

Case for Support for Public Libraries

How to use this document

This document has been created to help library authorities develop funding applications and engage key stakeholders. Please use, adapt and add local evidence as required to develop briefings, papers or proposals.

What is Reading Friends?

Reading Friends is The Reading Agency's reading connection programme. It uses all kinds of reading to start conversations and connect people socially around shared stories, interests and passions. Public libraries as trusted community spaces are core delivery partners for Reading Friends, which is part of the [Universal Health offer](#).

Reading Friends makes a positive difference to people's lives – supporting wellbeing, creating meaningful connections, reducing loneliness and engaging more people in reading together for pleasure. Reading Friends has a powerful impact on communities – building social support networks, creating long-lasting connections and friendships.

What is the need?

- [One quarter of adults](#) in the UK reported feeling lonely with some level of regularity in 2023, with [over 3.8 million](#) experiencing chronic loneliness.
- The implications are of vital societal, health and economic concern. Recent government data using the HM Treasury Green Book shows that the combined wellbeing, health and productivity impacts associated with severe loneliness are estimated to be at least [£9,976 per person](#) experiencing severe loneliness each year.
- [Loneliness is associated with higher rates of](#) anxiety and depression, high blood pressure and dementia, as well as higher rates of premature mortality. People experiencing loneliness are [more likely to visit their GP and use hospital emergency services](#) and are at increased risk of needing long-term care.
- In fact, [3 in 4 GPs](#) say that up to five of their patients each day attend primarily because they are lonely.

Find out local priorities in your authority's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment – this can inform where Reading Friends can add the greatest local value.

Why does Reading Friends work?

Reading Friends has co-produced [Guiding Principles](#) for flexible local delivery with no prescriptive reading lists or delivery formats. The programme incorporates key features in its programme design proven to reduce loneliness. These include: a tailored approach flexible to the needs of individuals and groups; an asset-based approach to reducing the stigma around loneliness; opportunities to build meaningful connections between people in a fun and engaging way; new relationships built around shared interests and a sense of purpose for the individual.¹ These principles and mechanisms are reflected in the co-produced design of Reading Friends.

¹ What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2019) [A brief guide to measuring loneliness for charities and social enterprises](#) p. 9; Kantar Public (2016) [Trapped in a bubble: An investigation into triggers for Loneliness in the UK](#) (for British Red Cross and Co-op)

Reading Friends is a proven intervention supported by a robust evidence base. [Read](#) our evaluation reports and [find out more](#) about how Reading Friends has been delivered in different library authorities. As trusted frontline services, public libraries running Reading Friends are delivering against key local health and wellbeing priorities as described below.

The Reading Friends Offer

Reading Friends is a cost-effective tried and tested programme to support wellbeing. Further detail in Appendix 1.

Project costs for local delivery will depend on the size of the delivery model employed but are usually around £5000. Appendix 2 contains a budget template to help with cost projections.

Budgets should include a national contribution for The Reading Agency to manage, support and evaluate the core offer at £300+VAT per library authority.

Over one year, an average sized programme with around six Reading Befrienders will deliver approximately 2000 befriending engagements at a cost of approximately £5 per engagement – however through economies of scale, this cost decreases as the number of engagements increase.

Reading Friends evidence overview

Benefits for individuals, communities and library authorities

Addresses factors that negatively impact mental health and wellbeing²

- Positive social connections are associated with increased wellbeing and resilience and lower risk of mental health issues³, improving health outcomes for individuals and contributing to local authority health and wellbeing priorities.
 - o 77% of participants agreed Reading Friends had added purpose to their week.
- Supports those most at risk as well as the general local population. Social support was not available to everyone prior to their involvement in Reading Friends:
 - o 66% of participants and 49% participants felt lonely always/often, some of the time or occasionally.
 - o 20% of participants and 5% of befrienders had not socialized with a friend or group of friends.
 - o 19% of participants and 5% befrienders did not have people that they could call on.

Uses the power of reading to support wellbeing:

- Participation in shared reading groups is linked to enhanced relaxation, calmness, concentration, quality of life, confidence and self-esteem, as well as feelings of shared community and common purpose.⁴
- Reading Friends supported wellbeing through increasing life satisfaction.
 - o 69% of participants and 68% of befrienders agreed the programme 'increased my satisfaction with my life.'⁵

² The Reading Agency (2023) Impact report

³ Seppala (2020) Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection, Stanford Medicine

⁴ E. Longden et al. (2015), [Shared Reading: Assessing the intrinsic value of a literature-based intervention](#), *Medical Humanities*, 41(2): 113-20

⁵ The Reading Agency (2023) Impact report

Builds social connectivity and social support:⁶

- Building on the evidence-based benefits of reading to create social connections⁷.
- People involved in Reading Friends feel more connected and less lonely.
 - o 83% of participants agreed the programme 'helped me feel more connected to other people.'
 - o 68% of participants agreed Reading Friends had 'helped me feel less lonely.'⁸
- High levels of interaction strengthen social networks and whole communities providing social support.
 - o "Our group has been a source of comfort to members knowing other members understand what they are going through and people accept them."
- Experience meaningful, ongoing connections created through shared interests.
 - o "I don't usually like speaking on the phone. This is good practice for me. I'm surprised to find myself chatting so much to people on the phone."
- The programme reinforces libraries' role as the heart of communities.
 - o "The calls have been rewarding both for the customers and the staff."

Provides access to an evidence-based national framework with ability to locally tailor delivery:

- Reading Friends works within an evidence-based national delivery framework but can be adapted to fit local context and meet local need as seen in our [Guiding Principles](#).⁹
- Can be delivered face-to-face, by phone or online, by volunteers or staff, meeting in groups or one-to-one.

Offers access to the benefits of volunteering:¹⁰

- Volunteering shown to support the wellbeing of volunteers themselves.
- 84% of befrienders agreed the programme 'helped me feel more connected to other people.'
- Volunteering builds confidence and skills, increasing employability, providing a sense of purpose, and supporting staff continuing professional development.
 - o 86% of befrienders agreed Reading Friends had added purpose to their week, with 70% agreeing the programme had 'increased my confidence to try new things.'

Reaches a range of different ages:

- Reading Friends reaches all ages, from birth to older adults – sharing stories has universal appeal and has been used intergenerationally to bring ages together to support each other and connect communities.
 - o In 2023, Reading Friends reached 0-15 (3%), 16-24 (19%), 25-64 (77%), 65+ (87%)
 - o "I've got to know people I didn't before...[it] brings people in the village together."

⁶ Renaisi (2019) [Reading Friends impact report](#); Renaisi (2020) Reading Friends evaluation report; The Reading Agency (2023) Impact report

⁷ Demos (2018) [A Society of Readers](#); Billington (2015) [Reading between the lines](#); Howard (2011) [The importance of pleasure reading in the lives of young teens](#)

⁸ Renaisi (2021) [Read, Talk, Share Impact report](#)

⁹ Reading Friends (2020) [Guiding Principles](#)

¹⁰ What Works Wellbeing (2020) [Volunteer Wellbeing: What works and who benefits](#); Renaisi (2019) [Reading Friends impact report](#); Renaisi (2020) Reading Friends evaluation report; The Reading Agency (2023) Impact report

Is delivered or supported through local partnerships:

- Comprising local authority support pathways or other community-based organisations, for example:
 - o community-based groups and partners including local charities.
 - o council pathways and teams, e.g., critical services, mental health, connected communities, outreach, independence and wellbeing, health and social care, community hubs.
 - o local authority helplines.
 - o social prescribing through link workers or public health teams.

Supports the delivery of key priorities of Loneliness Action Plans:

- By improving health and wellbeing, connecting individuals and communities, developing skills.

Next steps

Read our [Guidance for funding routes](#) for further details on where you can use this Case for Support. It can be edited as appropriate for local contexts. We have a specific [Commissioning Case for Support](#) for use with local Commissioners to help raise support or funding for local project costs.

Let us know if you are making any applications or need support, and also outcomes of submitted applications: readingfriends@readingagency.org.uk

Appendix 1

The offer

Reading Friends projects receive the following benefits:

Training and support

- Online training for Coordinators and Reading Befrienders (staff or volunteers).
 - o Video and PDF formats available
 - o MP3 format available for Reading Befriender training
- Regular Skills Share sessions.
 - o Where you can meet others to share best practice and learning
- Ongoing advice and support in response to need.

Programme toolkits and resources

- A project toolkit.
 - o A step-by-step starter guide developed with learnings and good practice
- Access to a ready-made, co-produced downloadable resource bank refreshed in response to need.
 - o Template resources to support setting up your project and support session ideas which can be adapted locally
- A commissioning toolkit.
 - o Guidance on engaging and promoting your project with commissioners

Evidence bank

- Evaluation and data collection.
 - o Impact and reach data collection resources provided for local evaluation
 - o Evaluation summaries for each library authority
 - o Local evaluations contribute to a national dataset and evidence framework
- Commissioning information and a Case for Support.

Comms support

- National promotion of the programme and its impact.
 - o Demonstrating the importance of public libraries as essential community hubs
 - o Government engagement campaign about our work with libraries
 - o Growing engagement with the National Academy for Social Prescribing
- Support with local communications and case studies.
 - o Support with local promotion

Reading Agency opportunities

- Publisher campaign opportunities.
- Access to partnership opportunities.

Affiliation to a national network

- Membership of the UK-wide Reading Friends community.
 - o Connect with others
 - o Website entry on our map to promote your project
- Use of the Reading Friends name, branding and promotional materials.
 - o A comms toolkit including logos, posters, photos, digital signage

Appendix 2

Budget template

Please adapt as required for your local context as variations from project to project depend on size, need and existing availability:

Expenditure	
National Contribution to The Reading Agency	£300+VAT
Staffing costs and expenses	Around 80% of your budget could be spent on these areas
Equipment and technical support	
Resources/materials/stock to support sessions/individuals	
Some of these areas may also be needed:	
Volunteer expenses, DBS or training	
Promotion and marketing	
Staff training for work with specialised audiences	
Events, paid facilitators for specific sessions, or payments to partners	