Strong Foundations in EYFS and KS1 Audit Tool

A tool for leaders to audit the content and impact of curriculum and teaching provision with a specific focus on the development of Strong Foundations



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Introduction

Welcome to the first version of the Strong Foundations Audit Tool produced by Phil Abbott, for Quality Assured Education Limited.

The development of strong foundations in the earliest stages of education is critical to ensuring that all pupils, particularly the most vulnerable, are able to succeed both academically and socially. The Ofsted report "Strong Foundations in the First Years of School" (2024) highlights that high-quality early education establishes the essential knowledge and skills children need to thrive, including communication, literacy, numeracy, and wider social and emotional development. These foundations are not simply preparatory; they are determinative, shaping children's long-term attainment, wellbeing, and life chances.

Ofsted identifies several key elements that underpin strong foundations. These include a clearly sequenced curriculum focused on essential knowledge, high-quality teaching that enables children to practise and embed learning, and effective assessment that identifies gaps early. Central to this is ensuring that children develop core competencies such as language and communication, early reading through systematic phonics, writing and mathematical understanding, alongside physical development, social skills, and executive function—the ability to focus, retain information, and regulate behaviour.

The evidence also demonstrates that establishing strong foundations is particularly crucial for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. While improvements have been made in areas such as early reading, gaps remain: in 2023, around one in three disadvantaged pupils did not meet expected standards in phonics by the end of Year 1, limiting their ability to access the wider curriculum. Furthermore, children who begin school with lower starting points are disproportionately affected by weaknesses in curriculum design, teaching, and assessment, meaning that early gaps can widen quickly if not addressed effectively. Research consistently shows that when foundational knowledge is insecure, pupils struggle to access more complex learning later, making early intervention essential.

In this context, the Strong Foundations Audit Tool provides a structured and evidence-informed approach for schools to evaluate their provision. By systematically gathering evidence across curriculum, teaching, and assessment, the tool enables leaders to identify strengths, pinpoint gaps, and assess the impact of their approaches on pupil outcomes. Crucially, it supports schools in moving beyond compliance towards meaningful evaluation—ensuring that provision is not only well-designed but demonstrably effective for all learners.

The use of a robust audit tool offers several key benefits. It promotes clarity around what constitutes essential foundational knowledge, aligns school practice with national expectations and research, and strengthens leaders' ability to articulate impact—particularly for disadvantaged pupils. It also encourages reflective practice, enabling schools to adapt provision in response to pupils' needs and to ensure that no child is left behind in securing the building blocks of future learning.

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How to use the Audit tool

The tool is an evidence-based evaluation process using a 5-point evaluation scale for leaders to quantify the implementation and impact against each audit question. The process helps leaders to identify demonstrable strengths and areas for improvement, whilst comparing each audit area with an overall score. On completion, this process ensures that areas for improvement are easily identifiable.

5 – Fully Embedded and Highly Impactful
Practice is consistently and securely embedded across the school. There is strong, reliable evidence of significant positive impact on pupil outcomes, including for vulnerable learners. Practice is sustained over time and refined through ongoing evaluation.

4 – Embedded and Impactful
Practice is well established and consistently implemented. There is clear evidence of positive impact on most pupils. Minor refinements may further strengthen consistency or reach.

3 – Developing with Emerging Impact
Practice is in place but not yet consistently embedded. Some evidence of positive impact is evident, though this may be variable across groups or classes. Further development and evaluation are needed.

2 – Early Implementation
Practice is at an early stage of development or inconsistently applied. Limited evidence of impact is available. Key elements may be missing or not yet secure.

1 – Not Yet Established / No Evident Impact
Practice is not in place, is very limited, or lacks clarity. There is little or no evidence of impact on pupil outcomes.

NB - You should ensure that you score your evaluations based on each word of each statement, to ensure that all elements are reflected.

Early Reading

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
Phonics						
A systematic synthetic phonics scheme is taught with fidelity						
Staff have strong subject knowledge and deliver phonics consistently and accurately						
Assessment is regular and accurate, ensuring that impact is tangible						
Where required, additional support is timely, targeted and impactful						
Catch up and keep up interventions for reading have tangible impact						
Classroom environments have clear reference points to the phonic sounds children are learning						
The learning environment is vocabulary rich and children refer to key vocabulary at an appropriate level						
Reading at school						
Reading books closely match the phonic knowledge, or match the stage of each child working beyond the SSPS						
When reading to an adult, there is a focus on word reading, fluency and prosody on each occasion						
There is a daily opportunity in all classes for pupils to listen to an adult read a class story/novel						
Adults read with prosody, using character voices, inflection to mark punctuation, and varying vocal timbre for effect						
Adults exhibit a positive excitement when reading aloud and clearly value the process						
There are welcoming, well stocked reading areas which are regularly utilised by **all** pupils						

Reading at home						
There are systems in place to check the regularity of reading for individual pupils and these are rigidly applied						
Parents are aware of the school's expectations of home reading and support this effectively						
Where pupils do not read regularly at home, they receive prioritised support at school to read with an adult						
Achievement in Early Reading						
Most pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, keep up with the phonics programme						
Typically, outcomes in reading in Word Reading and Comprehension are in line with national averages (over time)						
Typically, outcomes in the Y1 Phonics Screening test are in line with national averages (over time)						
Typically, outcomes in the Y2 Phonics Screening test retake are in line with national averages (over time)						
Attainment and progress in reading across KS2 is sustained or increased over time						
Total Score for this area	/	%				

Early Writing

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
Handwriting						
There is a clear progression in gross and fine motor skills in the Early Years curriculum from half-term to half-term						
The handwriting curriculum sets out the expectation of letter formation and joins in a sequenced programme						
Teachers demonstrate accurate letter formation, including using rhymes and articulating expectations at all times						

Routines for posture and grip are rigorously and continuously referenced during all writing activities						
Adults consistently model accurate handwriting in their own writing away from handwriting lessons						
Adults consistently teach and model the accurate use of joins						
Handwriting standards in English are maintained across the other curriculum areas						
Pupils who need extra help with their handwriting benefit from impactful support or adaptations.						
	Writing					
Writing is taught through a carefully sequenced curriculum, focussing on the fundamental skills of writing						
Children apply their phonic/spelling knowledge consistently and independently in their writing						
Opportunities to write sentences using accurate spelling and punctuation are provided through dictation						
Pupils are encouraged to, and successfully use oral rehearsal before writing sentences						
Children in Early Years and KS1 can write simple sentences independently at an age-appropriate level						
Writing shows increasing accuracy and fluency over time						
Pupils are able to explain how to make their writing better, and how their teacher helps them to do this						
Pupils who need extra help at word and/or sentence level benefit from impactful support or adaptations.						

Total Score for this area	/	%

Communication, Language and Oracy

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
High quality interactions and Oracy						
Adults repeat or rephrase words or sentences used by children when beneficial						
Staff explicitly teach and model new vocabulary daily						
Adults model ambitious vocabulary naturally and frequently						
Language is planned, not incidental, across all areas of provision						
Staff ensure pupils build emotional connection to language through songs, rhymes and poems						
Adults use questioning and discussion to extend thinking and language on a 1:1 and formal basis						
Adults use questioning and discussion to extend thinking and language in continuous provision						
Children use new vocabulary accurately and confidently						
Sentence stems support participation						
Children listen, follow instructions and engage in conversations						
Structured partner talk ensures that all pupils (not just confident ones) participate in conversations						
Where continuous provision is used, it is supported by written displays of 'language for provision'						
Vulnerable learners show rapid gains in language development						
Total Score for this area	/					%

English as an Additional Language

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
High quality provision						
All pupils with EAL are assessed on arrival for their English Language Proficiency						
All pupils with EAL are regularly re-assessed for their English Language Proficiency						
There is a keen and obvious focus on talk between adults and EAL pupils in lessons						
EAL pupils are effectively supported with vocabulary development before, during and after lessons						
Deliberate repetition of vocabulary extends language						
Learning through a systematic synthetic phonics scheme is undertaken ASAP						
Total Score for this area	/	%				

Early Maths

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
The curriculum focuses on number sense and deep understanding						
Concepts are taught in small steps with clear representations						
Adults provide models and guided practice in Maths						
Children have frequent opportunities to practise and apply learning, both together and independently						
Mathematical talk and vocabulary are explicitly taught						

Staff ensure that pupils have sufficient foundational knowledge to complete tasks						
Feedback is immediate and helps children improve						
Misconceptions are quickly addressed						
Children can explain their thinking using mathematical language						
Children demonstrate secure understanding of number						
Gaps in understanding are quickly identified and addressed						
Total Score for this area	/	%				

Curriculum and sequencing

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
The curriculum clearly identifies the most important foundational knowledge, skills and vocabulary pupils need to learn						
Content is logically sequenced so that new learning builds on what children already know						
There is a clear rationale for what is taught and when, particularly in Reception and KS1						
Learning is broken down into small, manageable steps						
Opportunities for practice and revisiting are planned and consistent						
Assessment is ongoing and purposeful - not excessive - so staff know what children know and can do						

Achievement across the curriculum						
Gaps in knowledge are reduced over time, especially for disadvantaged pupils						
Children are well-prepared for the next stage of learning						
Total Score for this area	/	%				

Executive Function and self-regulation

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
Staff explicitly support attention, memory and self-regulation						
Routines are clear, consistent and well-established						
Activities are designed to promote recall and retention of foundational knowledge						
Activities are designed to encourage problem solving, across EYFS and KS1						
Activities are designed to build focus and resilience across EYFS and KS1						
Adults model and scaffold listening skills						
Activities are clearly modelled across the provision so pupils know what is expected of them						
Across EYFS and KS1, children can sustain attention and follow routines						
Children demonstrate increasing independence and self-control, especially in managing impulses						
Vulnerable pupils are supported to engage successfully in all areas of learning, according to their identified barriers and needs						

Total Score for this area	/	%

Social and Emotional Development

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
Staff and pupils build warm, responsive relationships						
Children feel safe, secure and confident in their learning environment						
Children feel safe, secure and confident at unstructured parts of the day						
There are deliberately and frequently planned opportunities for pupils to develop turn-taking/sharing						
Deliberate curriculum planning helps pupils develop personal care routines						
Total Score for this area	/					%

Inclusion and Strategic Leadership

Question	Brief summary of evidence	5	4	3	2	1
All teaching and academic support staff can clearly articulate the meaning and importance of Strong Foundations						
The School Improvement Plan directly identifies where it is developing Strong Foundations						
The Pupil Premium Strategy identifies how Strong Foundations will be prioritised for disadvantaged pupils						
There is a deliberate prioritisation on securing strong foundations for pupils with SEND						

Disadvantaged and SEND pupils are identified and assessed quickly						
Staff effectively adapt teaching to ensure full access to the curriculum						
Total Score for this area	/	%				

Audit Summary

Toolkit area	Key Strengths	Key areas for improvement
Early Reading		
Early Writing		
Communication and Language		
English as an Additional Language		
Early Maths		
Curriculum and Sequencing		
Executive Function		
Social and Emotional Development		
Inclusion and Barriers to learning		