

# Guiding principles of Reading Friends

## Delivery principles

### What is Reading Friends?

Our mission at The Reading Agency is to tackle life's big challenges, such as loneliness and isolation, through the proven power of reading. Reading Friends connects people by starting conversations through reading, giving opportunities to meet others, share stories, make new friends and have fun. It creates social connections and takes a person-centred approach building on interests and hobbies of the people involved to get people talking.

### Who is it for?

The focus is on connecting people who are vulnerable, isolated and at risk of loneliness. Originally, older people, people with dementia and carers were identified as those most at risk but the evolution of the programme and changing times has expanded this remit to include other age groups and communities as the pandemic has made loneliness and social isolation almost universal conditions. By May 2020, 41% of UK adults reported feeling lonelier since lockdown, and 1 in 3 had not had a meaningful conversation in the last week.<sup>1</sup> By November 2020, 39% of UK adults said they have not had a meaningful conversation with someone in a fortnight, a third worry something will happen to them and no one will notice, and 2 in 5 people said loneliness is having a negative impact on their mental health.<sup>2</sup>

### How is it delivered?

Reading Friends is delivered by local community-based delivery partners through volunteers and staff. Public libraries have been core to the development and delivery of Reading Friends as front line community services. The Reading Friends model is adapted to meet local needs and can now be delivered over the phone and virtually, but it still works within a national delivery framework, supported by a national evidence base. Here is our last [impact report](#).

- 1 [British Red Cross \(2020\) Life after lockdown: Tackling loneliness among those left behind](#)
- 2 [British Red Cross \(2020\) Lonely and Left Behind: Tackling Loneliness at a Time of Crisis](#)

## What are its core values?

There are a number of key ingredients that are essential to the Reading Friends ethos, including its accessibility, diversity of reading materials, informality and flexibility. Here are some key principles to follow to create a successful and engaging Reading Friends project:

Fun	Welcoming
Inclusive	Equal
Empowering	Participant-led
Non-judgmental	Non-elitist

- **Fun and Welcoming** - An enjoyable experience with friendly and approachable staff and volunteers, in a familiar and comfortable place.
- **Inclusive and Equal** - Open to anyone and responsive to people's needs. There is no hierarchy, everyone is a Reading Friend just with different roles.
- **Empowering and Participant-led** - Participants are given opportunities to be involved in what happens during sessions and what they would like to read or do.
- **Non-judgmental and Non-elitist** - All kinds of reading are involved. There are no set texts or specific approaches to reading that need to be followed.

## Session principles

### What reading materials can a session contain?

Reading Friends is not a structured book group or literary model. The focus is on books and reading as a conversation starter. Reading takes many forms and can include books, newspapers, magazines or zines, poems, quotes, excerpts, comics, short stories, picture books. Different formats such as e-books or audio books can also be used. We have information about what has worked well in sessions in our training and resources. Our reading is 'in the moment' without participants having to have read something before a session. This means that it is suitable for people living with dementia and their carers as well as people with other conditions or less time.

### What does a Reading Friends session involve?

Reading Friends is participant-led, giving people choices about how sessions run and what happens during them. Reading Friends sessions can therefore take many forms, based around interests or hobbies, i.e. cooking, gardening or travelling. It helps to provide some structure at the start whilst getting to know participants, but then encouraging ownership through ongoing feedback, shaping the content and making adaptations. Showcasing local resources from your organisation can help to bring sessions to life i.e. local history or reminiscence collections.

**Participants might like to do some of the following session ideas:**

- 🕒 Read, be read to, or a mix of both.
- 🕒 Chat about things they have read, authors or more generally about different genres. Our reading-related conversation ideas provide icebreakers and inspiration.
- 🕒 Share and exchange favourite poems or stories.
- 🕒 Share a short poem, extract, quote at the start of each session and let conversations develop from there.
- 🕒 Share reading material from their homes: letters, cards, postcards, diaries.
- 🕒 Read [Quick Reads](#), [Pictures to Share](#) or other collections.
- 🕒 Develop confidence with reading and learn new things.
- 🕒 Read together something they would normally read but can't access at the moment, like newspapers or magazines. These could be accessed through library online resources.
- 🕒 Use our resources containing reading-related discussions, ideas, and activities.
- 🕒 Do the crossword. This is possible online if they don't have access to any at the moment.
- 🕒 Do activities or games like hangman, anagrams like the 'countdown conundrums', or word wheels.
- 🕒 Share booklists or prize lists, i.e. Booker Prize, and see if they've heard or read any of the books on the list.

