Open Letter to the Department for Education
Concerning the 2026 Digital Reception Baseline Assessment

To: **Paul Waugh MP**
Minister for Early Education
The Department for Education

17 September 2026

We, the undersigned parents and guardians of school-aged children across the country, are writing to bring to your attention a profound disconnect between the mandatory touchscreen version of the **Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA)** and your department's own guidance on screen use for children aged 0 to 5.

Your department's guidance for Early Years settings[1] states that screen use should be strictly limited, carefully planned, and centered around active adult involvement rather than passive, automated activities. Specifically, the guidance states that good practice when using screens with young children includes:

> *"Adults co-engaging with children, prompting children to think, predict, respond or discuss, and avoiding activities which provide an automatic response without any effort on the part of the child."*

The guidance further suggests that adults should comment, narrate, describe, and ask open-ended questions to stimulate conversation when screens are used. It also states that interactive, screen-free activities are preferable and that screens should not be used as a substitute for high-quality educator-child interaction. In short: any screen-based activity in the early years should be social, supported, and responsive, and screens should be used only if there is net educational benefit in doing so.

With regards to assessment your department's guidance goes on to direct that pre-reception assessments *"should not involve asking a child to do activities on a screen"* in order to determine their level of development, and should instead be based on educators' observation and professional judgement. This guidance applies to early years settings caring for children aged 0 to 5, which includes Reception-age children under the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The screen-based RBA is incompatible with DfE's screen guidance

We find it impossible to reconcile DfE's robust, evidence-based advice for children aged 0 to 5 with the department's requirement for schools to conduct the screen-based RBA just weeks after children aged 4 or 5 start Reception. Plainly, the developmental needs of a four or five-year-old do not fundamentally change when they join a Reception classroom.

For the touchscreen elements of the RBA, teachers are strictly prohibited from helping, prompting, or guiding children in the way the DfE's screen guidance directs. The assessment

[1] https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/screen-use

materials require the teachers supervising the process to adhere strictly to a standardised script, preventing them from offering hints, explanations, or scaffolding, even when a child is visibly struggling, or confused.

This creates a stark policy contradiction:

- **The DfE's early years screen guidance** dictates that adults must co-engage, prompt, and discuss when screens are used with young children.
- **The DfE's assessment rules for the RBA** state that teachers must not prompt or support children beyond the standardised script while the child interacts with a touchscreen device.

In practice, a four-year-old child – just weeks into starting school – is placed in front of a touchscreen where their recorded 'ability' (literacy and numeracy) heavily depends on their digital dexterity (tapping and dragging) and their familiarity with touchscreen devices.

It is obvious to teachers and parents alike that assessing our youngest children in this way will produce false or misleading results, skewed by each child's baseline digital literacy and familiarity with tablets.

Independent research suggests that the screen-based RBA is inappropriate, unfair and generates misleading data

These concerns are not theoretical. Recent research conducted by a team of early years experts from Leeds Beckett University and University College London (UCL), led by Dr. Mandy Pierlejewski, compared the 2025 digital RBA with its non-digital predecessor. This study is the first and, so far, only empirical study of the digital RBA.

A summary of the study's findings[2], published by Carnegie Education, reveals that children who took the digital RBA experienced:

- **Distress:** Every single child observed during the 2025 study showed visible signs of stress and anxiety while attempting the touchscreen assessment.
- **Digital Literacy Barriers:** Many children lacked the digital familiarity required to navigate the tablet interface, preventing them from demonstrating their actual understanding of the underlying maths or language concepts.
- **Interface Interference:** Children routinely struggled to understand what the device required of them. Their performance scores were demonstrably skewed by the touchscreen interface rather than their cognitive knowledge.
- **Restricted Teachers:** Bound by the rigid script, teachers were unable to offer natural, comforting support, leaving children unsupported during a distressing task.

The research categorically indicates that the touchscreen elements of the RBA contravenes the DfE's own screen-use guidance, will have produced inaccurate data, and causes unnecessary distress and confusion for the very young children involved.

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2 https://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2026/07/the-reception-baseline-assessment-contravenes-screen-use-guidance/

On any reading, the results of this independent study are damning: the touchscreen elements of the RBA are inappropriate, unfair, and inferior to the original analogue RBA process. Digitising the RBA was an experiment that has comprehensively failed.

Parental choice and next steps

Like us, many parents have sought to minimise or entirely exclude smartphones and tablets from their children's early lives. As a result, these children have not been routinely exposed to touchscreen technology and remain largely or entirely unfamiliar with it. We believe this is a good thing, supportive of their health and happiness – children of four or five years should not need to become familiar with touchscreen devices.

Mandating those children, in the emotionally challenging first few weeks of school, to take a touchscreen assessment inevitably disadvantages them in a way that the original paper and play-based RBA did not, and almost guarantees misleading results. The central reason for conducting the RBA – to measure progress through primary school education – is fundamentally undermined by a process which distresses and disadvantages many of the children subjected to it, and which produces unreliable and likely misleading data..

When parents have approached their children's schools to request their children be given access to the alternative, non-digital adaptation of the RBA, this has been refused, typically on the basis that the DfE restricts the physical paper RBA packs to children with diagnosed learning difficulties or special educational needs (SEND).

Parents should not be forced to require their children to take the digital version of this assessment, and teachers should not be forced to administer the digital assessment in circumstances where parents have raised well-founded legitimate concerns about a child using touchscreen devices in circumstances which contravene the DfE's own guidance on screen use.

Every school in England must already have the capabilities to conduct a non-digital version of the RBA in order to meet the needs of any relevant SEND children, and the DfE has a non-digital form of the RBA on hand for that purpose. Our children may not have a SEND diagnosis, and should not be obliged to seek one in order to access the non-digital RBA, but we firmly believe their particular needs and circumstances (and indeed the data needs of the DfE) will be best served by the non-digital RBA.

We therefore urgently request that the Department for Education update its RBA administration instructions to allow schools to request and use the non-digital RBA packs for *any* child whose parents give notice that they do not wish their Reception year child to be asked to use a touchscreen device.

Given the proximity of the autumn term testing window, please could you provide a response to our request as soon as possible and in any event by Thursday 24th September 2026.

Yours sincerely,

The Undersigned Parents and Guardians