

Reading Friends

Evaluation Report 2022/23

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Introduction



Reading Friends

Reading Friends is a reading connector programme delivered by The Reading Agency with public libraries. It uses all kinds of reading to start conversations and connect people socially around shared stories, interests and passions.

In 2022, 1 in 2 adults (25.99 million) in the UK reported feeling lonely occasionally, sometimes, often or always. For chronic loneliness, the statistics are even starker and confirm the continuing impact of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis on people's wellbeing, with 3.83 million adults reporting they were chronically lonely² – nearly half a million more than in 2020. The implications are a vital societal concern, as loneliness and a lack of social connection are well documented as being linked to poor physical and mental health. Research shows a link between a lack of social connection and an increased risk of disease, for example cardiovascular disease, strokes and poor mental health including depression and anxiety.³

Programmes and initiatives that provide individuals with social support and connection are critical to addressing levels of loneliness and social isolation in the UK, feeding into the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) strategy for tackling loneliness.⁴

¹ Campaign to End Loneliness (2023) Facts and Statistics

² Campaign to End Loneliness (2023) The State of Loneliness 2023: ONS data on Ioneliness in Britain June 2023

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

⁴ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2018) A connected society A strategy for tackling loneliness – laying the foundations for change

Between 2022 to 2023, Reading Friends connected people through reading, improving individual and community wellbeing, supporting meaningful connections and empowering individuals. For the second year running, the programme ran as a subscription model, with libraries signing up to take part and host Reading Friends one to one and through group sessions.

This report outlines the reach and impact of the programme activity that took place between July 2022 and June 2023.⁵



- " I tended to avoid social interactions with people I didn't know but the Reading Friends group (and group facilitator) was welcoming and I gained confidence to share my thoughts and experience. I also started to participate in other activities, all of which have contributed positively to my mental wellbeing."
 - Participant
- " I have enjoyed meeting people and learnt a lot about my local community from the group, both past and present helping me to feel more connected to my local area. I have enjoyed the sense of fun and cameraderie amongst the Reading Friends group, the way they support each other, the laughs they share and the way they welcome everyone."
 - Befriender

Overview

What is Reading Friends?

Reading Friends is a reading connector programme delivered by The Reading Agency with public libraries. It connects people by starting conversations through reading, giving opportunities to meet others, share stories, make new friends and have fun.

From 2022 to 2023, the programme worked with 39 UK authorities and their delivery partners to make a positive difference to individual lives and whole communities – creating meaningful connections, reducing loneliness and improving wellbeing.

How many people took part?

- Over 4,800 people took part in groups and one-to-ones
- Over 35,600 social connections took place

"Made friends for life."

~ participant

The difference Reading Friends made in 2022/23

Reading Friends made a difference to people's lives and strengthened communities. By taking part in the programme:

77% participants and 86% befrienders added purpose to their week

68% participants and **29% befrienders** felt less lonely

83% participants and **84% befrienders** felt more connected to other people

69% participants and **68% befrienders** increased their satisfaction with their life

71% participants and 70% befrienders increased their confidence to try new things

The people who took part in Reading Friends

How many people took part in Reading Friends sessions in 2022 to 2023?

Between June 2022 and October 2023, 39 library authorities hosted Reading Friends activities across England and Wales.

An estimated 4,822 participants, befrienders and project staff took part, connecting over 35,608 times. This included:

- 32,180 connections made across 3,574 group sessions
- 2,858 connections made across 1,429 one to one sessions
- 570 connections made in initial introductions to the programme, including emails and calls

Library authorities worked with 78 other partners, including local arts and community organisations, specific authors and illustrators, hospitals, social prescribers, care homes, homeless shelters, amongst many more.

These are some of the partnerships made:

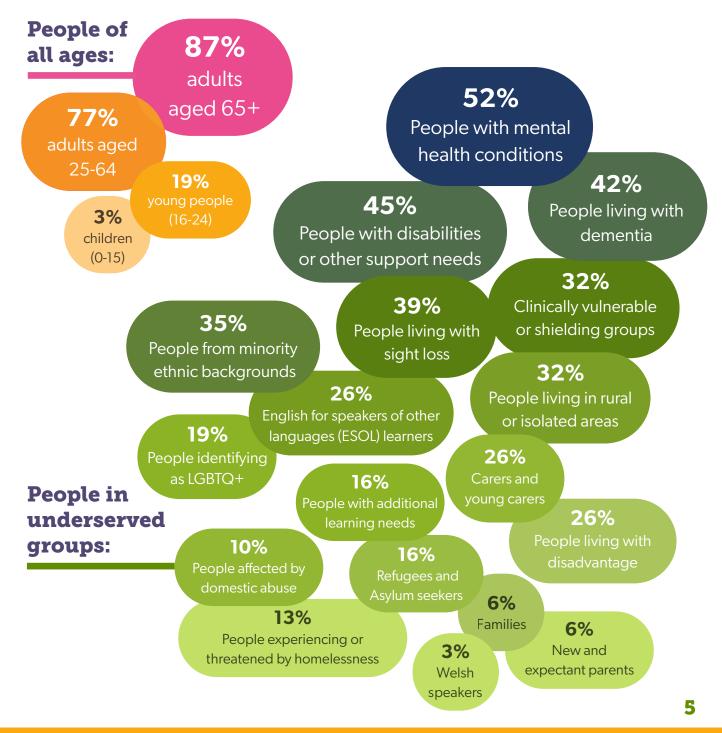






Who took part in Reading Friends?

Between 2022 to 2023, our evaluation findings show that people of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds took part in Reading Friends. Data collected from library authorities shows that the programme was successful in engaging communities and groups of people who may be traditionally underserved, including people living with disadvantage as well as people who require further support with their reading owing to a variety of physical health and mental health-related reasons. In 2022-23, library authorities delivered Reading Friends sessions to:



People who experience loneliness or social isolation

Our evaluation findings suggest that a high proportion of Reading Friends participants responding to our survey regularly felt lonely prior to taking part (66% – 15 percentage points higher than the general population in September 2023 [51%]). In the three months prior to becoming involved in Reading Friends:

- 66% of participants and 49% of befrienders felt lonely always/often, occasionally or some of the time
- 20% of participants and 5% of befrienders had not socialised with a friend or group of friends in-person

• 19% of participants and 5% of befrienders tended

to disagree or disagreed that if they wanted to socialise, they had people that they could call on

¹ ONS (2023) <u>Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness.</u> [23 August to 3 September 2023 edition of this dataset]

Reading Friends activity

Where did Reading Friends activity take place?

Between June 2022 and October 2023, Reading Friends activity took place across 39 library authorities in England and Wales, 35 of which signed up to take part in the most recent subscription year and four of which took part in 2021 to 2022, and carried on with activity between June and October 2022. Authorities signed up for the subscription year 01 October 2022 to 01 October 2023 are represented in the map below.

As part of The Reading Agency's mission to ensure everyone can engage with the proven benefits of reading, the Reading Friends programme aims to reach as many people as possible and provide people living in underserved geographical areas further opportunities to engage with systems of social support through reading. In 2022 to 2023, 12 of the public library authorities in England hosting Reading Friends activities belonged to areas identified as 'Levelling up for culture places' or priority places by Arts Council England (ACE) and the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) – areas in which investment and engagement are low.

Library authorities delivering Reading Friends in 2022 to 2023

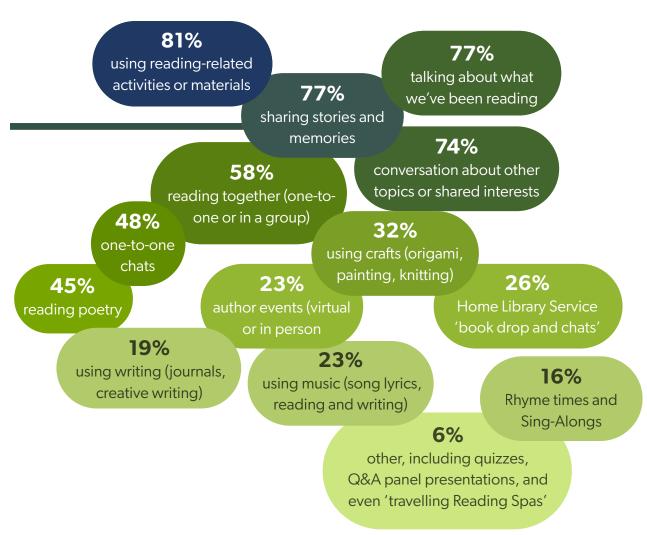


How did people take part in Reading Friends?

Library authorities delivered Reading Friends activities using different platforms and delivery methods to ensure all participants can access reading and social support:



Library authorities delivered Reading Friends activities using different methods of engaging people in reading, building on the flexible model of approach:



The difference Reading Friends made

Impact Overview

Each year, we aim to understand more about the Reading Friends programme, including how it runs in local communities, as well as the difference taking part in the activities may have made to participants and befrienders. To do this, The Reading Agency creates and circulates surveys to public library coordinators, participants and befrienders,² the findings of which can be found in the following sections of this evaluation report.

In 2022 to 2023, our evaluation findings show that Reading Friends made a positive difference by:

- Improving people's wellbeing, by providing purpose, increasing life satisfaction, reducing loneliness and increasing confidence
- Enabling access to social support, creating meaningful connections through conversations that use reading as a hook for further discussion
- Connecting people with their community, offering further opportunities to engage with free public services and the resources they offer, including the library and other community organisations, harnessing the sustainability of the Reading Friends programme
- Engaging more people in reading, by providing a variety of activities through which to spark intrigue and delivered in ways that enable access and further opportunity



Improving Wellbeing

One of the strongest themes to emerge from feedback collected from participants and befrienders was the positive difference the Reading Friends programme made to people's wellbeing. This included improvements in feelings of **purpose**, **confidence**, **life satisfaction and levels of loneliness**.

Reading Friends created value and purpose

A high proportion of participants (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that Reading Friends added purpose to their week, with comments highlighting the ways in which the Reading Friends activities provided participants with the motivation to go outside, where they looked forward to the sessions each week.

- "Reading Friends is the group that gives me something to look forward to each week." ~ Reading Friends participant
- "Encourages me to get out of my home even though it's difficult. Well worth the effort." ~ Reading Friends participant

A very high proportion of befrienders (86%) agreed or strongly agreed that Reading Friends added purpose to their week, suggesting that the programme was more likely to be impactful in this area for people leading or supporting sessions. This is perhaps owing to the nature of volunteering itself, which supports new interests and widens experiences. Comments reflect the value in becoming involved and being responsible for nurturing connections and providing a sense of purpose and structure for others.

- "The dementia sessions have added a new dimension to my work in the library in a positive way. As well as giving me increased job satisfaction." ~ Befriender
- "For me it's more about feeling I'm adding a tiny bit of structure and interest to the week of someone whose social activity is restricted by disability etc. That's what makes me feel good!" ~ Befriender

The difference Reading Friends made – Improving Wellbeing

Reading Friends increased people's confidence

A similar proportion of participants (71%) and befrienders (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that by taking part in Reading Friends they had increased their confidence to try new things. Even for people attending one-off events, there was a similar level of positive impact, where 79% agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the Reading Friends activity had increased their confidence to try new things. Participant responses highlighted the ways in which the programme provided a safe and welcoming environment through which to speak and listen to others, ensuring that those who are less confident speaking to new people could gradually build meaningful relationships with others, using reading as a hook through which to create connections and spark conversation.

" I'm not as confident around people as I used to be but I felt as though I really developed a relationship with the library staff. It was lovely." ~ Reading Friends participant



"I tended to avoid social interactions with people I didn't know but the Reading Friends group (and group facilitator) was welcoming and I gained confidence to share my thoughts and experience.

I also started to participate in other activities, all of which have contributed positively to my mental wellbeing." ~ Reading Friends participant

One of the primary themes to emerge from befriender comments was an increase in confidence as a result of taking part in the programme. By leading and supporting sessions, a large number of befrienders reflected on the listening and public speaking skills they gained, as well as the confidence to manage and come up with creative ideas for the sessions themselves.

" I have definitely felt more confident to speak amongst a group of people and gained important experience of listening to people, sharing views and made me happy to see people enjoying the sessions." ~ Befriender

The difference Reading Friends made – Improving Wellbeing

- "It has increased my confidence at work to try new projects and to trust my creative instinct. I have become more confident with facilitating groups, talking about mental health and creative writing with groups, make groups more accessible to users with different needs, to evolve things to suit those groups, and to help people with diverse personalities to feel safe and find common purpose." ~ Befriender
- "Reading friends has allowed me to be more confident in myself and grow. I have improved on my ability to engage in small chat. Finding success in what I am doing at reading friends has allowed me to be more confident in other areas of my life. I really value the time that reading friends adds to my week it encourages me to stop and remember to read." ~ Befriender

Reading Friends helped improve life satisfaction

A large proportion of participants of participants (69%) and befrienders (68%) agreed or strongly agreed that by taking part in Reading Friends they had increased their satisfaction with their life, a key indicator of subjective wellbeing. This emerged as a core theme in the feedback received from participants, who listed the ways in which the programme had become a critical and highly valued part of their daily lives, and improving for many their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

- " Made life worth living, a phone call to look forward to, a neutral person to help make decisions." ~ Reading Friends participant
- " Made me feel good about myself." ~ Reading Friends participant
- "During Covid and afterwards it has helped me to survive. Without it life would not be worth living, I feel a member of a real world." ~ Reading Friends participant

The difference Reading Friends made – Improving Wellbeing

Reading Friends reduced feelings of loneliness

A large proportion of participants (68%) agreed or strongly agreed that Reading Friends helped them feel less lonely. This is particularly encouraging, considering the high number of people who reported feeling lonely often/always, occasionally or some of the time prior to becoming involved. Comments highlighted the ways in which people who are socially isolated may benefit from the regularity of Reading Friends sessions and coming into contact with others in a welcoming environment that promotes participation in ways that can be more or less active, depending upon individual need.

- " I moved (...) just before the pandemic and had been feeling pretty lonely before finding Reading friends last year. I don't generally say much in the meetings but I really like the friendly atmosphere and find the evenings really well run and welcoming. I look forward to attending and like having a regular weekly thing even now that life is returning to normal. It has given me confidence knowing that I'm doing something social for myself." ~ Reading Friends participant
- " I always looked forward to the regular weekly chat as I don't see or hear from many people." ~ Reading Friends participant

A little under one-third of befrienders (29%) agreed or strongly agreed that Reading Friends helped them feel less lonely, perhaps reflecting the smaller proportion of befrienders who noted that they felt lonely often/always, occasionally or some of the time prior to becoming involved in the programme. Befrienders did comment on their motivations for getting involved in the programme, highlighting that helping those who were lonely was a primary motivating factor for many.

- " Meeting other residents who are lonely and helping to make theirs a happy one." ~ Befriender
- "When I retired I wanted to do something to help the elderly and the lonely." ~ Befriender

CASE STUDY:

READING FRIENDS: Pop Culture Group Discussion in Bristol

Reaching people through interest-based discussions

Bristol Libraries began Reading Friends as part of the DCMS-funded campaign Read, Talk, Share, a grant to The Reading Agency take on the challenge of tackling loneliness and supporting mental health during the pandemic. In the last year, Bristol ensured 208 people were able to connect with each other over 355 times. As part of this, Paul Walker, Library Development Officer for Central, North and West Bristol runs an online Reading Friends group covering all things Pop Culture.

In 2019, the group began as a book club run in collaboration with WECIL, a user-led organisation supporting people with disabilities as part of their Peer Support programme. In 2020, when the pandemic resulted in closures across public services in the UK, group members chose to evolve it from an in-person reading group to discussing pop culture themes in online meetings via Zoom. Comments highlighted the importance of this group for participants during the pandemic:

"Only human contact we're getting." "Some of us not leaving the house."

A core group of participants, many of whom used to volunteer at WECIL, take part in the Reading Friends Pop Culture group on a regular basis, although it is open to anyone who identifies as disabled or who has a long-term health condition, as well as friends, carers and family – reaching people of different ages, genders and nationalities. The group pick a different theme each month, ranging from sci-fi films to the 1980s, and discuss openly, sharing new ideas and perspectives with each other in a safe space.

The Reading Friends group employs a flexible and innovative approach, employing interest-pathways as a catalyst for conversation. Using pop culture as a broad overarching theme and as an initial hook, participants can then select topics to discuss, widening knowledge and sharing perspectives.

Comments captured during a group session in August 2023 reflected the ways in which the group had supported conversations, connections, and members' wellbeing, providing something to look forward and a safe and welcoming environment through which to talk to others.

"This could help everyone."

"Good for mental health."

"Something to look forward to."

"Chat here the most."

Participants had clearly built strong relationships through the group, meeting through a welcoming, informal space and connecting with other people with similar life experiences to themselves.



Enabling access to social support

A critical theme to emerge from feedback collected from participants and befrienders was the positive difference the Reading Friends programme made to communities and individuals by providing social support.

Similar high proportions of participants (83%) and befrienders (84%) reported that as a result of taking part in the Reading Friends programme, they felt more connected to other people. 82% of participants who attended a one-off Reading Friends event agreed or strongly agreed that during the Reading Friends activity, they had spent quality time with other people and that they felt more connected to people as a result (83%).

For participants responding to The Reading Agency's survey, a recurring comment was that they had made friends as a result of the programme. This provides evidence to support the high-quality nature of the Reading Friends sessions, with further responses highlighting the sense of belonging and community that the regular sessions provide.

- " It's made me feel part of a 'reading community'."
 - ~ Reading Friends participant
- "I have met people I wouldn't have and it's good to be able to chat to a wide variety of people with different interests and experiences." ~ Reading Friends participant
- "My experience has been not just "very good" but rather excellent. The Bristol library team feels like they are my friends overseas (as I live in the U.S.). They never judge, and they are some of the kindest people I have ever met in my life." ~ Reading Friends participant

Not only did the Reading Friends sessions allow many people to connect with each through conversations related to reading, the sessions also ensured people felt supported to be able to talk to one another about their lives and to open up about personal issues and problems – providing social support when most needed.

" I was out of work and the group was a safe place for me to talk, they supported me in many ways. I now work and try to pop into the group during my lunch break, as I only work around the corner." ~ Reading Friends participant

The difference Reading Friends made – Enabling access to social support



"It's really helped me. I was grieving over the loss of my daughter, the company and friendship has really helped me." ~ Reading Friends participant

Many participants noted that they valued the flexibility of the Reading Friends programme, offering different ways of taking part depending on individual need, catering to those who might benefit most from being able to attend activities online and from the comfort of their own homes.

- "Because of health reasons I am non-verbal, the people in the group accept me as I am and I'm not pressured to participate in activities. I can just enjoy being in company with other people who are enjoying their selves."
 - ~ Reading Friends participant
- "I love Reading Friends; it has made such a difference to my life, especially now lockdown is over and social activities are moving off-line into real spaces, that are not accessible to me because of my disability." ~ Reading Friends participant

Connecting people with their community

Reading Friends is a programme that provides a high level of interaction with others and with reading through regular sessions and interest-based topics and activities. By connecting people multiple times through reading in public libraries, the Reading Friends programme ensured many more people were engaging in cultural activities, their library services and the free resources they provide, connecting individuals with their community offerings and delivering community cohesion on multiple levels.



The positive implications for linking members of the community with free public services and social support was further supported by the **large proportion of people** (31% of participants, 20% of befrienders and 45% of people attending a one-off Reading Friends event) that report that they would **join other activities based on a hobby or a shared interest as a result of taking part in the programme.** A further **20% of participants and 20% of people attending a one-off Reading Friends event would join a social group,** indicating the ways in which the programme supports individuals to connect with others in other ways, even outside of the specific Reading Friends sessions.

- "I believe that these "Reading Friends" meetings/groups are a powerful initiative for community well-being."
 - ~ Reading Friends participant

The high-quality level of interaction experienced as part of Reading Friends as well as the sustainability of the programme is further evidenced by the **79% of participants**, **70% of befrienders and 48% of people attending a one-off Reading Friends event who report that they would continue taking part in Reading Friends**.

CASE STUDY:

READING FRIENDS: Chat and Craft group in Egham Libraries (Surrey)

Providing hooks for conversation through crafts and reading

"It is nice just to sit and listen for a while, sometimes we don't sit and listen. We don't listen to others enough and we can learn a lot from other people." ~ Participant, Surrey Libraries

Surrey Libraries have been hosting Reading Friends sessions in their branches since 2021. In the last year, they ensured 54 people, including 17 befrienders and 37 participants, were able to connect with each other over 520 times in group sessions at several branches, including a Chat and Craft Reading Friends group, held at the library.



The Chat and Craft Reading Friends group merges reading aloud, group discussion and knitting so as to provide something that everyone can get involved in. The group is made up, for the majority, of care home residents who tend to be 60 years old or older, and who are supported by staff and volunteers to visit the library on a weekly basis during term time, then listen to Clare Scott, branch manager at Egham library, read aloud whilst they craft, before further discussion. The majority of participants in the group are from the wider local community and are joined by participants from a local Care Home who come with a carer and their activities manager.

Clare noted the ways in which a flexible model, offering various hooks for conversation through both reading and crafts lent itself to more meaningful discussion and opportunities for connection, as well as humour, which played a critical role in their group. The project lead also highlighted the ways in which the group has supported a community to come together through reading, sharing stories about the history of their local area and their mutual connections, forging friendships between people who have grown up around each other and who had previously never had the chance to meet.

- "What I've found is that for people that come, they've grown up next to each other but they've never spoken. So they've passed them in the street, seeing their faces on a daily basis, and never connected. And they all know people in common and find out about that through the group so that's been really nice to see."
- "It's given people who were lonely the chance to get out and meet people and add purpose to their week. (...) I think it's made a real difference. Just coming together with people that have similar interests."

Participants in the Chat and Craft group were overwhelmingly positive about the difference the group has made to them and their lives, allowing them to form new connections and friendships through reading and catering to specific needs, ensuring anyone is able to take part.



- " I have made friendships here. I have met people here who I have walked past whilst growing up but have never spoken to. I can't miss a Tuesday."
- " I found it on the Surrey County Council website. I was looking for something to do to meet people, to socialise really. I came along on my own to begin with and then brought my family member along with me for who it has been very beneficial, to get her out, socialise with other people and make new friends as she has memory loss."

Having grown exponentially in attendee numbers since its beginning and now a well-established offer at Egham library, the group will be divided into two new groups in 2023 to 2024, so as to better be able to cater to everyone and so that more people can join in on the meaningful discussions.

Reading Friends was successful in engaging more people in reading

The Reading Agency's mission is to empower people of all ages to read, particularly those most in need. Our evaluation findings indicate the ways in which Reading Friends successfully contributed to this mission in 2023, where one in three participants (31%) and befrienders (35%) reported that Reading Friends had encouraged them to read more. A further 31% participants and 59% befrienders reported that taking part in Reading



Friends had inspired or encouraged them to read more widely, including different authors, genres, texts.

Comments reflected the ways in which the sessions introduced participants to new reading material and choices, providing opportunities for further discussion and sharing perspectives with others. Even for participants who attended a one-off Reading Friends event, a similar proportion (32%) also agreed that by taking part in Reading Friends, this had encouraged them to read more. A further 22% agreed that they would read more widely, including different authors, genres, texts.

- " I look forward to Reading Friends as I enjoy listening to the story that I may not have chosen for myself and I particularly like listening to other people's thoughts."
 - ~ Reading Friends participant
- "Given me incentive to research reading and books. Given me pleasure in sharing my ideas with others."
 - ~ Reading Friends participant
- "Introduced me to books which broaden my horizons."
 - ~ Reading Friends participant

The difference Reading Friends made – Engaging more people in reading

Comments from several participants highlighted the ways in which the flexible model and support from librarians and befrienders ensured that those with additional needs could also take part by engaging with other formats that were more suitable for them, such as audiobooks.

- "I have macular eye disease and am losing my sight which has made reading which I have always loved so difficult. But our lovely leader informs us if a book is in audio etc and I can then order it if I wish to read the one being read that week." ~ Reading Friends participant
- "After joining Reading Friends I found out about the online library book group, and joined that. I also found out about library audiobooks to download; I had previously only been able to get audiobooks through the library. I rely on audiobooks because I am disabled. Reading Friends has enabled me to have a fixed hour or "me time" in my week I guard it jealously!" ~ Reading Friends participant

For befrienders, the programme was similarly instrumental in engaging them with reading, providing the motivation and allocated time to connect with others through reading.

- "Because so much of my work relies on digital tools and I sit in front of a computer all day, working on a highly pressurised project, I find Reading Friends allows me to slow down and discuss books my primary love and enjoy the book-side of my library job." ~ Befriender
- "Helped me reconnect with love of literature and its importance in my life and the life of others. Probably helped me feel more connected to local community and of use!" ~ Befriender

CASE STUDY:

READING FRIENDS: Groups for children and Welsh learners in Conwy Libraries

Developing skills through informal and shared reading group sessions

Conwy Libraries have been hosting Reading Friends sessions in their branches since 2017. In the last year, they ensured 205 people, including 16 befrienders and 189 participants, were able to connect with each other over 843 times in group sessions at several of their libraries, including a group for children aged 8 to 12 years old and a group for adult Welsh learners.

Reading Friends group for children aged 8 to 12 years old

The Reading Friends group for children aged 8 to 12 years old is catered to children of all reading levels and abilities. Run by Judith Griffith, Senior Library Assistant at Llyfrgell Abergele Library, the group meets in their local library once every fortnight and read extracts from a book based on a theme they choose together. Judith describes the theme as providing children with 'hooks' for further book talk and conversation, noting the ways in which some children, whilst interested in different things, quickly become absorbed in most of the topics and have become more empathetic as they learn about different cultures, perspectives and life experiences through reading.

Having run the group for over a year, Judith highlighted the value in being able to spend time with her group, perceive changes in reading levels and interests over time and can cater to those changing needs.

"As they age and as they've read more, their vocabulary has improved and how they use their imagination and elaborate a story has changed also. I think their exposure to more words helps them pick it up."





"Reading Friends gives you that opportunity to really sit with a group and get to know them, how they are and seeing what they like to read and decide to choose, as well as reacting to what I've chosen to read (...) It's great seeing how they change and how they change what they read over time too." ~ Judith Griffith

The group began with just one attendee, but quickly expanded gaining more members from different schools in the local area, with many children becoming close friends.

"I'm always really impressed by how well they interact (...) the children have become very close and very good friends quite quickly. (...) Following a difficult period [national lockdowns as a result of the pandemic] it was really nice to be able to offer children something like this." ~ Judith Griffith

The library service plays a critical role in all of this, and engaging whole families in activity like Reading Friends can ensure children remain engaged with reading throughout the transition to secondary school and in later life. Judith explains that if you can get children into a library from an early age, 'you've got them for life'.

"A library card will take you into space, to all sorts of different worlds, you'll meet animals and go on lots of adventures, and you can be whoever you want to be" ~ Judith Griffith

Reading Friends group for adult Welsh learners

The Reading Friends group for Welsh learners is hosted in Llandudno Library in Conwy county by Hilary Moss and Eirian Jones. The group was established as an opportunity to meet and support people who had started learning Welsh alone during the lockdown but has now evolved into an informal drop-in social gathering, catered to a variety of ages.

"The group attracts a range of ages, reflecting the need and desire to discover the Welsh Language. This includes adults learning alongside children and grandchildren and retirees pursuing a hobby." ~ Hilary Moss

The sessions run on a weekly basis in the library where a Welsh text is read aloud and translated, followed by a group discussion, mostly in English, around points of interest. The two befrienders, Hilary and Eirian, maintain a relaxed approach to the sessions with a key focus on introducing Welsh culture, major events and celebrations, for both returning and new members alike.

- "The session is an extra support for the formal Welsh courses and the group provides extra help for what the group learns. The group members enjoy the sessions, there is quite an air of hilarity sometimes and it was lovely to hear the National anthem playing in the library." ~ Eirian Jones
- "It is very satisfying to see people develop their reading and speaking skills over time." ~ Hilary Moss

Through a flexible approach, the sessions allow for learners of varying levels to be able to attend and take part. Members value the group being led by someone who is fluent in Welsh, and the focus on discussion in Welsh is supported by a variety of participatory activities including story cubes, games and revision.

"The sessions are very relaxed and certainly not lessons.

However, it is a great opportunity for we Welsh learners to speak aloud, practice without pressure of perfection and gain confidence at the same time as having fun." ~ Hilary Moss



Both befrienders explained that the Reading Friends group had gained more members and as a result new people signing up to join the local library, highlighting the group as a space for social connection and friendship.

- "Friendships have been made through the group and new attendees brought in through word of mouth." ~ Eirian Jones
- "The group has brought more members to the library, and it is a pleasure to have a personal contact with them beyond the usual staff customer relationship." ~ Hilary Moss

Conclusion

In 2022 to 2023, Reading Friends made a positive difference to people's lives – engaging more people in reading, improving people's wellbeing, enabling access to social support and connecting people with their community.

The Reading Agency, public libraries and their partners were able to engage more people in underserved communities or who traditionally may experience specific barriers to their reading through targeted activities. The flexible model offered a range of activities and delivery methods, ensuring that the programme remained accessible to as many people as possible.

The Reading Friends programme delivers on local and national wellbeing priorities, particularly given the high-quality and regular level of interaction involved in Reading Friends sessions, developing life skills and confidence, improving wellbeing and ensuring people feel supported by other members of their community. Ultimately, the programme was successful in ensuring more people were able to connect with each other, employing reading as a tool through which to open up discussion and create meaningful connections - strengthening social networks and whole communities across the UK.



A special thanks to public libraries and their partners delivering Reading Friends sessions in 2022 to 2023, alongside those library authorities who supported us in delivering case studies, presented in this report (Conwy, Bristol & Surrey) and on our website (Cumbria, Leicester, Walsall & Wiltshire).

Evaluation methodology

Between 1 October 2022 and October 2023, 35 library authorities signed up to deliver the Reading Friends programme activities. Four library authorities were unable to provide any evaluation data by the evaluation deadline. Four libraries who were signed up to the previous subscription year (2021-2022) provided data for July 2022 to October 2022..

Participation monitoring forms,

N=31 (Response rate = 90%)

The Reading Agency collected participation monitoring data on an ongoing basis from project coordinators, encouraging them to submit data on a monthly basis. 31 library authorities provided data to The Reading Agency by the submission deadline.

Final activity forms,

N=31 (Response rate = 90%)

The Reading Agency circulated activity feedback forms to project coordinators in all 35 library authorities who had signed up to host Reading Friends programme activity in 2022 and 2023. Thirty-one coordinators responded. Percentage breakdowns for audiences, delivery models and activities are therefore based on a sample size of 31. Percentages for audiences reached, delivery models and activities do not add up to 100%, as coordinators were able to select more than one option.

The form asked coordinators about their experience of delivering the programme in their authority, including any successes, challenges and further session ideas. The forms also asked project coordinators to indicate how many participants, befrienders and paid staff they worked with to deliver the programme in their local authority. Our evaluation findings show that at least 3,897 participants and 912 befrienders took part in Reading Friends between June 2022 and October 2023. As the reach figure does not include all participating library authorities' data, this is likely to be higher.

Surveys

Participant, N=343; Young participant, N=12; Befriender: N=66;

One-off activity or event: N=155

In October 2022, The Reading Agency circulated five online surveys (hosted on SurveyMonkey) to library authorities delivering Reading Friends programme activity. These surveys ran until 26 June 2023 and were aimed at capturing the difference the Reading Friends programme made to participants, young participants (aged between 11 and 18 years old), befrienders, participants involved in a one-off activity or event, and delivery partners. To ensure that as many people as possible were able to take part in the evaluation, The Reading Agency also created two additional evaluation feedback tools, which could be used to collect the feedback from participants living with dementia and participants aged under the age of 11. The latter received 16 responses in total. By 26 June 2023, we received 343 responses to the participant survey, 12 responses to the young participant survey, 66 responses to the befriender survey and 155 responses to the participant (one-off activity or event) survey. Owing to the small sample size for the surveys for young participants aged 11 to 16 years old, and those aged 11 years old or younger, the analysis has been excluded from this evaluation report.