

**Reading Ahead
evaluation report
2019-20**

Foreword

The Reading Agency is a national charity with a mission to tackle life's big challenges through the proven power of reading. One in three adults in the UK do not regularly read for pleasure and one in six find reading difficult. In prisons, one in five people report needing help with reading and over two-thirds have problems reading prison information. This national trend has a huge impact on health and wellbeing, the economy and welfare spending.

Reading changes lives and its benefits should be available to all. The annual Reading Ahead programme is designed to engage less confident readers in reading for pleasure, often for the first time. It is delivered by organisations across the UK including public libraries, colleges, prisons, workplaces and community-based adult learning.

The 2019-20 Reading Ahead programme began in September 2019. By March 2020 the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, including social distancing, the closure of public spaces and staff redeployment, meant that Reading Ahead had been put on pause by the majority of participating organisations. This report is therefore divided into two parts to reflect the activity and progress that was taking place before lockdown and the adaptations and response from The Reading Agency and participating organisations once the pandemic began.

The pandemic significantly reduced the ability for organisations to deliver the Reading Ahead programme as reflected in the participation figures reported. However, it also impacted data collection as contact was restricted and buildings closed. Therefore, the figures outlined in this report do not represent the full picture or number of those reached, and the impact of the programme has been limited to a snapshot of a small number of participants whose data we were able to collect.

Despite these limitations, this report has found that in 2019-20, a total of at least 18,710 people took part in Reading Ahead, with at least 8,458 completing their six reads. The impact of the programme has continued in line with previous years, with individual participants reading more frequently, enjoying reading more and exploring a greater range of reading material because of taking part. They have also felt more confident, both in their reading ability and in trying new things in their lives more generally. They are using their participation in Reading Ahead to spark conversations about books and reading with family, friends and colleagues. For many participants, this has resulted in increased social connections during a period where many in the UK were at risk of loneliness and isolation as a result of the pandemic.

In addition, over 38 organisations supported 50 or more participants to complete the challenge. This is a significant achievement during such difficult circumstances. As always, we would like to thank all the staff in public libraries, learning organisations, prisons and workplaces for their commitment to supporting less confident readers. The past year has demonstrated the creativity and determination within these sectors that is key to ensuring everyone has the opportunity to benefit from the power of reading.

The Reading Agency have taken the learnings from the past year to develop the digital capacity of Reading Ahead and a [digital version of the challenge](#) was launched on 1 February 2021. Now in its 13th year, Reading Ahead continues to provide an innovative and flexible tool for supporting and inspiring new readers to discover the joy and benefits of reading.

Lily Staunton Howe, Programme Manager: Adult Reading. April 2021.

Executive Summary

Reading Ahead is a Reading Agency programme delivered in partnership with organisations across the UK. The programme aims to encourage those who find reading difficult to explore reading for pleasure and improve their skills at the same time. Participants are invited to choose six reads (short texts such as poems, magazine and newspaper articles and websites count as well as books) and record, review and rate them in a reading diary. Those completing their six reads receive a certificate and the opportunity to enter prize draws at local and national level.

Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, delivery of the programme was paused by the majority of participating organisations in March 2020. With some reopening taking place over the summer months, the 2019-20 programme year was extended through to November 2020.

In 2019-20, a total of at least 18,710 people took part in Reading Ahead, with at least 8,458 completing their six reads. Delivery organisations faced challenges in collecting or gaining access to participant data. As a result, participation and completion figures may be higher than are represented here.

Based on data collected from Reading Ahead participants, the following areas of impact can be seen as a result of taking part in the programme:

- 80% said they enjoyed reading more because of taking part in Reading Ahead
- 80% said they feel more connected to others because of taking part in Reading Ahead
- 77% said they feel more confident about trying new things (like applying for a job or course) because of taking part in Reading Ahead
- 74% said they read for pleasure more because of taking part in Reading Ahead
- 74% said they feel more confident about reading because of taking part in Reading Ahead

The following evaluation report outlines in further detail the activity that took place both before and during the pandemic, the reach of the programme, and the impact on those who took part in Reading Ahead during this challenging year.

1. About Reading Ahead

One in three adults in the UK do not regularly read for pleasure. One in six adults in the UK find reading difficult. The effects of this have a huge impact on people's lives, including increasing poor health, pressure on the economy from loss of earnings and increased welfare spending.¹ Reading changes lives and the Reading Ahead programme plays a key role in addressing the national adult literacy crisis in the UK through inspiring emergent readers.

Delivered by public libraries, adult and community learning, FE and sixth form colleges, prisons and workplaces across the UK, Reading Ahead has challenged participants to start their reading journeys and build their identity as readers since 2008. Through an incentivised Challenge model, it aims to encourage those who find reading difficult to discover reading for pleasure and improve their literacy skills at the same time. Participants choose six reads (short texts such as poems, magazine and newspaper articles and websites count as well as books) and record, review and rate them in a reading diary. Those completing their six reads receive a certificate and the opportunity to enter prize draws at local and national level.

¹ The Reading Agency (2020), [Reading Facts](#)

Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, delivery of the programme was paused by the majority of participating organisations in March 2020. With some reopening taking place over the summer months and no guarantees that restrictions on movement would be removed by September, the 2019-20 programme was extended through the summer to November 2020. This allowed those organisations that were able to pick up activity in the summer to do so, and those with remaining resources that could not be used in the final academic term to be able to use those with new starters from September. This time was also used by The Reading Agency to develop the digital capacity of the programme so that it could be delivered online.

This report outlines the activity that took place both before and during the pandemic, the reach of the programme, and the impact on those who took part in Reading Ahead during this challenging year.

2. Reach

In 2019-20, an estimated 18,710 participants were reached through Reading Ahead through the support of 206 delivery organisations. This represents a decrease of 38% on engagement levels prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as is outlined in further detail below, participation data was collected and shared in a different way to previous years, meaning that this is a loose rather than direct comparison.

An estimated total of 8,458 participants completed Reading Ahead by reading and reviewing at least six books each, indicating that at least 50,748 books were read this year.

The table below outlines participation across organisations in more detail:

Reading Ahead 2019-20	Number of organisations taking part	Total starters	Total completers	Completion rate
Prisons	94	5,685	3,251	57%
Public libraries and local learning providers	47	2,523	1,077	43%
Colleges	55	10,147	4,028	40%
Workplaces	10	356	102	29%
Total	206	18,710	8,458	45%

Delivery organisations faced significant challenges in collecting or gaining access to participant data, with some delivery coordinators unable to return to their workplaces where data had been stored. As a result, participation and completion figures may be higher than are represented here. Additionally, due to these challenges faced by delivery coordinators, it was not possible to collect or present accurate data on the demographics of Reading Ahead participants this year.

3. Delivering Reading Ahead

As a result of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and a reduction in face-to-face contact, the 2019-20 programme year represented a shift in the ways Reading Ahead was delivered across organisations. This section focuses on the range of ways The Reading Agency and delivery organisations worked together to deliver Reading Ahead both before and during the pandemic.

All organisations delivering Reading Ahead were invited to complete an online or paper survey that asked for their experience of delivering the programme. The quotes and information below have been obtained from the organisation survey, which was filled in by 36 organisations. As a result of the low number of responses, it is likely additional activity and delivery methods took place beyond what can be represented in this report.

Additional activity that took place around Reading Ahead in the 2019-20 programme year included a pilot peer support project in prisons. From November 2019 through May 2020, six prisons in Staffordshire piloted Reading Ahead Champions, a method of peer-to-peer support aimed at increasing engagement with Reading Ahead and challenge completion within prison settings. While the pilot's delivery was drastically altered or discontinued in the six prison settings in March 2020 due to Covid-19 lockdown, the evaluation findings indicated a positive impact on participants, peer Champions and prison librarians. The pilot project was funded in part by The Bromley Trust, and a full evaluation report can be accessed through the Resources page of The Reading Agency's website.

Before the pandemic

Reading Ahead 2019-20 launched in September 2019. Prior to the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, the programme was promoted to organisations and individuals through a series of in-person events including author visits and conferences. In addition, The Reading Agency's Reading Ahead in Prisons Manager delivered a workshop and information sharing session to prison librarians, which was attended by 50 people.

Further details of activity and events taking place from September 2019 through February 2020 can be found in the timeline on the next page.

Engagement in the first few months of the programme was positively described by several organisations:

"The response this year has been excellent. We have had a 100% completion rate and our highest participant numbers so far."

"The challenge was launched in Nov. 2019 we were on track for all the participants to complete by the end of May."

Organisations highlighted that Reading Ahead helped their learners to become more confident in accessing and using libraries:

"Reading Ahead gives them exposure to libraries and makes libraries more accessible."

"Having the library induction and regular sessions in the library throughout the programme also has the benefit of developing a habit of library use"

Timeline of Reading Ahead activities, pre-pandemic (September 2019-February 2020)

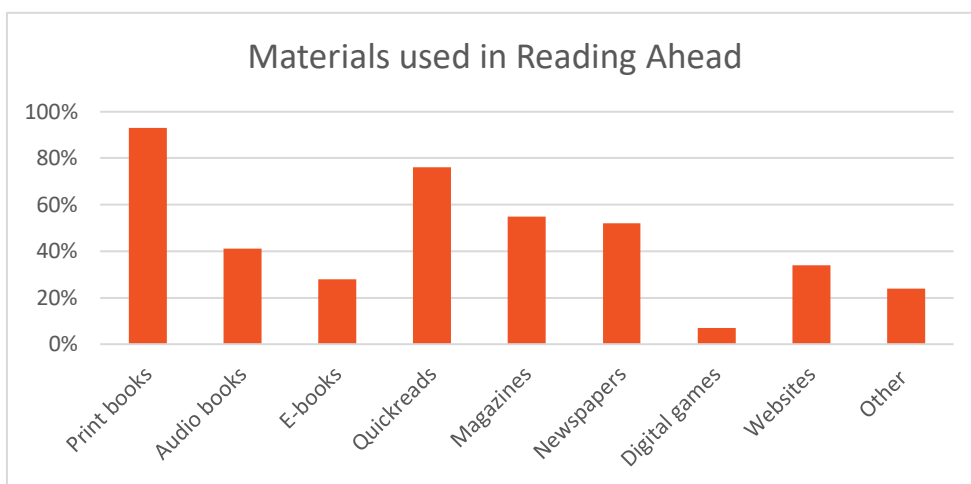


Materials & activities used to deliver Reading Ahead

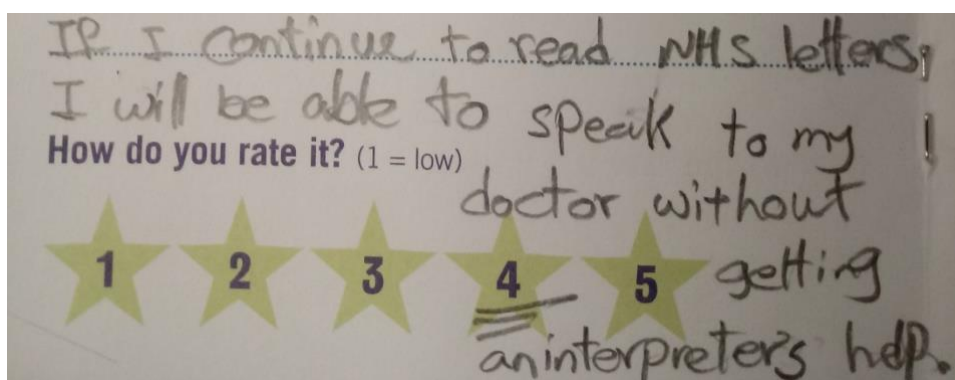
The Reading Agency provided free resources available online to help organisations in delivering Reading Ahead. The number of unique page views of these resources are outlined below, indicating the level of access by organisations:

Resource name	Views
Guide to running Reading Ahead 2019-20	289
Quick Reads Learning Resources	227
The Wilbur & Niso Smith Adventure Writing resource	221
The Reading Agency booklist for ESOL learners	141
Winter Reads 2019: Poetry, Short Stories and Novels	83

The most commonly used reading materials are outlined in the graph below. Diverse reading materials were also mentioned by organisations, including letters, song lyrics and a footballing magazine.



In some cases, participants noted the ways that using these reading materials as part of Reading Ahead helped support them in their daily lives. An example of this is represented in an excerpt from a reading diary, shared below:



ESOL student at City of Glasgow College, Reading Ahead reading diary, Dec 2019

Quick Reads were highlighted by several organisations as being a popular material with Reading Ahead participants:

“Quick Reads and short versions of classics are popular.”

“Quick reads are popular with those who are struggling with their reading or English”

When the situation allowed, organisations also used a range of activities to support the programme. Many of these activities focused on introducing participants to the programme, such as library tours and launch events:

“Visiting classes and promoting the Reading Ahead to students.”

“Library inductions we great and helped break down the initial reluctance some participants had.”

“Our launch event normally works very well as we work with the public library.”



NHS Wales Library Service, Reading Ahead display at Glangwili Hospital Canteen, Jan 2020



NUH library service, Reading Ahead display, March 2020



Students receiving Reading Ahead certificates at Burton & Derbyshire College, Dec 2019



CCG Library Reading Ahead display, Feb 2020



Students starting Reading Ahead at North Kent College, Dec 2019

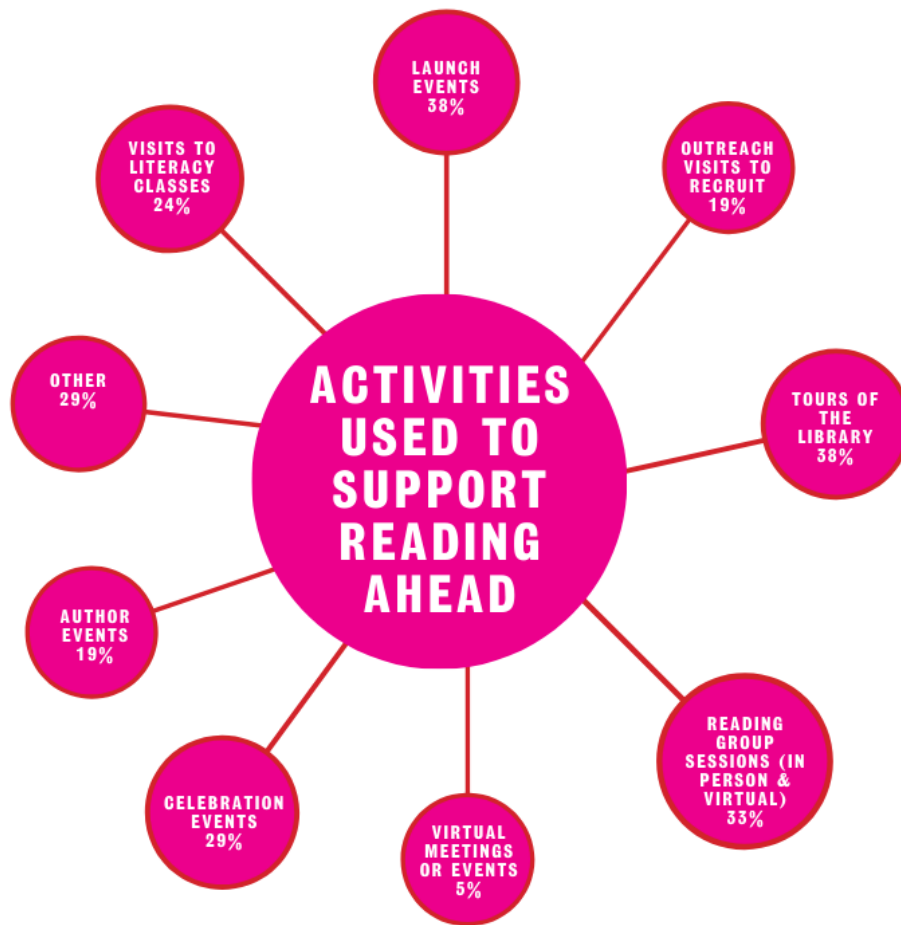


Merseylearn promoting Reading Ahead, Oct 2019



Students at Northampton College with Covid safety measures, March 2020

A breakdown of the key activity types used to support Reading Ahead are shown in the graph below:



Other smaller scale activities were aimed at making Reading Ahead an engaging and inclusive experience for participants:

“Students liked listening to stories read aloud and I think were inspired by seeing their tutors and people from the community – and it made them feel like fellow readers.”

“Reading groups – students enjoyed talking about their reading”

“The book reviews worked well. The participants enjoyed seeing their reviews displayed in the library.”

“A particularly successful activity was a visit by a therapy dog, to which the foundation students read books. This was a fabulous experience for them and for us to watch.”

In addition to materials used to support the delivery of Reading Ahead, The Reading Agency offers items that can be used as incentives for registration or to encourage completion, such as branded mugs, pens and tote bags. Organisations can order these incentive materials alongside the core materials for running the challenge. Organisations are encouraged to supplement these with local incentives relevant to their group of participants. This can include local prize draws for vouchers or prizes or benefits such as positive behaviour marks or phone credit for people in prison.

The Reading Agency also run two national prize draws, one for organisations and one for participants, as an additional incentive for taking part and completing Reading Ahead. The winners of the organisation prize draw receive author visits organised by The Reading Agency. Unfortunately, due to the uncertainty of the pandemic this prize draw was cancelled for 2019/20.

The participant prize draw, however, remained open and 620 participants were entered by nine different organisations. Ten winning participants received gift vouchers and the overall winner will have a character named after them in the next book written by bestselling author Mark Billingham.

The main incentive for taking part in Reading Ahead is the certificate of achievement that all completers receive. Due to the pandemic, The Reading Agency provided a digital version of these certificates for organisations to award online and via email.

Finally, The Reading Agency produces a 'roll of honour' and organisation certificates for all organisations supporting 50 or more participants to complete the challenge. In 2019-20 over 38 organisations received certificates.



Author Levison Wood visiting Reading Ahead students at CONEL, Feb 2020



Author and Reading Ahead ambassador Adele Parks visiting The Manchester College, Nov 2019

Spotlight on the value of incentives in prison settings

Incentives seem to be key in encouraging participants to sign up to and persevere with Reading Ahead, as they provide value to the organisations and to the participants. As noted above, these incentives can come in many forms, including celebration events, particularly in prisons:

- *“The celebration event where refreshments were available and a chance to be in the library all morning / afternoon. A rarity in prison life and a huge selling point.”*
- *“Celebration events work very well in prison.”*

In previous years, free dictionaries had been donated to prisoners completing Reading Ahead by the charity Give a Book. While these were not directly offered in 2019-20, some prisons made use of any remaining dictionaries they had in their setting as additional incentives, demonstrating their ongoing value in encouraging prisoners to complete the challenge:

- *“The reward of a dictionary (this year we had some of the improving writing books as well) is a huge incentive.”*

During the pandemic

A UK nationwide lockdown was first introduced on 16 March 2020, and presented a major challenge to organisations in delivering the Reading Ahead programme, with many highlighting the absence of face-to-face contact time as a significant barrier:

“Many students like the physical action of visiting our Library and speaking to us so we have less finishers than we would have if lockdown had not occurred.”

“With the library being closed and the group not meeting since March only the very quickest managed to finish”

“Lockdown had a huge effect on starters/completers.”

In response to lockdown, The Reading Agency produced additional resources and toolkits to support those running Reading Ahead. These resources were designed to help delivery organisations to promote reading and support less confident readers, even if they had paused the programme itself. As can be seen by the unique page views below, these resources were used widely by delivery organisations:

Resource name	Views
Reading Ahead during Covid-19 toolkit	322
Penned By A Prisoner Daily Writing Challenge (days 1-10) (Resources created by HMP Brixton and promoted by The Reading Agency)	239
Reading Ahead for prisons during Covid-19 toolkit	221
Editable Reading Ahead Poster 2019-20	133
Editable, digital versions of the RA certificate	97
This Is Going To Hurt: Diary Writing Challenge to accompany the This Is Going To Hurt Quick Reads title	91
Editable Reading Ahead Flyer for Prisons	37

The Reading Agency also put together a series of [case studies](#) to share best practice and provide ideas for how the programme could continue in some circumstances. These were posted on the website and distributed to delivery organisations as part of a package of support provided by The Reading Agency.

The support package provided by The Reading Agency was rated by most responding organisations as 'Good' or 'Very Good'. Several organisations specifically commented on the high level of support provided by the Reading Ahead team, both before and during the pandemic:

"Easy to contact and always helpful and supportive. Encouraging of all our reading schemes and show a real understanding of the challenges faced by young people struggling with reading and adults that have poor literacy."

"Always ready to help if there is an issue."

"Always there to provide support if needed. You know you are not alone."

Moving to digital delivery

Despite the challenges presented by lockdown, several organisations made adaptations to continue delivering Reading Ahead:

"We managed to adapt. Just before the full lockdown was announced, we sent diaries to each wing for anyone who wanted to take part, along with a variety of books. These boxes of books and diaries circulated the wings for 3 months. Due to this, we had loads of completers who hadn't originally signed up to take part. [...] I think the lockdown gave people a chance to try Reading Ahead and reading in general"

"We have been in contact with our registered students via text, personal emails and on their eLPs. We have also contacted tutors who are still teaching digitally to remind students to carry on with Reading Ahead."

In addition, many organisations adopted digital methods as a way of delivering Reading Ahead during lockdown and social distancing. Selected examples of these methods are highlighted below:

"I created an interactive PPP with book excerpts and links to further reading and websites. This was shared with staff and students via our internal online communications board - Yammer, and email."

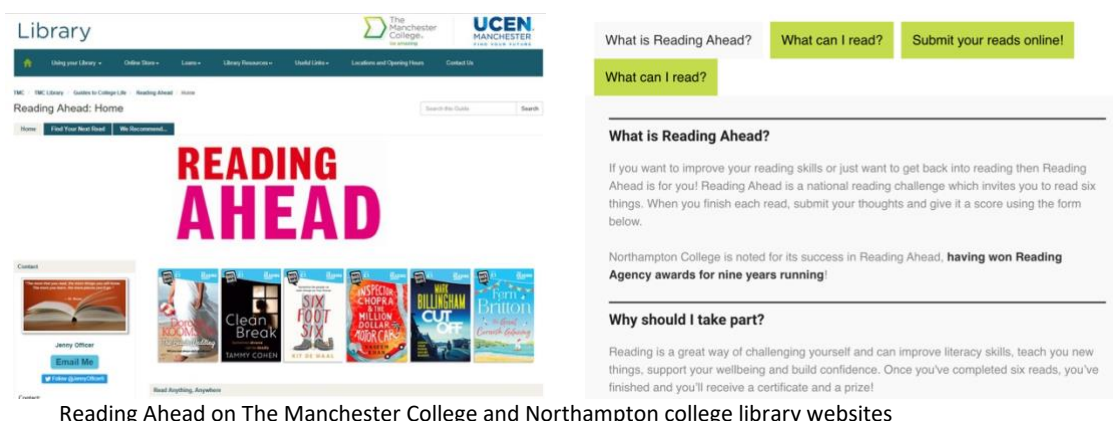
"We are having to change how we do everything at the moment with a view of Reading Ahead being on the whole, digital from now on, registration, support, encouragement, certificates."

"During the lockdown the Learning Centre staff used Team, Zoom and our VLE platform to engage as much participants as possible to complete the challenge."

"The online course meant that students could send us a message out of college if they needed any help or had any queries."

"Our Awards Ceremony is a big event each year so we are having to rethink how to recognise student achievement. We are organising a virtual Ceremony, pre-recorded and sending students a personalised digital certificate until we can get a paper copy to them. We have a local author, the college Librarian, Principal and Vice Principal recording video clips to include

and this will be launched and publicised in June to all who finished Reading Ahead, won competitions and completed other Library schemes.”



Reading Ahead on The Manchester College and Northampton college library websites

As the pandemic continued into the new academic year, The Reading Agency recognised the increasing need for a digital model of Reading Ahead to support delivery of the programme. In September 2020, the Reading Ahead team sent a survey out to programme co-ordinators asking for feedback on the potential for a digital model and any other support needed for delivery during the pandemic. Thirty-eight organisations responded to the survey and provided feedback, including 13 prisons. The Reading Ahead team also spoke directly to co-ordinators from each of the four key sectors involved in delivering the programme to gain more in-depth insight into options for delivery.

This consultation led to the extension of the 2019-20 Reading Ahead programme year to November 2020 and the development of a digital model for the programme and updates to the printed resources, including new artwork and a new diary layout. The 2021 programme was publicised from the end of November for organisations to pre-order their materials, and the newly developed programme blending digital and in-person delivery was launched in February 2021.

Spotlight on working in partnership

The Reading Ahead team at the Reading Agency worked closely in partnership with organisations, publishers and funders to consistently deliver the programme both before and throughout the pandemic and continue to reach those who struggle with reading and access to books.

Partnership efforts prior to the pandemic:

- Worked with the Wilbur & Niso Smith Adventure Writing Prize to promote the 2019 Best Published Novel Prize. This involved promotion to libraries and reading groups through The Reading Agency’s Reading Promotions team and promotion specifically to Reading Ahead participants. It also included author visits from the shortlisted authors to organisations running Reading Ahead (as outlined in the timeline on p. 6) and resources on creative writing for Reading Ahead participants.

Partnership efforts during the pandemic:

- The Reading Agency distributed 3,100 Quick Reads to 44 prisons across the UK thanks to funding from The Hobson Charity.
- 4,800 Quick Reads were donated by publishers during the pandemic. The Reading Agency distributed 2,500 Quick Reads to organisations working with adult readers and/or running Reading Ahead. This included HMP Pentonville, HMP Brixton, unionlearn and Islington

Adult Education. An additional 2,300 copies were donated to healthcare and community keyworkers with support from Civic.

- Reading Ahead team elected onto the Prison Learning Alliance Steering Committee during lockdown.
- Reading Ahead team set up and facilitated the Literacy in Prisons Stakeholder group. This group began in lockdown to support the limitations on communication and access whilst prison libraries were closed. The group has continued to meet monthly and provides a valuable space for sharing and coordinating adult literacy and reading activity in prisons.
- Delivered workshops to union learning reps at CWU in 2020, which were attended by 74 people.
- The Reading Agency booklist for ESOL learners, created in 2019 in partnership with NATECLA and The Bell Foundation, was refined and updated by the Reading Ahead team.

4. Impact of Reading Ahead: Evaluation methodology and notes on data

Each year Reading Ahead evaluates the outcomes and impact of the programme for both participants and delivery organisations. Since 2017, the evaluation questions have been set in line with The Reading Agency's [Reading Outcomes Framework Toolkit](#).

Data are generated to determine whether Reading Ahead had achieved its intended outcomes:

- Reading engagement outcomes:
 - Attitude to reading;
 - Reading behaviour;
 - Confidence about reading;
 - Shared enjoyment of reading;
 - Understanding how to find reading materials
- Intellectual outcomes:
 - Language and literacy

Organisations were asked to encourage their participants to complete a survey following their Reading Ahead experience, whether they completed Reading Ahead or not. The primary aim of the 'after' survey was to measure perceptions of change due to taking part in the programme. The survey was open from 30 September 2019 to 11 December 2020 and could be completed through online or paper formats. There was a total of 55 survey respondents, representing 21 organisations.

Due to the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the decreased contact between organisations and participants, the number of survey responses decreased significantly from previous years. Whilst some results in this report are presented as percentages in order to summarise, the low number of responses means that only broad statements about trends can be made. The findings outlined in the sections below, therefore, should not be viewed as representative of all Reading Ahead participants, but as an insight into the experiences of a small group of respondents. It is also important to note that, while the number of responses was lower in 2020, the views of these respondents are broadly in line with those from previous years.

All organisations delivering Reading Ahead were also invited to complete an online or paper survey that asked for their experience and perspective regarding the outcome areas noted above. Due to the challenges of the Covid year and pausing and restarting of delivery in some organisations, additional

surveys were administered to ascertain delivery needs. The information presented below incorporates data collected from all surveys shared with organisations.

The data below is visualised using a bookshelf graphic. Each ‘book’ in these graphics represents approximately 5% of respondents and the answer categories of ‘more’ and ‘about the same’ are represented by the colour orange and pink, respectively.

As Reading Ahead participants are at various points in their reading and writing journeys and have differing levels of skill and English language knowledge, all quotations from participant responses have been left verbatim.

Impact on participants

This section aims to evaluate the impact of the Reading Ahead programme on a number of aspects of participants’ reading journeys. The data and conclusions outlined do not seek to make broad statements that Reading Ahead is solely responsible for the changes detailed, as there are external factors that cannot be controlled for and the repercussions of Covid-19 have limited the data available. However, the information represents the change perceived by individuals and organisations on key aspects of the reading journey because of taking part in the Reading Ahead programme.

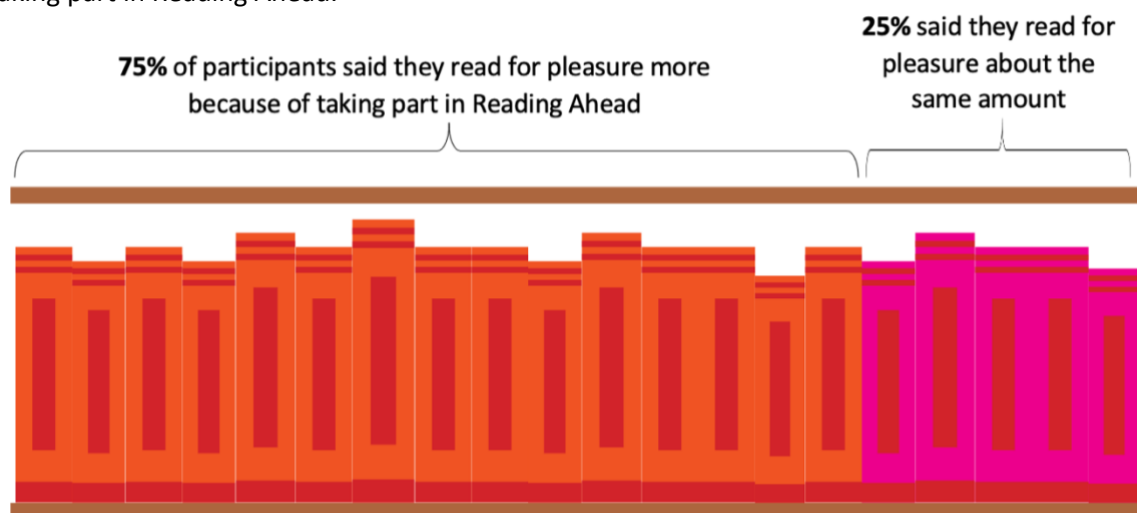
The overwhelming majority of participants were positive about their experience of Reading Ahead, with over 94% indicating that they enjoyed taking part in the programme.

The following sections outline the impact on Reading Ahead participants in the following areas: reading behaviour, attitudes towards reading, confidence, social connections, and skills/learning.

Reading behaviour

Participants’ perspective

The majority of responding participants indicated that they read more frequently as a result of taking part in Reading Ahead.



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I read more often....

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	52%	22%	22%	4%	0%	54
	74%					

Respondents said that taking part in the challenge increased their motivation to read for pleasure, with many of them noting they now set aside dedicated time to do so:

“I enjoyed my time only me and the book, great relax, much better than spend a lot of time in social media”

“It gave me gave me a reason to read the books that I have been eyeing up for a while in the library.”

“It has allowed to take time and appreciate what other writers have written in the past”

Organisations’ perspective

The majority of responding organisations also agreed that participants read more frequently as a result of taking part in Reading Ahead:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	All responses
Responses	33%	52%	15%	0%	0%	27
	85%					

Several respondents noted the value of Reading Ahead in changing participants’ perceptions of reading, introducing them to reading as a pleasurable and rewarding experience:

“Reading Ahead we think of a pleasure to do and it is often the first 'positive' experience of reading that our students have had.”

“Some students expressed their joy in actually reading 6 books and asked for second diaries to continue reading.”

Spotlight on new genres

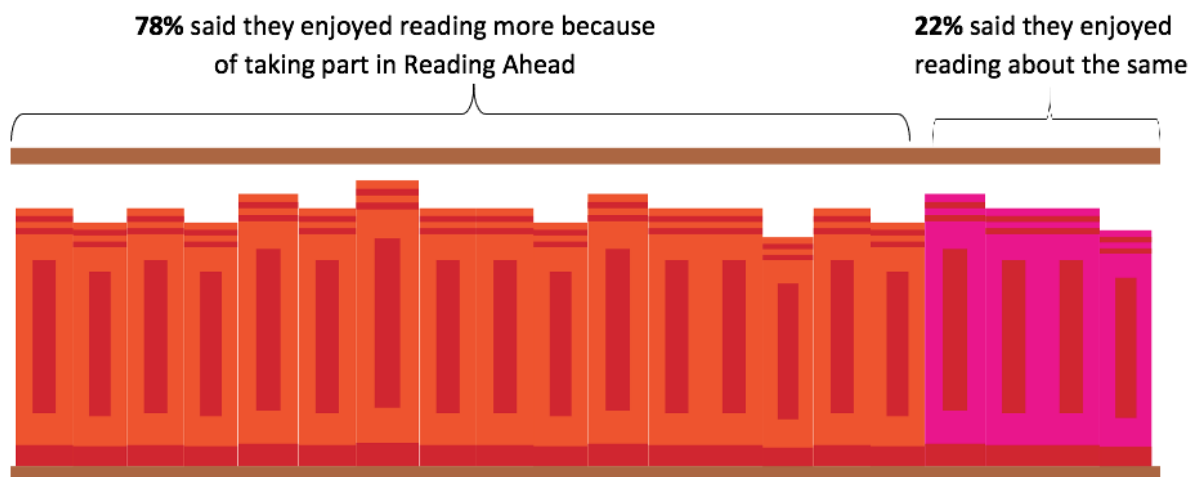
Many respondents highlighted how taking part in Reading Ahead had encouraged them to try different books, genres and authors that they otherwise would not have:

- *“Makes me think more about what I’m reading and read genres I would not normally have chosen.”*
- *“Encouraging me to try different authors and a broader range of topics.”*
- *“Taking part in Reading Ahead has allowed me to choose books that are normally out of my comfort zone and not a genre I would choose.”*
- *“Reading Ahead has allowed me to try new genres and step out of my comfort zone wit [sic] books!”*
- *“I have been surprised by how much I have enjoyed doing Reading Ahead. I have read more diverse things than I would normally choose”*

Attitudes towards reading

Participants’ perspective

The majority of responding participants indicated that their attitude towards reading had improved as a result of taking part in Reading Ahead.



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I enjoy reading....

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	52%	26%	22%	0%	0%	54
	78%					

Participants discussed enjoying reading as part of the challenge:

“It has made such a massive difference as I have learnt many new things and enjoyed reading”

“I like to reading new stories. I enjoy alot.”

“I wanted to come back to do Reading Ahead again because I know I will enjoy looking at books with help and knowing more stories. It is good to get help with my reading.”

Spotlight on rediscovering the joy of reading

Many participants highlighted how taking part in Reading Ahead had reminded them of the enjoyment they had once experienced through reading. Enjoyment has previously been highlighted as a key positive outcome for adults engaging in reading:²

- *“Made me read alot more and reminded me how much I love to read.”*
- *“I had forgotten how reading takes you to new places and opens your mind.”*
- *“It has encouraged me to start reading books again.”*

Organisations’ perspective

The vast majority of responding organisations (96%) said that they had also witnessed increased enjoyment of reading among participants:

² [BOP Consulting](#), 2015

Organisations witnessing increased enjoyment of reading among participants

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	All responses
Responses	42%	54%	4%	0%	0%	26
	96%					

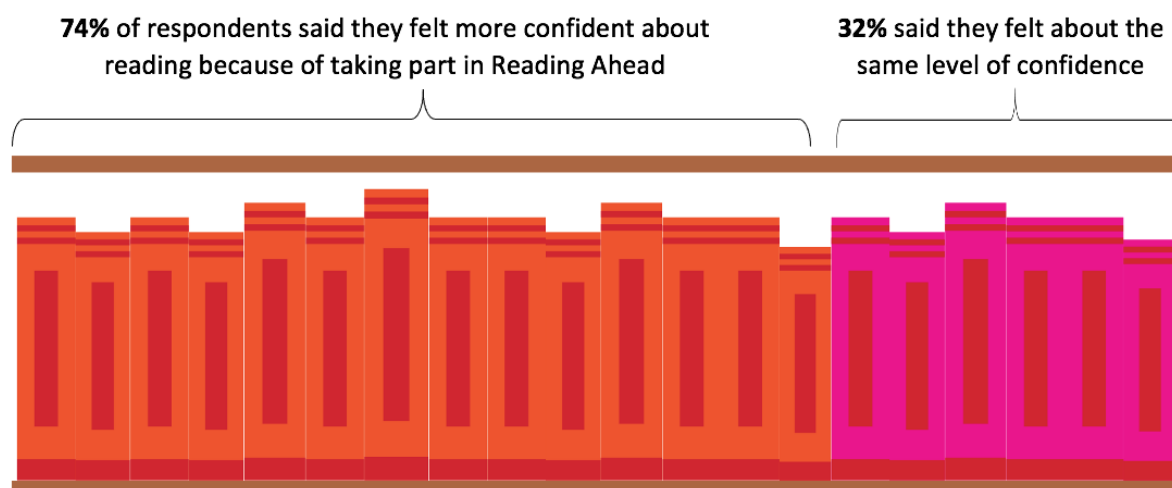
Organisations commented on the ways reading enjoyment interlinked with their motivation to continue taking part and complete the challenge:

“The students engaged with reading and found it a fun exercise, they were keen to read”

“Many participants enjoy the challenge aspect and the reward of trying to complete something.”

Improved confidence in reading

Participants’ perspective



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I feel confident about reading...

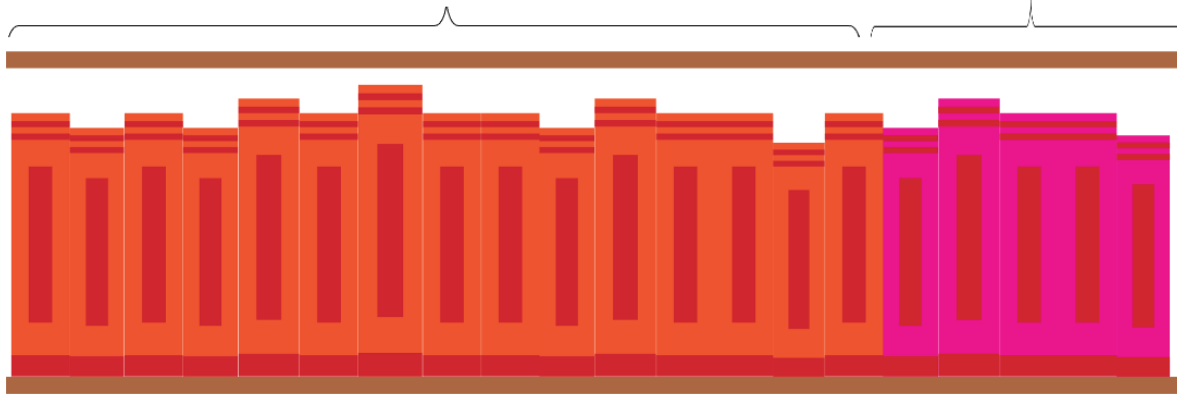
	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	43%	25%	32%	0%	0%	53
	74%					

Previous studies have found a strong association between the outcomes of reading for pleasure and emotional and personal development.³ As well as feeling more confident in their reading skills specifically, over three-quarters of respondents also agreed that they had increased their self-confidence more generally:

³ [BOP Consulting](#), 2015

77% of respondents said they felt more confident about trying new things because of taking part in Reading Ahead

21% said they felt about the same level of confidence



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I feel confident about trying new things (like applying for a job or course) ...

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	32%	45%	21%	2%	0%	53
	77%					

Several respondents also highlighted their feelings of increased confidence in and outside of reading as a result of taking part in Reading Ahead in their qualitative comments:

“I really feel more confident in myself, even a lot more than I've done before.”

“It has helped me to improve in writing skills and it has given me confidence as well.”

“it has helped broaden my horizon and brought a lot of vocabularies in my writing and speaking which has made me a very confident and competent individual.”

In addition, some participants discussed their awareness that taking part in Reading Ahead could be helpful for other areas of their life outside of reading:

“Difference of taking part in Reading Ahead that I have noticed that there will be new certificates for reading ahead that demonstrate and supports the evidence of C.V”

Organisations' perspective

Organisations agreed that the confidence Reading Ahead participants had experienced had extended beyond confidence in reading to general self-confidence.

Organisations reporting participants' confidence has increased after Reading Ahead

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	All responses
Responses	41%	48%	11%	0%	0%	27
	89%					

In their qualitative comments, organisations described the ways that improved confidence in participants' reading abilities had extended to other areas of their life:

"The ESOL students were the main participants. Their reading confidence improved and they continued read after the competition."

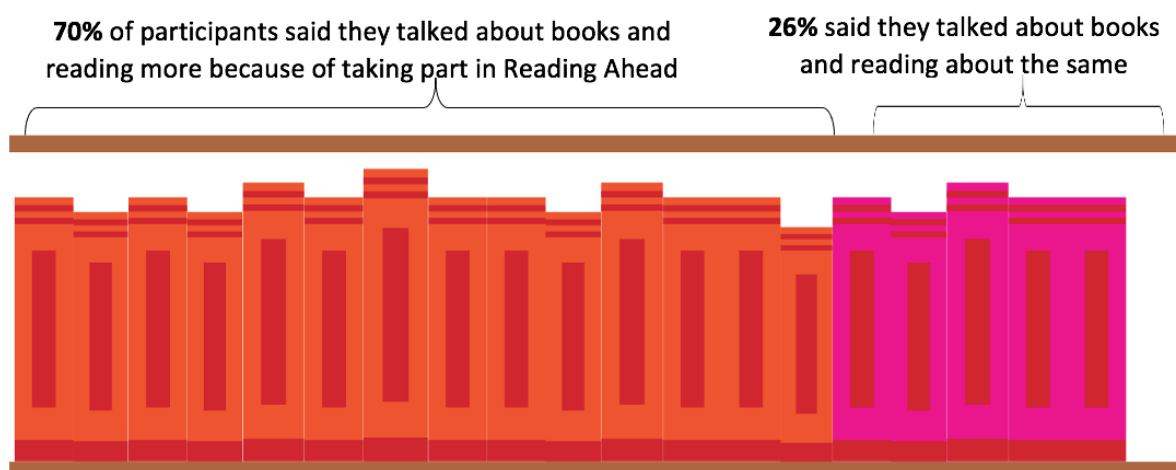
"Overall, I think it leaves them feeling much more confident in their own abilities and more relaxed in their environment."

"We watch ladies who rarely read determined to complete their Reading Ahead challenge and that in turn gives many the confidence to explore new books."

Shared enjoyment of reading

Participants' perspective

As a result of taking part in Reading Ahead and its associated activities, participants also reported sharing their enjoyment of reading with others by talking about books and reading, as well as by reading with their children and families.



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I talk about books and reading...

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	38%	32%	26%	2%	2%	53
	70%					

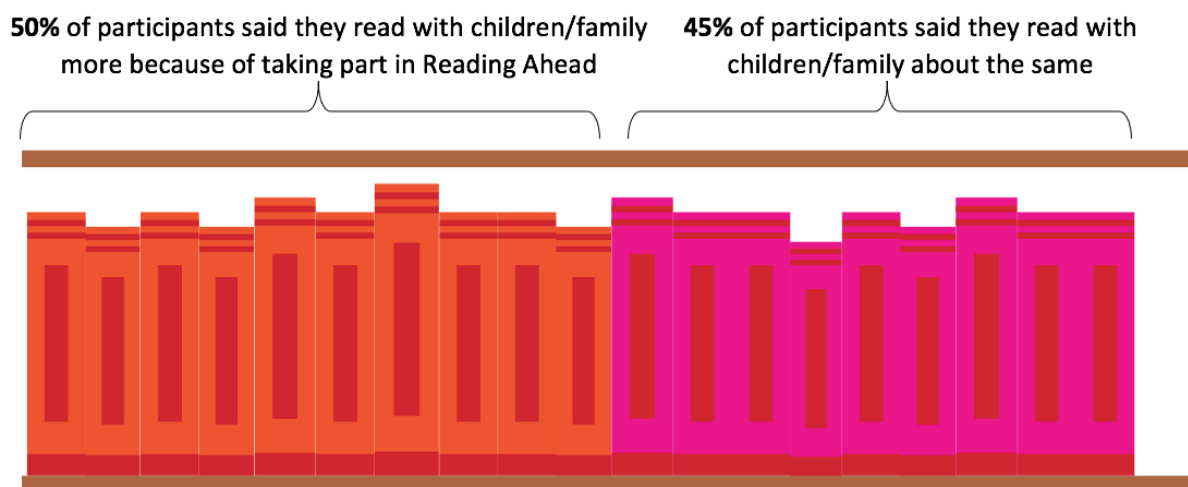
Participants mentioned talking more about books and reading with their family members, which links to sharing an enjoyment of reading with those family members:

"My wife and I have done it together and we have talked about books a lot more and shared what we think."

Having books in the home is associated with improved reading enjoyment and confidence in children, demonstrating the value of reading together and shared enjoyment of reading.⁴ Parents or

⁴ [McGrane, 2017](#)

carers reading to young children has also been described as an ‘absolutely crucial aspect of early child development’ which in turn has a positive effect on social mobility over time.⁵ About half of respondents reported reading with children and family more frequently as a result of taking part in Reading Ahead:



Many participants shared examples of how Reading Ahead enabled them to share an enjoyment of reading with their families:

“I really enjoyed the reading, now my husband has started reading as well.”

“I now have a little ‘cwtch’ in my home [...] I have two bookcases in there and a small settee. It has encouraged all my family members to read more. I have wanted to do this since joining book club, and the reading ahead challenge made decide. This has also encouraged my son to read more as he is trying to beat my score of what I have read.”

“I have started reading with my little sister since i started the challenge.”

Organisations’ perspective

85% of organisations indicated that participants talked more about books and reading after taking part in the challenge, supporting the findings from the participant survey.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	All responses
Responses	26%	59%	15%	0%	0%	27
	85%					

Increased connectivity through reading

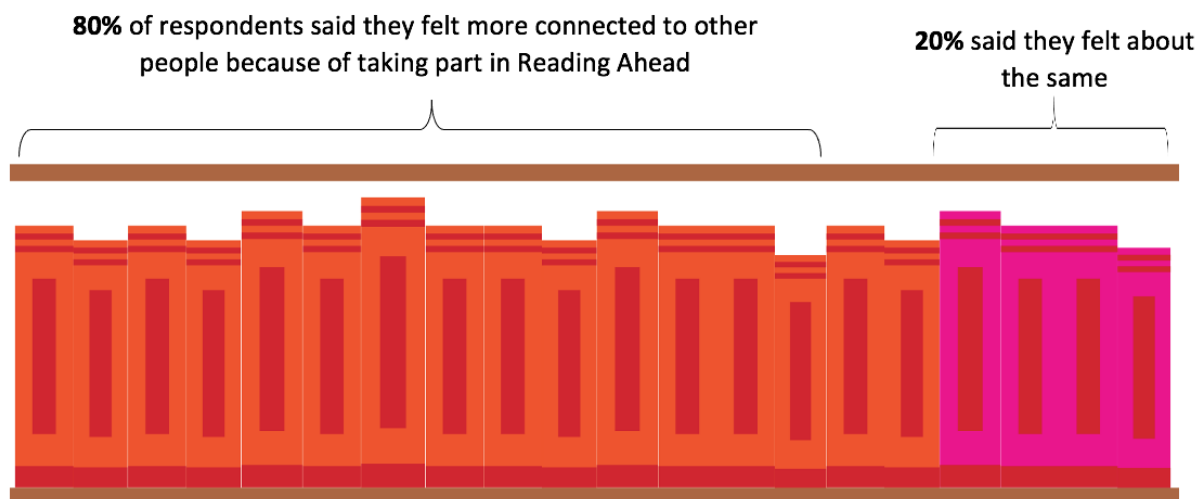
Loneliness and isolation is a serious challenge currently facing society, which has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.⁶ Research indicate that reading for pleasure can help to alleviate these issues to some degree, having been documented as a method of reducing feelings of loneliness for people aged 18-64.⁷

⁵ Demos, 2018, p. 34

⁶ Demos, 2018, p.32; Red Cross, 2020

⁷ Demos, 2018, p. 1

As a programme, Reading Ahead encourages discussion with others about reading as part of several activities, thereby creating connections with other people. The 2019-20 programme year was the first to measure increased connectivity as an outcome of participation. It is encouraging to see that the majority of survey respondents felt more connected to other people because of taking part in Reading Ahead. This outcome will be explored in greater detail in future years.



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I feel connected to other people...

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	55%	25%	20%	0%	0%	53
	80%					

Participants highlighted that Reading Ahead encouraged them to discuss reading in different settings and with different people than usual, offering further opportunities for social connection:

“Reading Ahead encourages me to discuss what I’ve read with other like-minded book-loving colleagues at my place of work.”

“Reading Ahead gets me together with other people at our university who read.”

The theme of enjoying the connections formed because of taking part in Reading Ahead was also highlighted by several participants in qualitative comments, whether these connections were made between friends, colleagues or library/college support staff:

“Going on the course gets me out and I have a good laugh with other people.”

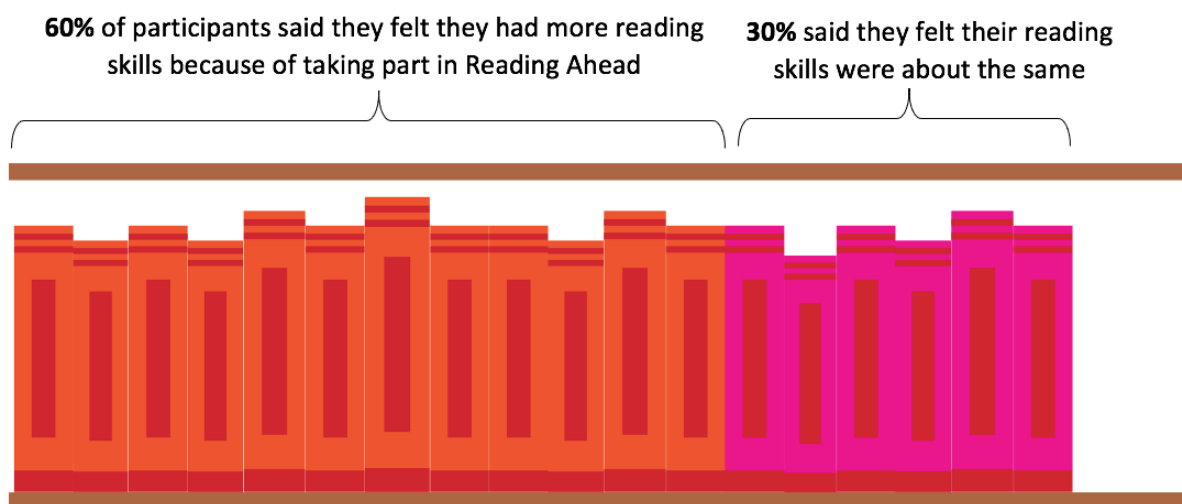
“I have met a support worker who is French like me and really enjoyed talking with him and learning more.”

“I enjoy going to the library where the staff know me now.”

Intellectual outcomes

Participants' perspective

Evidence indicates that reading for pleasure can foster the development of stronger reading habits and increase literacy skills at a greater rate than through formal literacy lessons.⁸ Reading Ahead aims to build a reading for pleasure habit, thereby supporting participants' reading and literacy skills. The majority of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their reading skills had improved as a result of taking part in Reading Ahead.



Because of taking part in Reading Ahead, I feel I have good reading skills...

	A lot more	A little more	About the same	A little less	A lot less	All responses
Responses	38%	25%	29%	6%	4%	53
	60%					

In their qualitative responses, several participants detailed how the programme had improved their reading skills:

"My English developed for the better and I start read in English more than my first language."

"made me read faster"

"It has made a difference because it helps with my spelling because we do writing activities as well as reading."

Other participants explained how taking part in Reading Ahead had improved their skills in other areas outside of reading:

"It helps me with my vocabulary also communicating with friends."

⁸ [Demos](#), 2018, p.32

“It has made a difference because it helps with my spelling because we do writing activities as well as reading.”

“I have learned to speak new words and I understand more.”

“Reading Ahead increased my words and helped me in writing [sic]. I became more confident while talking in English”

“It’s made a difference in making me do poetry and my reading skills.”

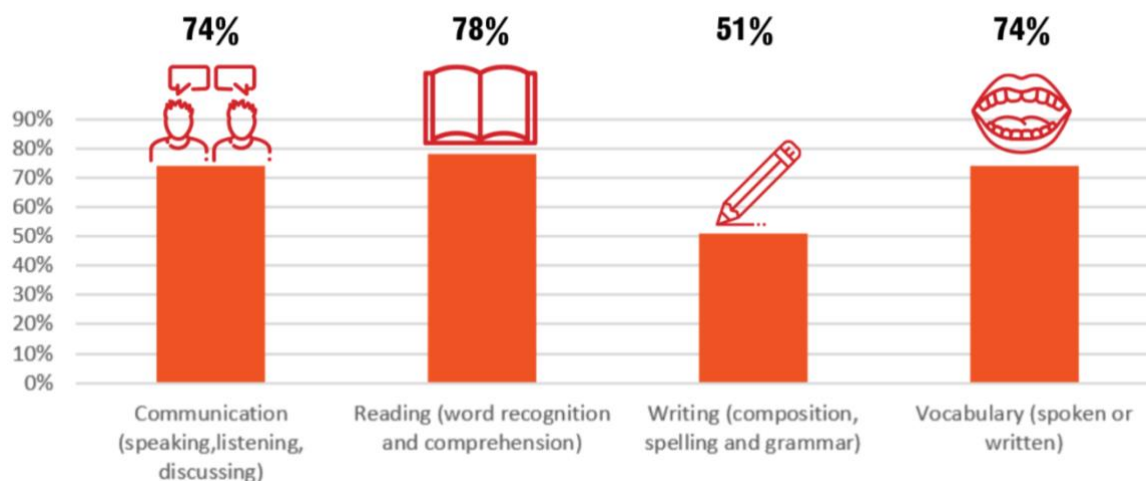
Organisations’ perspective

The majority of responding organisations (82%) also reported that participants’ literacy skills have improved since taking part in Reading Ahead.

Organisations thinking participants’ literacy skills have improved since Reading Ahead

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	All responses
Responses	19%	63%	19%	0%	0%	27
	82%					

Organisations were asked to assess the extent to which Reading Ahead improved specific aspects of participants’ learning. Respondents reported that around three-quarters of participants had improved their reading and communication skills and vocabulary, with over half improving their writing skills.



A more detailed breakdown of organisations’ responses can be found in the table below. Several organisations mentioned in their responses that they were less sure of the impact of Reading Ahead this year, due to reduced contact with participants because of Covid-19 restrictions, potentially resulting in a higher proportion of those responding ‘not sure’ than in previous years:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	All responses
Communication (speaking, listening, discussing)	18%	56%	26%	0%	0%	27
Reading (word recognition and comprehension)	26%	52%	22%	0%	0%	27
Writing (composition, spelling and grammar)	7%	44%	48%	0%	0%	27
Vocabulary (spoken or written)	15%	59%	22%	4%	0%	27

In qualitative comments, organisations further highlighted the value of Reading Ahead in improving literacy skills for participants, with some also referring to higher level skills of analysis and evaluation:

“Students discussed reading and the books they had read more. They improved in their Speaking and Writing”

“Many students used this to critically assess texts, e.g. evaluating how useful or reliable an article is.”

In one case, an organisation noted the link between participants’ increased communication skills and their ability to relate to others. This links with research associating higher literacy skills with positive societal benefits including increased empathy and sense of belonging:⁹

“Particularly valuable for our Entry Level students with SEND, who often have communication difficulties. Reading together and choosing their own reading helps them with confidence in literacy, oracy and empathy.”

5. Conclusion

Despite the significant challenges posed by the 2019-20 programme year due to the disruption caused by Covid-19, Reading Ahead 2019-20 has continued to be a success for the participants and organisations who responded to our surveys. All outcomes have been achieved to varying degrees.

Individual participants are reading more frequently and enjoying reading more because of taking part in the programme. They are also reaping the benefits of an increased confidence in reading or in other aspects of their life. They are exploring a greater range of reading material and using their participation in Reading Ahead to spark conversations about books and reading with family, friends and colleagues. For many participants, this has resulted in increased social connections during a period where many in the UK were at risk of loneliness and isolation as a result of the pandemic.

To better understand the impact Reading Ahead makes to both participants and organisations, we are continuing to investigate ways to increase the response from the full range of participants in

⁹ [OECD](#), 2013

next year's Reading Ahead programme. This includes data collection methods embedded into the registration and completion processes.

The Reading Agency has also worked to develop the digital capacity of the programme so that it could be delivered online in future. This digital version of the challenge was launched on 1 February 2021, integrated with the physical version continuing to take place in libraries, colleges, prisons and workplaces. Through digital and in-person delivery, we hope to explore the ways that Reading Ahead can reach both new audiences and existing audiences in new ways to help adults and young people in their reading journeys.