compared with 1.3 pps for audiobooks, and a 3.5pp difference for FSM and non-FSM compared with 1.1pps for podcasts.

Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who listened to audiobooks and/or podcasts by gender, age and FSM eligibility in 2023



Of course, it is evident from open-ended comments (below) that many children and young people are listening to audio in other formats, such as in videos on YouTube or TikTok, but there remains an appetite for these more established formats.

Similarly, while not considered a traditional audio format, many children and young people mentioned listening on TikTok:

“I don’t normally listen to audiobooks or podcasts but sometimes I’ll listen to extracts of them on social media (TikTok or YouTube mostly).” (Girl, Year 7)

“Short horror stories on TikTok with an automated robot voice reading the horror story from Reddit.” (Girl, Year 8)

This second comment appears to relate to a specific genre of storytelling, where posts from Reddit are recreated with an automated voice (from a text-to-speech programme) reading the story, while there is rolling video, most commonly gameplay footage from Minecraft.³

³ For more information about this see, for example, Carolina Grassman, ‘The #AskReddit hashtag has more than 10 billion views and counting: Here’s why these videos are so popular.’ *The Insider*, 20 Sep 2022, <https://www.insider.com/reddit-storytelling-tiktoks-have-exploded-in-popularity-heres-why-2022-9> [accessed 27 July 2023]

Meanwhile, some comments suggest that there was an appetite to be read to but that this was not happening at all or not happening as much as they would like:

“Read to me by my older sister – that is if she ever has time which she hardly does.”
(Girl, Year 7)

“My parents are not always available as I have 2 other siblings.” (Girl, Year 5)

“My parents read to me once and I really liked it but it only happened once and they don’t want to read to me now.”
(Girl, Year 8)

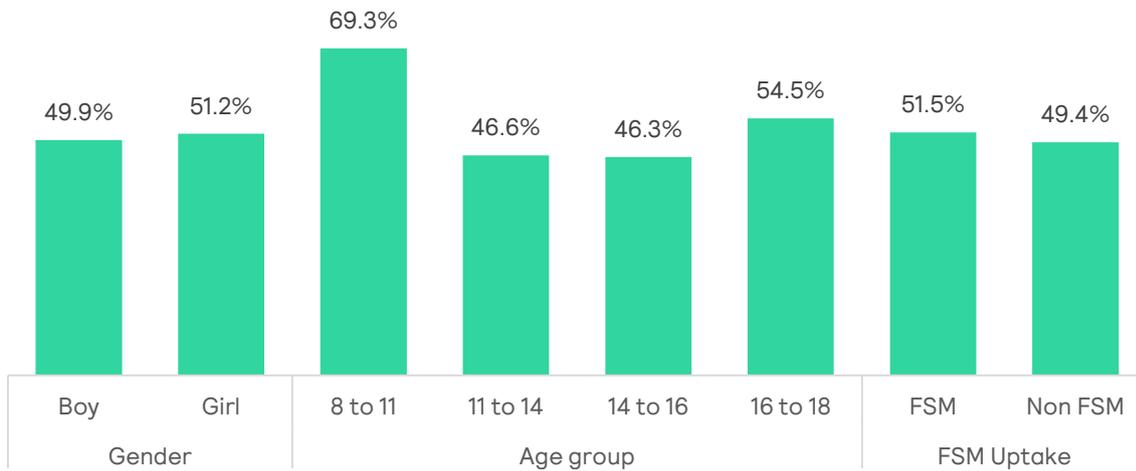
Listening to stories

“Listening to and talking about stories and non-fiction develops children’s vocabulary, because they meet words they would rarely hear or use in everyday speech.”

(Department for Education, 2023, p. 7)

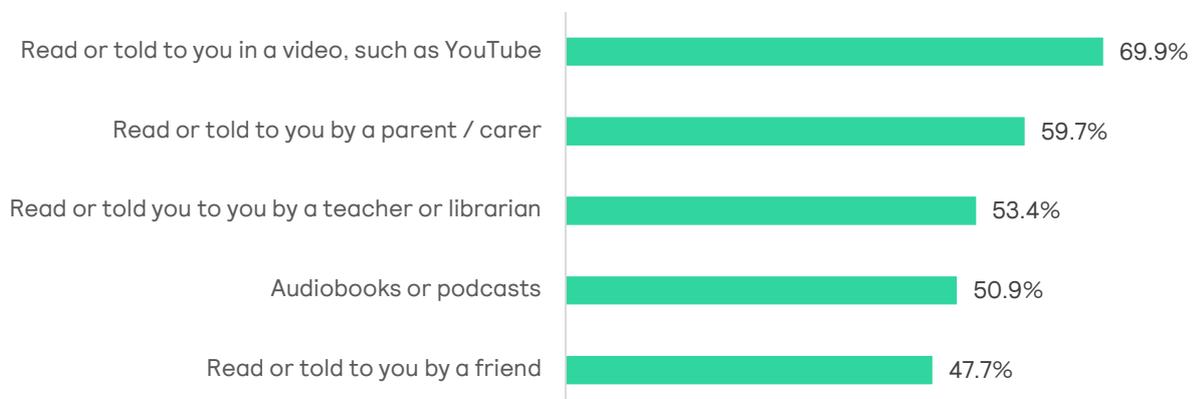
We also asked children and young people if they enjoyed listening to stories (as opposed to listening to audio, which might also include other genres than storytelling, such as drama or non-fiction), and half (50.5%) said that they did. Encouragingly, this was relatively consistent across different demographics (Figure 12). It is interesting to note that, by age group, this follows a similar pattern to enjoyment of reading, with a drop for those aged between 11 and 16 and then an increase for those aged 16 to 18, though not quite reaching the levels of those aged 8 to 11 where the figure sits at 7 in 10 (69.3%).

Figure 12: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to stories by gender, age and FSM uptake in 2023



We then asked those children and young people who enjoyed listening to stories whether they enjoyed hearing them in different ways and with different people, responses to which are shown in Figure 13. Of the different media listed, video was the most popular, with 7 in 10 (69.9%) of this group saying they enjoyed hearing stories that way. 3 in 5 (59.7%) said that they enjoyed hearing stories read to them by a parent or carer, while 3 in 5 (59.97%) enjoyed hearing them read by a teacher or librarian.

Figure 13: Preferred formats for those children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they enjoyed hearing stories in 2023



Cross-referencing preferred formats by gender, age and FSM uptake of those children and young people who enjoyed hearing stories showed some unexpected results for age and gender as outlined in Table 1.

For example, there was only a slight difference between boys and girls in most cases but there was a more marked difference for those who enjoyed a story being read or told to them by a friend, with just 2 in 5 (41.4%) boys compared with half (53.3%) of girls saying this. Meanwhile, far more older children and young people enjoyed hearing stories via a podcast or audiobook, which adheres to other findings to do with listening to audio. Likewise, more children and young people from the older age groups enjoyed hearing stories read on a video, though again this may be a question of access because older children and young people generally have more extended access to devices that they can use in this way. There was also, however, a notable difference between the eldest and youngest groups for hearing a story read or told to them by a friend.

Conversely, younger groups had higher levels of enjoyment for stories read or told to them by an adult, whether that be a teacher, librarian, parent or carer. However, these are still smaller gaps than where older children have higher levels of enjoyment and it is perhaps encouraging to see that more than half of children and young people aged 14 and over enjoyed hearing a story read to them by a parent or carer, and around 2 in 5 enjoyed hearing a story read by a teacher or librarian.

Table 1: Preferred media and formats for children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed hearing stories by gender, age and FSM eligibility in 2023

	Gender		Age group				FSM Uptake	
	Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non FSM
Read or told to you in a video, such as on YouTube	72.2%	67.8%	64.0%	70.1%	77.0%	82.3%	74.1%	69.7%
Read or told to you by a parent / carer	59.2%	61.1%	67.0%	59.3%	50.7%	50.8%	57.3%	59.8%
Read or told you to you by a teacher or librarian	51.6%	55.7%	66.4%	51.4%	42.4%	41.5%	57.8%	51.5%
Audiobooks or podcasts	51.1%	49.9%	39.1%	52.1%	62.0%	72.1%	46.9%	53.4%
Read or told to you by a friend	41.4%	53.3%	43.9%	46.6%	56.2%	64.3%	50.1%	48.0%

Hearing stories: digging deeper

We asked children and young people to tell us if there were any other ways they enjoyed hearing stories, or if they wanted to say any more. Some of the below

comments came from open-ended questions about listening where children and young people volunteered information relevant to this question. Gender and school year have been included with these quotes to illustrate that hearing stories is popular with children of all ages, not just younger groups.⁴

Many children and young people mentioned they enjoyed hearing specific family members read to them:

“I like hearing stories by my mum or dad and [I] like it when my cat is with me.” (Girl, Year 4)

“My parents read to me and my siblings sometimes.” (Girl, Year 7)

Others mentioned teachers and school librarians:

“I love the way teachers at school read. It’s really fun and interesting.” (Boy, Year 7)

“It would be better if we could go to the library in school, for example in English, to read a book for some of the lesson (being read to us by librarian).” (Boy, Year 8)

Several mentioned hearing themselves, which may refer to reading aloud:

“I prefer to read out loud to myself, especially if the passage I am reading is challenging.” (Girl, Year 10)

“I enjoy hearing my own voice when I read out loud.” (Girl, Year 7)

Different types of story

Crucially, this question was about hearing stories in different formats in addition to audio, which may also include hearing books read, but also hearing people tell their own stories, particularly friends and family. Many comments highlighted this:

“My grandparents have the most interesting stories in the world!” (Boy, Year 9)

“From my parents but true stories.” (Girl, Year 4)

⁴ We use school year rather than age for specific quotes as this is how we ask the question in the survey. To see how English school years translate to age, visit <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum>

“It feels nice to hear something that I can picture in my mind; it’s very interesting to me. Like when a teacher stops the lesson really quickly to share something that happened to them relating to the topic or any background information on the subject we’re learning. Or when my parents tell me stories from their childhood. Even just the retelling of a funny event that happened to one of my friends.” (Girl, Year 11)

Hearing stories for those aged 5 to 8

We asked children aged 5 to 8 whether they enjoyed hearing stories read to them by a teacher or parent. Over 9 out of 10 (93.4%) said they did, either a lot (64.7%) or a bit (28.6%). This is on a par with previous years: in 2021 we reported that 95.6% of children of this age group enjoyed hearing stories read to them (Best, 2021). We also had some comments from children in this survey concerning their feelings about reading where they directly highlighted an interest in listening.

“I read sometimes audiobooks when I’m bored and lonely.” (Boy, Year 3)

“I like going to the library as it gives me a different space to sit and listen to my audio.” (Boy, Year 4)

“I like listening to books.” (Girl, Year 4)

Benefits of listening

We asked those children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they enjoyed listening to audio whether they agreed with various statements about its benefits, with many telling us that they were motivated to listen for information and wellbeing. As shown in Figure 14, just under half agreed that listening to an audiobook or podcast made it easier to understand a story or subject (46.5%), that it helped them relax or feel better when stressed or anxious (45.8%), and that they used their imagination more than when watching videos (44.8%). There were also clear links with other literacy skills such as speaking and reading: around a third agreed that listening to an audiobook or podcast made them want to talk more about a subject with family or friends (35.5%), and that listening to an audiobook has got them interested in reading books on paper or on screen (30.6%).

Figure 14: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to audio and their agreement with statements about its benefits in 2023



Across different demographics, some of these statements have more variable levels of agreement than others. For example, as shown in Table 2, there was very little difference in agreement across age, gender or FSM eligibility that listening to an audiobook or podcast made it easier to understand a subject. Meanwhile, there is a noticeable difference between age groups with other statements. More younger children agreed that listening to stories meant that they use their imagination more, with a 12.9pp difference between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 16 to 18.

This group also had the highest level of agreement that listening to an audiobook had got them interested in reading, with a difference of 15.2 pps from those aged 14 to 16. However, there was a slight uptick for those aged 16 to 18. Meanwhile, those aged 16 to 18 had the highest level of agreement that listening to a podcast or audiobook made them want to talk about a subject with family or friends, with a difference of 20.5 pps compared with those aged 11 to 14.

Table 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed listening to audio and their agreement with statements about the benefits of listening by gender, age and FSM eligibility in 2023

	Gender		Age				FSM uptake	
	Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
Listening to an audiobook or podcast makes it easier to understand a story or subject	46.7%	46.6%	45.8%	45.7%	49.6%	50.8%	46.4%	47.0%
Listening to an audiobook or podcast helps me relax or feel better when I feel stressed or anxious	42.7%	48.5%	48.7%	44.9%	45.1%	54.9%	44.0%	46.5%
When I listen to stories rather than watch videos I use my imagination more	43.1%	46.6%	55.5%	42.7%	43.3%	42.6%	44.9%	44.7%
Listening to an audiobook or podcast makes me want to talk more about a subject with family or friends	35.7%	35.5%	37.5%	33.1%	40.1%	53.6%	35.4%	35.7%
Listening to an audiobook or podcast has got me interested in reading books (on paper or on screen)	29.6%	31.4%	40.8%	29.1%	25.6%	32.9%	32.9%	29.9%

Digging deeper: the benefits of listening

Considering open-ended comments from other questions about how and why children and young people enjoyed listening to audio and stories, more detailed benefits emerge, as well as comments to support the above. The below word cloud (Figure 15) shows some of the most commonly used words in these responses. It is notable that ‘help’ was the most common and that ‘relax’ was almost as common, suggesting that these were the most popular motivations for listening. ‘Book’, ‘interest’, ‘podcast’, ‘time’ and ‘music’ also feature highly. Other notable words include ‘homework’, ‘pronounce’, ‘sleep’, ‘imagine’ and ‘calm’.

Wellbeing

The National Literacy Trust has reported that literacy-related activities, including listening as well as writing and reading, can support mental wellbeing. This is particularly important post-COVID: in 2021, the charity Mind found that more than two thirds (68%) of young people who had experienced mental-health problems said that their mental health had got worse since March 2020, and 1 in 6 (18%) young people said that they had experienced mental distress for the first time during the pandemic (Mind, 2021).

“[I listen] to drown out the thoughts in my head.”

“Love hearing certain people read. There’s a comfort in being read to.”

A sense of wellbeing also emerged in responses to the question about hearing stories:

“Sometimes when I was younger I liked having my grandparents read some books to me before going to sleep and it made me feel relaxed.”

Using imagination

Audio is a great alternative to screen time and encourages children and young people to explore characters, stories and voices in their mind, as these quotes show.

“I listen to audio[book]s because they help me relax more than books and I can close my eyes when I listen [to] the audio[book]s and imagine the story in my head.”

“I listen to audio because it helps me imagine how a person is talking.”

Talking about a subject with family

Listening to stories together is a valuable way of spending time as a family, and it also encourages high-quality talk as well as developing speaking and listening skills.

“Me and my dad listen to history podcasts. Like right now we are listening to one about the Black Death.”

“Me and my dad listen to podcasts in the car. My family always listen to audiobooks on long car journeys.”

Increasing interest in reading books

Some children and young people use podcasts as a way into reading books. In addition, since listening in the scope of this report also includes hearing stories read, it is encouraging to see that some children and young people also go on to read those books in their own time.

“I would listen to my dad read me a book. I would read the same book when he is busy or [when] I am bored in my free time.”

“If I’m listening to a podcast [...] [t]hey might recommend a book.”

Other benefits

Expanding horizons and improving empathy

As noted below (see Figure 16), audiobooks can be a chance for children and young people to hear their own accents. It’s also an opportunity to listen to those from different backgrounds and to imagine different situations.

“I struggle with controlling my anger, things are said in the wrong context so I try to listen to audio of trying to be an understanding person, this hasn’t changed my mood completely but it takes time for me to put myself in people’s shoes.”

“Strangers or people I don’t really know, it’s nice to know about other people in the world who you’d probably never see again but still think about.”

Improving access

Audiobooks and podcasts have proved invaluable at times when children and young people don’t have access to physical books, such as during the COVID-19 lockdown when they could access audio remotely (see, for example, Best et al., 2021).

“I like to listen to books I don’t have the money to buy.”

“I listen to audio because it is easier than reading and I find there are a more variety of audiobooks that I have easier access to.”

Multi-tasking

During the pandemic-related school closures in 2020 and 2021, we found that children and young people were listening more partly because they had more time

(Best at al., 2020). With schools open once again, an emphasis on audio listening as an activity that can be done alongside others can help ensure these behaviours continue.

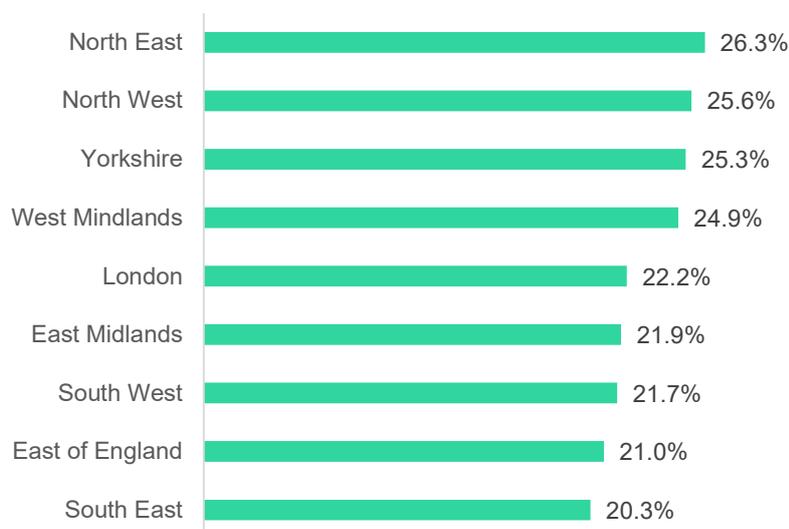
“It is a good way to be engaged in a story whilst doing something else. For example, sometimes I listen to audiobooks whilst washing up. That way I can still enjoy the story even though I have to complete a chore.”

“I enjoy listening to a book whilst walking home from school.”

Hearing familiar accents

1 in 5 (22.7%) children and young people who said that they enjoyed listening to audio agreed that they enjoyed hearing accents that sound like theirs. As shown in Figure 16, there was little variation across regions in England but it is interesting to note that the regions with the highest level of agreement (North East, North West, Yorkshire and West Midlands) were those that had perhaps the least representation in the media, or were the most removed from the standard ‘received pronunciation’ more commonly heard in Southern England and in the media.

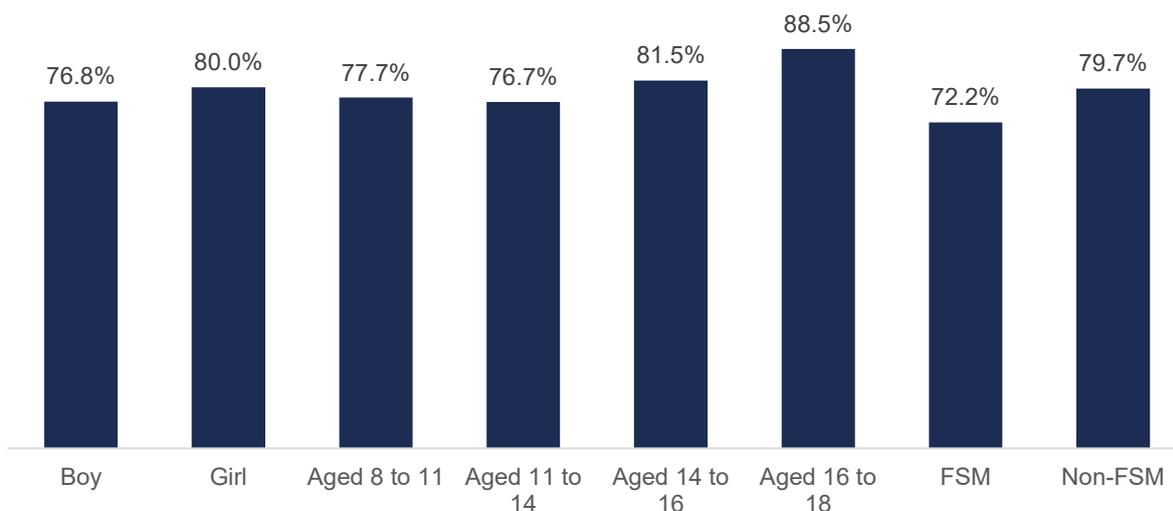
Figure 16: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed hearing accents that sound like theirs, of those who enjoyed listening to audio in 2023



Listening confidence

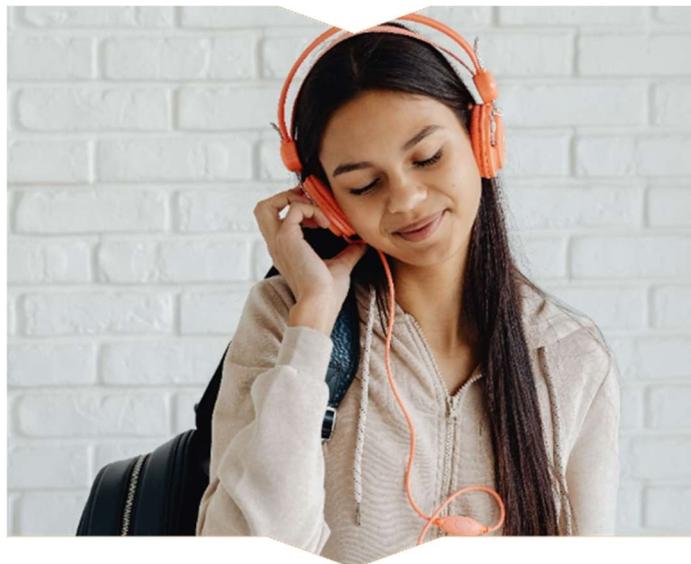
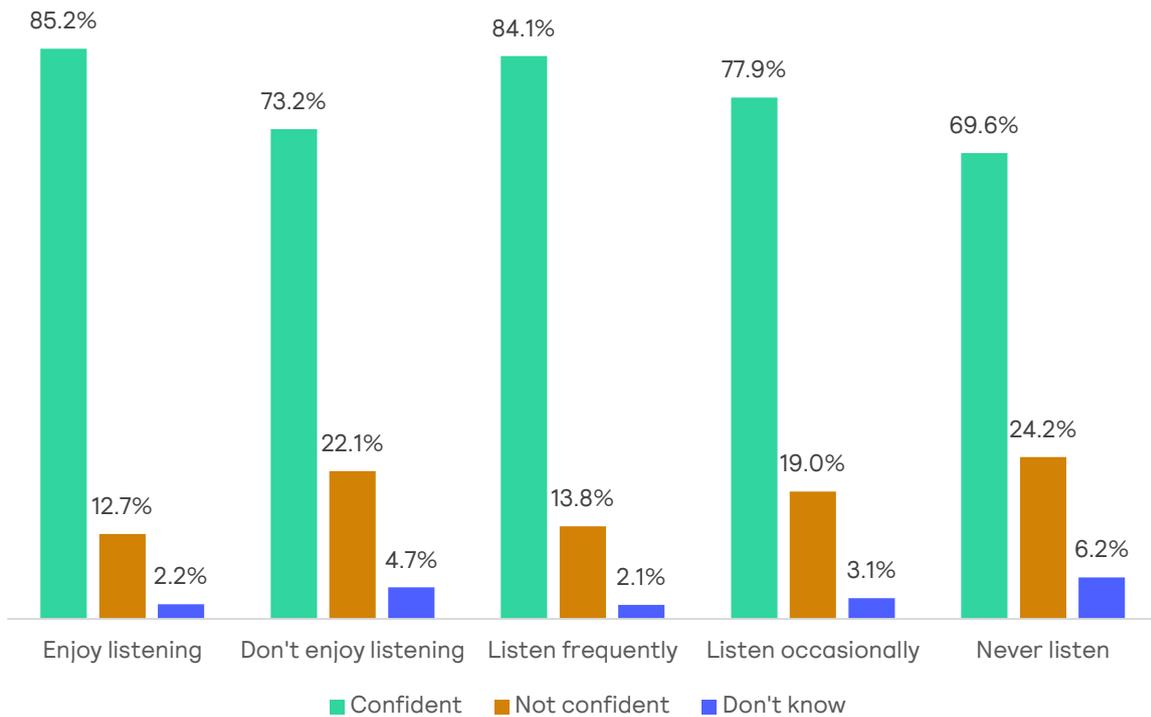
Listening is a skill as much as a behaviour and, as noted earlier, the 2023 Reading Framework highlights that it should be embedded and supported in school (Department for Education, 2023). We asked whether children and young people thought they were good listeners and nearly 4 in 5 (77.9%) agreed. Perhaps most notably, as can be seen in Figure 17, there was a difference between those in receipt of FSMs (72.2%) and non-FSM children (79.9%).

Figure 17: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who believed that they were good listeners in 2023



As noted earlier, and in the Department for Education’s Reading Framework, listening as a skill is something that needs to be supported and developed by teachers. However, as shown in Figure 18, there seems to be a correlation between listening enjoyment, frequency of listening and listening confidence, suggesting that encouraging listening as a behaviour might also help develop the skill. For those who thought they were good listeners, there was a 12pp difference between those who enjoyed listening and those who didn’t. Similarly, there was 14.5-pp difference between those who listened frequently and those who rarely or never listened, and nearly three times as many children who never listened did not know how to rate their confidence as those who listened frequently.

Figure 18: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who believed in 2023 they were good listeners compared with enjoyment and frequency of listening



As shown in Figures 19 and 20, this trend followed the same pattern regardless of demographic.

Figure 19: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said in 2023 they were good listeners by enjoyment of listening to audio, gender, age and FSM uptake

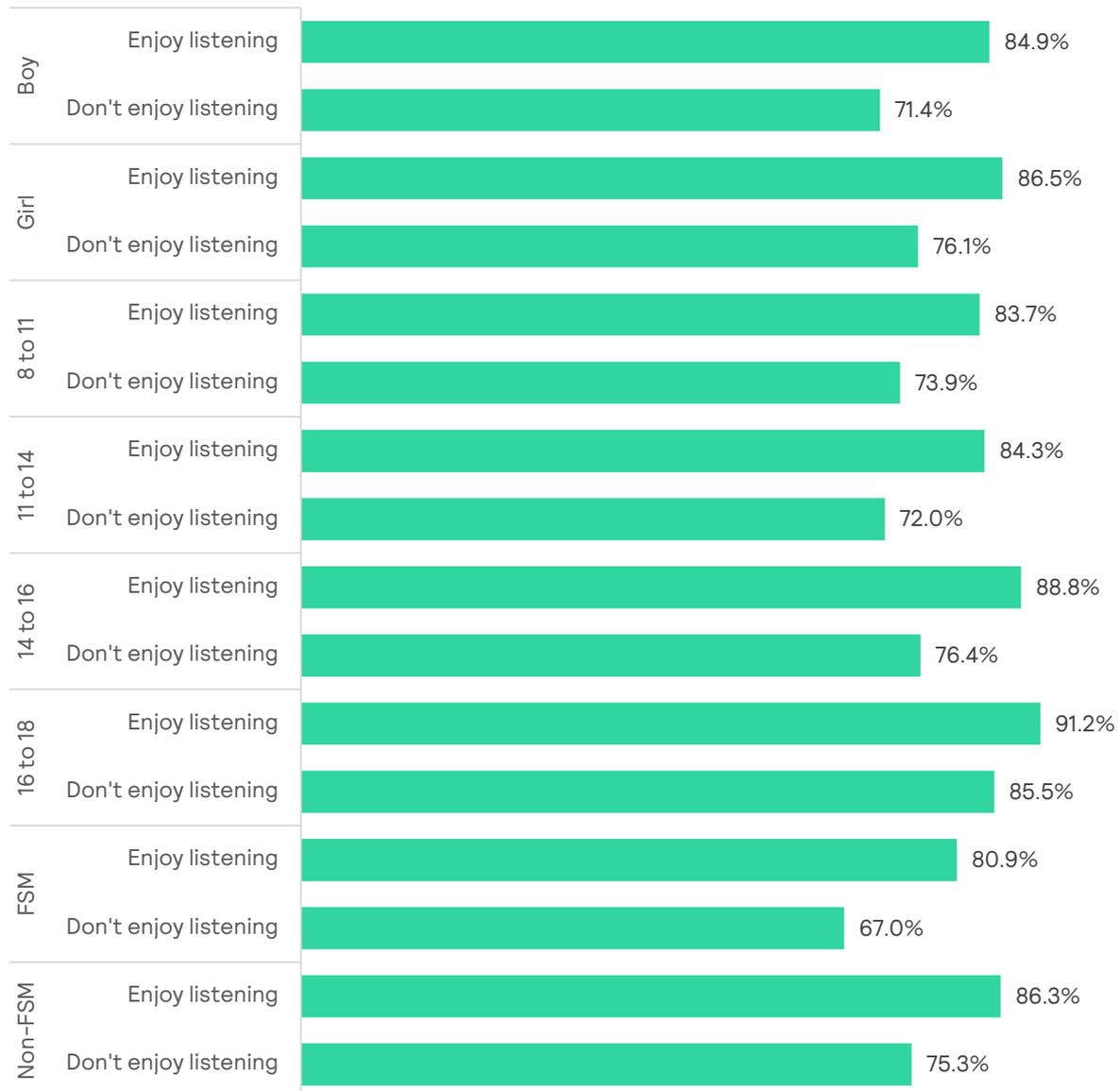
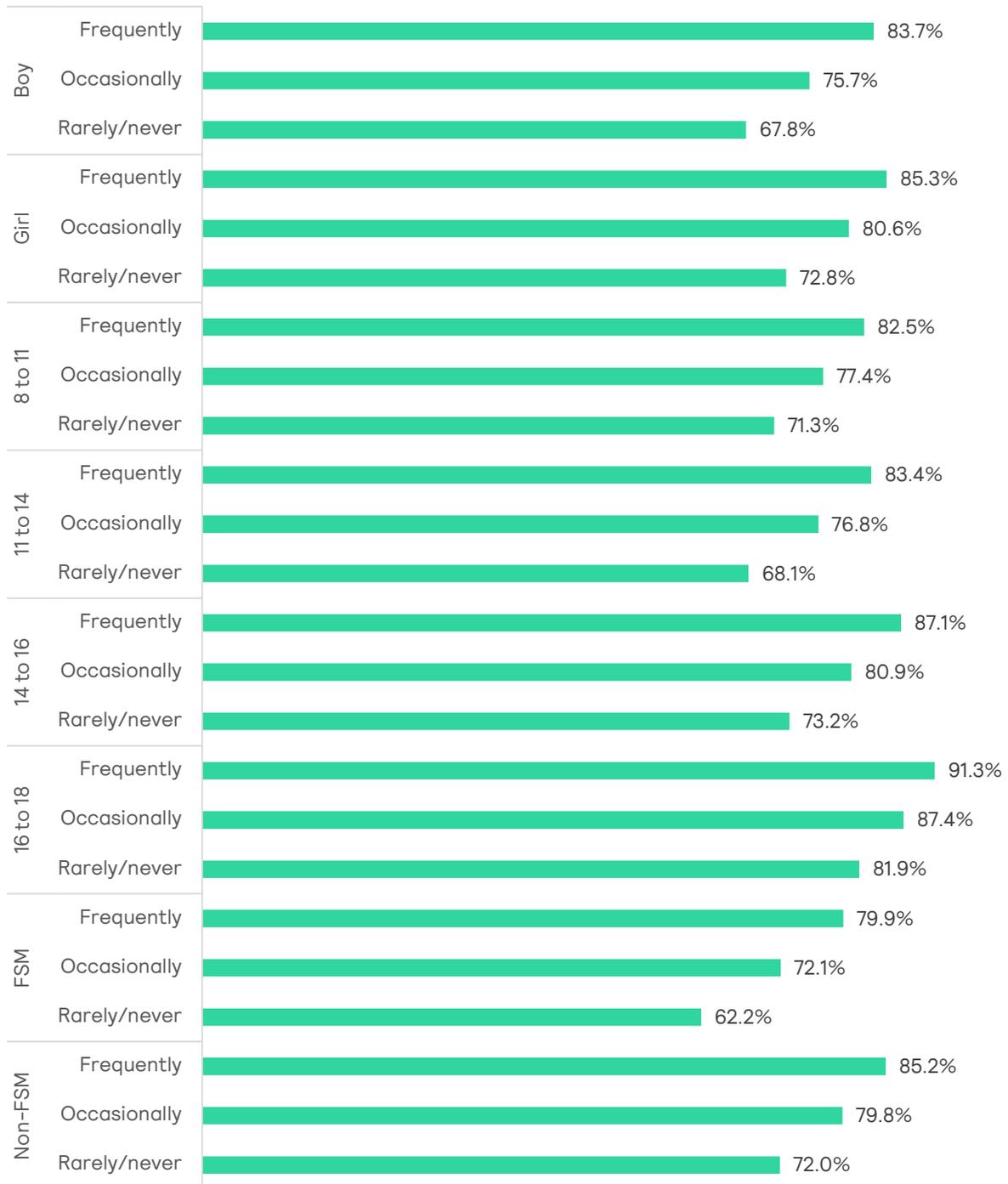


Figure 20: Children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said they were good listeners by listening frequency, gender, age and FSM uptake



Conclusion

It is encouraging to see that following the post-lockdown dip in 2022, listening to audio seems once again to be growing in popularity across formats. Furthermore, the appetite for and enjoyment of hearing stories for all ages and the links with confidence suggest that supporting and encouraging listening is more important than ever.

**“I love the
way teachers
at school
read. It’s
really fun and
interesting.”
(Boy, Year 7)**

Listening sits alongside writing and reading for enjoyment as a key area in developing children and young people’s literacy. These findings show that while there are gaps and drops across different areas, the gap in listening enjoyment continues to be narrower than that of reading or writing, so it could be used as a way of reaching those children and young people who are disengaged in other areas. It is also notable that in groups where reading enjoyment and engagement might be lower, such as boys and those in receipt of free school meals, the gap is decidedly smaller for listening even if reading is marginally more popular. Indeed,

these are the groups where self-perception of listening skill as lower is more closely correlated with listening enjoyment, with more children and young people in these groups who do not enjoy listening saying that they do not believe they are good listeners.

There are many benefits to listening to audio and stories, and many of those are outlined here. Among those children and young people who enjoy listening, it is promising to see so many agreeing that it helps them understand a subject and encourages them to use their imagination. Furthermore, open-ended comments continue to suggest an important wellbeing element and a joy associated with hearing stories from loved ones and teachers, whether read or told from memory. The fact that even many older children say they enjoy hearing stories read to them suggests that there is a strong case to be made for building story time and hearing stories read aloud beyond primary school.

Older children seem more likely to engage in independent listening and downloading of content, which is unsurprising, while younger children will have listened more with family. This does not mean, however, that there is not a space for older children and young people to engage in shared listening and hearing stories, as the findings here show.

Access to audio was a lifeline and a comfort for so many in lockdown, and, while it retained many of its benefits post-COVID, there was a slight decline that seems to be reversing in 2023. As we move on from this and address the issues around attainment gaps that were exacerbated by school closures, there is an opportunity to mobilise this enthusiasm and to utilise the ways in which children and young people enjoy hearing stories and other forms of spoken word to support literacy, to increase wellbeing and to nurture the next generation of story consumers.

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Our sincere thanks to all of the schools that participated in our survey this year. We couldn't do it without you!

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Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

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