

Tackling loneliness through reading

READING FRIENDS

A photograph of two elderly women sitting at a round table in a library. They are both smiling and looking at a newspaper held by the woman on the right. The woman on the left is wearing a floral patterned top and glasses. The woman on the right is wearing a blue sari and glasses. On the table in front of them are two white mugs with green accents and a small white plate with several round cookies. The background consists of tall wooden bookshelves filled with books. A green banner is overlaid on the top left of the image, containing the text 'Tackling loneliness through reading' and 'READING FRIENDS'. In the bottom right corner, the logo for 'THE READING AGENCY' is visible.

THE
READING
AGENCY

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This report is based on the findings of The Reading Agency's Reading Friends pilot phase evaluation carried out by Renaisi during September 2018 – August 2019.

The power of a shared story

Our mission at The Reading Agency is to tackle life's big challenges, such as loneliness and isolation, through the proven power of reading. Our Reading Friends programme connects people by starting conversations through reading. It helps those who are vulnerable, isolated and at risk of loneliness, giving them the opportunity to meet others, share their stories, make new friends and have fun.

Reading Friends shows how powerful reading and sharing stories can be. In 2018, we commissioned the think tank Demos¹ to carry out research to assess the potential impact of reading on loneliness, mental health problems, dementia and social (im)mobility.

Demos predicted that by 2030 the number of people deemed lonely in the over-60 age group could increase to 7 million. On the current trajectory, loneliness among older people will cost almost £2 billion by this date.

Can reading tackle this? Yes.

We know how powerful reading can be. Studies have found that regular readers tend to be less lonely. Books have been shown to be beneficial in supporting mental and physical health, and reading has been found to significantly improve common symptoms of both depression and dementia. Loneliness can affect people of any age – just under half of adults in England experience loneliness and increasing numbers of 16-24-year-olds also report feeling lonely. We know that reading can help and have made it our mission to ensure that everyone is able to read their way to a better life.

Our work on tackling loneliness has just begun, and I am delighted to share our findings from the past year with you.



Karen Napier
Chief Executive, The Reading Agency

¹ S. Hilhorst et al. (2018) *A Society of Readers*, Demos

Where we started

There has been an increasing focus on loneliness and isolation, particularly among older people, in the UK. With support from the National Lottery Community Fund, The Reading Agency's Reading Friends programme tackles loneliness by using the proven power of reading to build social connections and start conversations.

Reading Friends has been co-created with older people and experts from different sectors, and tailored to the local context through our partnership work with organisations including public libraries, health boards and other charities.

The programme is built on the following set of core principles, informed by the evidence base on best practice and feedback from co-production and consultation:

- A flexible model – recognising that loneliness is personal and one size does not fit all. Flexibility and being able to adapt to people's needs is at the heart of Reading Friends.
- Creating opportunities for meaningful connections – using reading as a hook but focusing on conversations.
- Having a shared purpose – with a variety of different reading materials and styles to bring people together and start them chatting.



Our journey so far

We started Reading Friends in 2017 with six regional sites to test and evaluate the model. In the following year we expanded to reach 22 projects across the UK. A core achievement was the expansion of Reading Friends to new settings including prisons, hospitals, schools, care homes, and recovery cafés.

In 2018 we also developed a subscription model to help support libraries to run Reading Friends, and 19 library authorities joined us to pilot this strand of work.

22

pilot projects

1518

participants took part

208

volunteers supported our projects



What we achieved in the pilot phase

In the pilot phase, we captured our learnings on the role that reading can play in tackling loneliness and social isolation among older people. However Reading Friends has become increasingly intergenerational in its delivery, building exciting new relationships within the local community.

Our participants...

74% aged 50+

and of these 36% were 75 years and older

67% female

and 30% were male

34% live alone

“It’s so important to maintain the connection with that generation... that’s why I do this. My grandparents are dead now, so this is the way I engage with that generation and ensure they don’t get forgotten about.”

Reading Friends volunteer,
Conwy

Our volunteers...

24% aged 65+

and 17% were under 18 years old

84% female

and 16% were male

33% in full-time education

and 28% retired, and 12% were employed full time

32% had never volunteered before

and the majority said they wanted to meet and support isolated older people or give something back to the local area.

90% wanted to carry on volunteering

and 97% felt their experience was 'good' or 'excellent'.

**96% of participants
found the experience
'good' or 'excellent'**



Photo: Marcia Chandra 2018

The difference Reading Friends is making

Our evaluation findings provide evidence that Reading Friends is making a difference to people's lives, improving their social connections, quality of life and experience of reading. Key findings are:

Building social connections

Reading Friends helps facilitate and develop social connections. This is a key outcome of the programme for participants and volunteers alike.

- 83% of Reading Friends participants strongly agreed or agreed that they 'feel connected to other people' compared to 67% at the start.
- For volunteers, this rose from 77% at the start to 95% at the end. All of the volunteers we asked said the experience had provided them with enjoyable social contact with others.
- Reading Friends helps people make new friends, and become more aware of people in the local area, as well as gaining a new perspective on things.
- Reading Friends volunteers and participants value taking part in our intergenerational projects as it gives the chance for different age groups to mix.

"Of course, the discussion of the book, but the fact that we [go] off topic and talk about other things; it's the early stages of a friendship and to begin to get to know him. That's my favourite thing."

Reading Friends participant, Stirling

"I've got to know people I didn't before – now if I met them out on the street, I would chat to them. It's someone to say hello to, and we have something to talk about. Brings people in the village together."

Reading Friends participant, West Sussex

"I have a husband with Alzheimer's [disease] and I only get out for two respites a week. I use one of those to come to this. I have a carer that comes for these times."

Reading Friends participant, Horsham

"The transformative ability of reading"



Brian attends a Reading Friends group at his local library in Oldham.

Brian is living with dementia. It is difficult for him to communicate, and he is supported in the sessions by his family and his wife Rosemarie. Before becoming a Reading Friend, Brian's life was filled with a love of books and boxing – the former is what led him to us.

Born in Collyhurst in the 1940s, Brian found success as a boxer and trainer. Later in his career, he spent 40 years teaching defence, just as he learnt from his mentors Jack Bates, Billy Tansey and Tommy Proffit. Despite leaving school hardly able to read or write, Brian's desire to share his knowledge of boxing led him to write 11 books about the sport.

Brian received an MBE for Services to the Community in 2011.

"I have witnessed the terrible fog of isolation, fear and loneliness which can descend upon those who live with dementia which considerably narrows their world. I have also witnessed the transformative ability that reading can have upon this condition; helping to open memories, and stir long-dormant emotions. Reading Friends provides this stimulus for many people, from those who are living with the condition, their carers and loved ones alike. I think the work of The Reading Agency is invaluable."

Brian's son Damian

In Oldham, Reading Friends runs a group for people with dementia and their carers, with over 50 members. Typically, people with dementia are more able to recall things from many years ago than recent memories. So activities are based on reminiscence to bring back childhood memories. The sessions give carers time for respite and allow them to learn new skills in a supportive and fun environment.

Through our work we have met a range of inspiring Reading Friends, including Brian.

Personal outcomes

Many Reading Friends participants report that the programme makes them feel more relaxed and less stressed. Volunteers are able to learn new skills and knowledge, such as presenting and group facilitation, through taking part in the programme.

- 76% of participants said the programme had added purpose to their week.
- 78% of participants said they strongly agreed or agreed that they felt confident trying new things at the end of the programme compared to 63% at the start.
- 92% of Reading Friends volunteers strongly agreed or agreed volunteering had given them a sense of purpose.
- 93% of Reading Friends volunteers strongly agreed or agreed that they felt confident trying new things at the beginning of the programme – an increase from 78% at the start.



“I’m more confident I think...I’m very quiet, very shy, I don’t really speak but I have noticed over time that I have come every month I do speak out more and more ... It is because we have known each other those few months now.”

*Reading Friends participant,
Greater Manchester*

“Coming here is just meeting people you don’t know, and they all have such interesting stories to share. I am a people person, so just talking to people and learning about them is interesting. I think it’s rewarding.”

Volunteer, Edinburgh

“I am living with dementia. I sometimes read out a poem to the group – one that [the volunteer] knows I will be able to read out. I enjoy the group, and love taking part when I am able to do so.”

Reading Friends participant, Horsham

**92% agreed being
a volunteer had
given them a sense
of purpose**



The power of reading

Reading Friends not only tackles loneliness, it presents an opportunity to regularly talk about reading with others. This is something that participants and volunteers highly value.

- 83% of participants said they enjoyed talking about what they read with other people.
- 93% of volunteers either strongly agreed or agreed that the programme had increased their enjoyment of talking about reading with others.
- Participants reported that the programme increased their enjoyment of reading for pleasure, sharing stories and reminiscing.



Right Thing Films 2018

“I was a voracious reader ... then, I developed schizophrenia and never read again; all the words got jiggled up and couldn't hold onto what had come before, in my head. Being read to is different because I can interact, and there is something to hold onto.”

Reading Friends participant, Edinburgh

“If you read a book on your own, your immediate reaction is to want to share your opinion of it. To pass the book on and share it with someone else and ask what do they think of it...Yeah that is one of the things that I miss with my wife dying...she was a great reader and we would sit and talk about it. And now, at least you've got somewhere to come and if a book really ignites you, you can actually turn around and say: 'hey, this is a great read'.”

Reading Friends participant, Greater Manchester

“I had independently decided I wanted to start reading more so it is helping me to focus a bit more. I am pleased about that because I had kind of got out of the habit of reading books... so it has been helpful to me like that with suggestions.”

Reading Friends participant, Greater Manchester

"Reading Friends helped me after my loss"

Helen is a volunteer for Reading Friends in Newcastle. Here is her story.

"I have always loved reading. In my 20 years as a primary school teacher, I was able to see just how much reading can benefit the lives of children and young people. I grew up in a literate household, and we were always surrounded by books, and I have always loved them.

"There was however a brief period that I lost touch with books. My husband's sudden passing had a tremendous impact on me, and I found that for the first time in my life I was no longer able to read. I struggled to resume a life, but eventually reading became a world that I could retreat into.

"As life goes on things change. After retirement, I found myself with less and less to do. I would often take care of my grandsons, but as they grew older that was no longer part of my routine. So, I sought new things to do to occupy my time. It was then that I discovered Reading Friends through an email from Newcastle Central Library. I wanted to be able to share my love of reading with others, and Reading Friends allowed me to do this.

"Since starting there has been no such thing as an average session. I manage a session with people who experience memory difficulties and we meet every fortnight. I found it interesting to learn about the different reasons that people enjoy reading, and some of our Reading Friends find the fact that we read aloud refreshing. In our sessions we all get a copy of the same text and we chat about what we've read. I like finding poems for everyone to read in the sessions, as this is what they enjoy.

"If you enjoy reading you can find another world in a book, and the world feels less lonely.

"Through Reading Friends, I have been able to meet people with different stories, and I find it fascinating. For example, someone from our memory loss group was a secondary school English teacher. She has short term memory loss but can remember teaching."

Reading Friends has been running in Newcastle since 2017. Over 120 participants and 15 volunteers took part in the programme last year.

What makes Reading Friends special?

Our strengths

Our local projects, volunteers and participants have helped shape Reading Friends. We have found that the main strengths of the programme include:

- **Communication** – using a wide variety of channels to help spread the word about Reading Friends and making sure messages and materials are welcoming – recognising that ‘reading’ might be unfamiliar to some.
- **Co-production** – providing some structure at the start, but then encouraging participants to take ownership of their projects through ongoing feedback, shaping the content and making adaptations.
- **Partnerships** – particularly where libraries could partner with other organisations, providing access to resources and expertise. Strong partnerships could also help to reach new audiences.
- **Volunteer recruitment and management** – with practical sessions to develop skills, and using partners to deliver training on specific subjects being highly valued. Volunteers also appreciated being in regular contact with delivery leads.

There are a number of key ingredients that are essential to the programme’s ethos, including:

- **The flexible nature of the model** – with potential to adapt approaches to different styles and groups.
- **Informal** – different from a more structured book group with less pressure or expectation on participants.
- **Diversity of materials** – showcasing local resources to help bring sessions to life as well as using a variety of different types of reading materials.
- **Being accessible** to people with different health conditions whilst still using reading.
- **Volunteer-led** – with groups and one-to-ones shaped by personal experience, often using creative techniques to ensure that people can benefit from the activity.

Contact us

Reading Friends is expanding to reach new areas and audiences. To find out how to get involved – whether as a volunteer, participant, or by running a local project – please get in touch for more details.



www.readingfriends.org.uk



readingfriends@readingagency.org.uk



020 7324 8901

“The reason I came to this group was to contribute and be with other LGBT+ people and to have some interest about our history.”

Reading Friends participant,
Islington



Reading Friends is a nationwide programme developed by The Reading Agency with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. The programme is delivered in partnership with organisations across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Reading Friends is an intergenerational programme that empowers, and connects people experiencing loneliness by starting conversations through reading.

www.readingfriends.org.uk

The Reading Agency is a national charity that tackles life's big challenges through the proven power of reading. We work closely with partners to develop and deliver programmes for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Reading Agency is funded by Arts Council England.

www.readingagency.org.uk



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