

# **Reading Groups, Libraries and Communities**

An exploratory study

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## Setting the scene

At a time when libraries were rethinking their role within local communities in the light of the five Universal Offers (Society of Chief Librarians, 2016), our inquiry set out to explore the part that reading groups play in libraries' work and what they were doing to support them. We talked with key people in the Society of Chief Librarians and at The Reading Agency to set our study in the context of current developments in the library service nationally, and asked them to suggest a range of library services known to exemplify good practice in this area.

We decided to use a case study approach, as this would allow for in-depth study of the many different aspects of the support provided for reading groups. We talked to senior staff in libraries with overall responsibility for organising and promoting reading groups. We also talked to library staff and volunteers who facilitated or provided the direct contact with library-based or library-resourced reading groups. Where possible group members were interviewed about their experiences and their views considered in relation to those of library staff. (More detail about our approach is provided on page 34.)

As we listened to librarians, it was abundantly clear that, due to budget cuts, many were having to face some very difficult decisions with respect to reading group provision, for example:

- Limiting opening hours which in turn limits who can join reading groups
- Relying on members to run library-based reading groups themselves
- Losing local knowledge and networks as branch libraries are forced to close
- Reducing the availability of books
- Limiting talking books to a single copy.

We document here how, despite these challenges and difficulties, the library services we visited are continuing to support reading groups and in so doing bring immense benefits and value to their local communities. We met inspiring individuals who believe passionately in the power of literature and reading to make a real difference to the quality of people's lives.

## Library-linked adult reading groups

Our inquiry focused on reading groups that meet in libraries or are initiated and facilitated by library staff. We made a choice *not* to focus on independent groups meeting in people's homes, even though we were aware that libraries often make a substantial contribution to these groups behind the scenes, organising collections of books and ordering stock in response to requests. This choice was made partly due to our limited resources but also because, as one member reflected, there was a difference when groups were library-linked because people came together first and

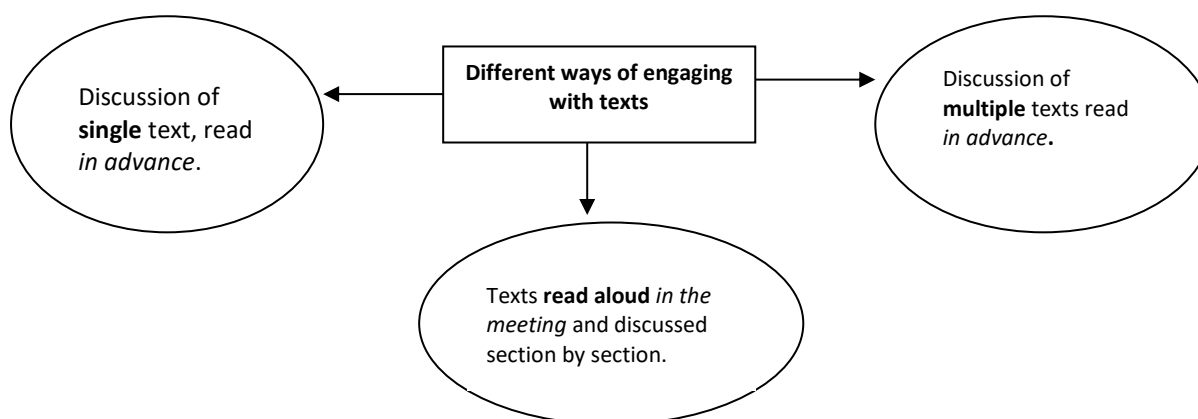
foremost as *readers*, rather than as friends. A key feature of library-based reading groups is that they are open to everyone. Membership remains open in principle even if in actuality, as some facilitators pointed out, the number of participants was often limited by the number of copies of a given title that could be made available.

We decided not to include reading groups for children in our study, again partly due to limited resources but also because so much previous research had focused on groups and activities for younger people.

To create our sample, we used characteristics of the 'flexible reading group model' described in a report of research conducted by The Reading Agency (2004: 42), a leading charity dedicated to inspiring people to read more. This helped to ensure that our study included reading groups of many different kinds:

- Groups with different demographics
- Situated in cities and rural areas
- Using reading material with different formats and genres, including talking books and graphic novels
- Adapted for those with particular needs
- With differing degrees of structure and formality.

In addition to these variations, we found marked differences in the ways that groups engaged with texts and organised their discussions, as shown in the diagram below:



In some groups, people came together *having read a chosen text* and used the meeting to share their responses to this text. This was the most common format for the reading groups we visited. In other groups, members came together *having read different texts* and enjoyed sharing what they had read with others and exchanging recommendations. Some participants in the latter groups would have preferred to focus on a single text, but resources did not permit the purchase of multiple copies. Others in these groups were happy to spend the meeting hearing recommendations and acquainting themselves with texts they had not read. Access to what one person

described as an 'impressive' array of books was a major incentive for some of those attending a graphic novel group. Members of a group of people with visual impairment, who could not read blurbs on the cover of talking books for themselves, also appreciated hearing recommendations from the others.

Through contacts made during the research, we were also introduced to reading groups using a distinctive approach known as Shared Reading, where carefully chosen texts (plays, poems, novels, short stories) were *read aloud, in small sections*, and meanings discussed by group members then and there in the meeting. Jane Davis, Director of The Reader, who pioneered the development of Shared Reading, explained to us how, with the support of a trained facilitator, reading aloud can allow for a closer engagement with and discussion of the ideas. For participants, it can offer a very powerful emotional and social experience.

Given the scale of our study, it was not our intention, nor would it have been possible, to make comparisons or recommendations about the relative value of groups of different kinds. Rather our purpose was to ensure that our sample was broad enough to encompass the flexible ways in which the libraries creatively adapted or expanded their support to better encourage reading for pleasure among the communities they served.

## **Why do library services value reading groups?**

Library staff stressed that reading groups were vital because they 'sit across' so many of the areas that library services of the 21st century are expected to encompass in their work. Traditionally, reading groups were principally about encouraging, and heightening, reading for pleasure. A senior librarian told us:

I think that's why libraries have been enthusiastic to get involved in reading groups, because it clearly links with what we do and strengthens what we do ... libraries have such a natural fit with reading groups.

Now it is recognised that reading groups can also have a key role to play in promoting health and well-being and in countering social isolation, as one manager explained:

Readers' groups are a lifeline for those people who don't see anyone else for a long time ... It's a way of making friends, it's a way of keeping the brain active in old age. It covers a massive range.

Awareness that participation in a reading group could also contribute importantly to people's health and well-being was a key consideration in projects designed to extend libraries' offer to include groups using the Shared Reading approach. Indeed, some of the projects were all or part-funded from health and adult social care budgets. However, as Jane Davis and other practitioners of this approach were keen to point out, the focus of the groups was not primarily therapeutic. People came together as readers. It was the power of literature itself, together with the process of

engaging with good literature as a member of a supportive group, that brought about the feelings of increased well-being frequently noted by members and facilitators alike. As Jane Davis said:

Everybody who experiences it says that you have a different kind of experience for the time that it is happening ... it's like a meditation ... or a retreat, and I think that's good for people. That's why it's worked.

In all groups we interviewed, coming together as readers meant that people, whatever their backgrounds and personal situations, could participate on an equal footing; they could set aside ascribed roles and responsibilities and, for a time at least, 'come away from the world'. A librarian who initiated a reading group in a men's prison noted how important that could be for the people who came to her group:

I think they appreciated just being a human being instead of being told to do this... Being asked 'what do you think?' - that's quite a lot to cope with if nobody's ever asked you that before.

There was unanimous agreement that participation in a reading group heightens the pleasures of reading, as well as providing the foundation for many other non-literary benefits. One person spoke for many when she said:

Reading can be very solitary... If you want to open up your experience wider than that, to make reading something different, then a ... group like this, especially if you've got a focus, is really wonderful.

There were many ways in which people said that their reading experience had been enriched by taking part in a reading group. It had, for example:

- Increased their enjoyment
- Challenged their understanding
- Made them think more deeply about reading
- Opened up their experience
- Widened their perspectives by hearing others' views
- Enriched and broadened their reading choices
- Increased their willingness to persevere in reading a challenging text
- Provided further insight into people's motives.

Group members also mentioned many additional ways in which they felt they had benefited individually from participation in the group. One person who had recently moved into the area came to the reading group as a way of making contacts and friends. For another, it was a way of getting out of the house and 'keeping in touch with what was going on'. One person felt more confident to speak and express her thoughts than before. Another noted that group meetings brought about a lift in her mood. One had been inspired by membership of the reading group to join a creative writers' group. For another, coming to the group was something to look forward to, 'the highlight of my week'. More generally people appreciated that through the

group they came into contact with a wider range of people than they would otherwise have met during the normal course of their lives.

It was clear, however, that all these benefits were integrally bound up with the collective experience. Members appreciated being valued and listened to, feeling a sense of belonging. Knowledge and understandings were created by people *together*, as they shared their ideas and made links with their own experience. The camaraderie, mutual support and community feeling that were so frequently mentioned by participants as reasons for coming and continuing to come to group meetings were created by, and in turn enabled, the group's activities.

## **What library services do to support reading groups**

So what was going on, in the library services that we visited, to foster these positive group experiences and to realise the benefits for members individually and collectively that reading groups can provide?

### **Strategic planning**

In some cases, libraries' planning for reading groups had a place as part of a formal strategic framework designed to promote and widen access to reading for pleasure. For example, in one metropolitan borough, a Fairness Commission had been set up a few years back to address the disparity between the wealthiest and socially deprived sections of the population within the borough. Reading was identified, alongside health, housing and child poverty, as being crucial in developing people's life chances. A short policy document was written, setting out objectives and a steering group set up, headed by the library, to guide the development of the strategy. The senior librarian explained:

And so this basically is the umbrella for everything that we do around reader development, it all feeds into this strategy. And so when we are doing a project, I have to look at it and say 'Is it going to help us to deliver our reading strategy?' Which is great actually because it gives a focus to what we do and sets the priorities.

His role in supporting the development of reading groups was expanding, he told us, as new areas of work opened up within the overall strategy. For example, he had recently been involved in many conversations with members of staff working in one of the Council services about how to set up book swaps and run a successful reading group. The hope and expectation was that, once book swaps and reading groups were established, staff would be inspired to consider how they might foster reading for pleasure as part of their work with clients. Another area for development currently under consideration was the appointment of a Reader in Residence who would train and support library staff in creating Shared Reading groups, particularly in care homes with the needs of people with dementia in mind.

So work supporting reading groups is expanding or there are opportunities to expand through [the strategy] and that's what we want to do. And that will have implications



probably for my time. But it is an important development which the Council wants delivered. It remains a priority.

The relationship between senior managers and strategic decision makers can be pivotal in deciding how money is allocated at a strategic level and thus whether reading groups can remain part of the library service's offer. An Area Services Manager (but with a county-wide brief for reading groups) explains how she managed to secure funding to introduce Shared Reading groups across her local authority.

...we had a meeting with the Director of Public Health and our Councillor lead for health. He used to lead on libraries and is a great supporter of libraries. I think he saw this as something he could do that was good for libraries as well as good for health.

Another Library Services Manager who has also been closely involved for a number of years in the development of Shared Reading groups, stressed that, in spite of financial pressures, these groups will continue to have an important place in her Service strategy:

We think they're vital really ... and we will do all we can to protect them. It's something we are committed to in our strategy and it will continue as long as I'm there and will continue to put as a high priority.

## **Day-to-day management**

The practical and everyday organisation of reading groups involved close cooperation between colleagues based in central and local libraries. Under recent reorganisations roles have widened but generally encompass Reader Development and the Universal Reading Offer, while in two services library managers were seen as responsible for developing cultural activities within their local communities. Here is an assistant librarian explaining how his role fits into the overall organisational structure of his library service:

I'm what's known as an Assistant Communities Librarian ...I report to a Communities Librarian and it's up to the Communities Librarian to plan what we do for the year. We do that together but the Communities Librarian comes up with the main idea and then it's up to me to deliver it.

The practical tasks involved in supporting reading groups include:

- Ensuring that each group has a facilitator
- Providing free and welcoming venues where groups can meet which are accessible to all
- Making books and other reading materials available
- Attending to group and individual needs through providing support, advice and training.

## *Staffing*

Staffing the reading groups was usually reliant on facilitators who were either qualified librarians or library assistants. In some groups, the role was taken on by a volunteer or volunteers, and in two of the services we visited there were groups where a group member had taken over as facilitator. When groups included people with mental health problems or those with dementia it was felt that the involvement of a librarian or trained volunteer was desirable. In the case of Shared Reading groups, the presence of a facilitator trained through the Read to Lead programme provided by The Reader was always required. A senior librarian explained how staffing had changed over the years. Initially, it was librarians who led the Shared Reading groups. This had resource implications since, to be able to do so, they needed time off from their other duties, not just to support the group but also to undergo specific training because:

...it was a new way of working in libraries. Libraries weren't just issuing, discharging, recommending books, but were actually working with the book and the person...

Gradually, as the number of librarians reduced, library assistants came forward expressing interest in leading groups. Involving a wider field of facilitators proved to be 'a great equaliser':

Some of our most successful groups are run by people who are not qualified librarians although we also have qualified librarians very much in support.

More recently the use of volunteers in facilitation particularly in the case of Shared Reading groups has become an important development but, as a senior librarian pointed out, this development is not without its challenges. She described some of the dilemmas she faced as she attempted to bring more volunteers on board: how to reach and recruit the right people for the job in the first instance, the organisation of training and ongoing support, as well as coping with turnover. She also pointed out the importance of making sure that library colleagues were kept up to date with developments and were comfortable with the way the Shared Reading work was being managed:

...one of the things that I was conscious of from the outset was making sure that library staff understood what the groups were about, were comfortable with the volunteers, were supporting their volunteers and making sure that it was facilitated as well as possible.

## *Venues*

Most of the groups we encountered met in their local libraries, either in the main body of the library or in a separate room. The former approach allowed other library users to see the groups at work which might encourage them to join. On the other hand some felt using a separate room provided a quieter and more intimate atmosphere that encouraged members to participate in discussions. Libraries

generally provided free accommodation for reading group meetings, although in one instance a charge was levied by a library service run by a social enterprise company.

### *Access to books and reading material*

The library services we visited supported their reading groups by making available multiple copies of the same book on request. This was organised in different ways. One service we spoke to ordered books for specific use by reading groups while others, often due to budgetary constraints, disseminated the books within the system and then recalled them when requested by reading groups. Some group members found this constraining as they could only choose books from within the current catalogue and sufficient copies were not always available. Limits to book numbers also prevented groups from expanding their membership.

The impact of technology on reading groups in our study was limited but it was an issue referred to by a number of readers and facilitators. On the whole there was a reluctance among group members to move away from the printed word. Concerns were expressed regarding the logistical problems in moving wholesale to eBooks, since licences limiting the number of copies that can be released at any one time could militate against reading groups. A group of older visually impaired readers who currently relied on Talking Books were apprehensive about the future, afraid that without possession of more advanced technology they would no longer have access to published works.

For those facilitators of Shared Reading groups who had undergone the training, The Reader provided anthologies of reading material as well as access to an online hub containing further ideas. These include themed suggestions of short stories and poems and were greatly valued by facilitators:

I like it because I think that those things have been specially chosen. I've enjoyed everything that I've read in there, and the fact that it comes with a poem that automatically goes with it is great...

Reading group discussions sometimes inspired individuals to want to do further reading. A senior librarian described how her service supported this:

We have just spent quite a lot of money buying poetry anthologies ... so that if a reader having come to the group and really enjoyed it, wants to read the book that the extract came from or wants to read other short stories by the writer of that short story they have listened to, they can then borrow it from the library... We have also bought some of the anthologies for the volunteers to use so that they have access to them as well as to the online material.

### *Advice and support*

The experience of reading group members was enriched by the collective knowledge of professional librarians as well as the input provided by individual facilitators. For

instance one volunteer facilitator relied on her local librarian to make recommendations of titles the group might read. Another facilitator received suggestions from colleagues about community activities and local speakers to invite when the group was pursuing a particular theme such as local history. In the following example the collective resources of the whole community combined to provide a rich and worthwhile experience for the reading group.

...we're working with a curator who specialises in Women in World War 1... Another librarian said you should look at this so we did and I ordered in *Half the Human Race* by Anthony Quinn which is about suffragettes, WW1, cricket, loads of stuff... and she was able to tie it with propaganda and posters and things like that.

## *Training*

We found that approaches to training facilitators varied between services. For instance working together with adult community learning, one library service offered training based on the Reading Champions model developed by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) designed to promote reading in council-run workplaces. Aimed at both staff and their clientele, the purpose of the programme is to promote reading and to give more people the skills to talk about reading. A senior staff member explained:

Because we acknowledge that with a council staff of something like 2000, that's 2000 people who could be promoting reading to residents in places that we just won't get to: housing estates, and care homes and children's centres, nurseries.

Some services have developed online reading group toolkits designed to support librarians as well as members facilitating their own reading groups. These toolkits provide useful information including hints and tips on how to run a reading group, manage group dynamics and encourage discussion.

Most formal training programmes were linked to the Shared Reading initiative, as noted earlier. To learn the skills of enabling group discussion, people attended the Read to Lead programme for three days (sometimes more). They took part in Shared Reading sessions with different facilitators and eventually took over the facilitator's role themselves, receiving feedback and further advice. Volunteers who underwent the training spoke warmly of their experience:

I thought it was just fabulous. Very thorough, very professional and very enjoyable.

You picked up a lot from seeing how other people did it, and how skilful it is.

I really learned a lot about what it meant to read with people and to bring them into a group.

Some facilitators felt the need for training on specific aspects of their role. For instance an assistant librarian who ran a Shared Reading group for people with dementia and who had completed the Read to Lead training had also attended a course on dementia to increase her understanding of the condition.

A senior librarian emphasised the importance of providing ongoing support for volunteers through conducting observation and feedback of reading group sessions as well as having opportunities for reflection. She noted too the skills required in giving feedback to volunteers in ways that made them feel valued but at the same time ensured that they were working in ways that met the standards of the library service. As she explained:

Being reminded about what we're trying to deliver, and how, is really good for the volunteers. And bringing the volunteers together on a regular basis acts as a great deal of support for them, their practice as practitioners.

## **The facilitator's role**

While libraries' work at the level of organisation and planning makes an important contribution to the success of reading groups, perhaps most crucial of all is the face-to-face role of the facilitator in building positive group feeling and fostering the participation of everybody within the group.

We talked with facilitators who supported groups of different sizes, and whose members came with a range of reading experience and expectations. Some facilitators were trained librarians or working as library assistants, and some were volunteers. While they themselves were often modest about the significance of their own contribution, members were whole-hearted in their recognition of the key role that the facilitator plays:

The facilitator is all-important. [Our facilitator] ticks all the boxes. Seriously, she has a passion for reading which is very encouraging.

We identified four aspects of the facilitator's role which together helped to create the conditions for reading groups to thrive.

### *Creating a supportive ethos*

One facilitator linked his role in the group to the inclusive aims of the library service generally:

It's really important that everything we do in public libraries ... is very focussed on social inclusion and well-being: it's giving people a chance to be in a safe place, to be heard, be respected.

Collectively, there was agreement that a vital aspect of their role was to create an atmosphere of trust in which everyone felt free to express their views and opinions:

So I think it's trust between group members, enabling each other to have a say – it's very non-judgemental. Nice atmosphere. I think that's the key.

To help establish this atmosphere, it was important for the facilitator to be warm and welcoming and to get to know individual members, since people joining an open

reading group usually did not know each other. People needed to know that they were valued as individuals, that their needs and interests were being taken into consideration, that their contribution counted. Most important in creating a supportive atmosphere was the skill and sensitivity with which the facilitator guided the discussion.

### *Enabling group discussion*

The facilitators we spoke to enacted their role in supporting group discussion in many different ways, bearing in mind the nature of the group, the needs and wishes of the members, their own interpretation of the role and competing pressures on their time.

One volunteer facilitator explained how she and the group negotiated together a way of working that they felt comfortable with:

I inherited a definition of how a group should be run, but we just decided to go our own way ... I passed it round and we decided we didn't want to be as formal as that.

Others concentrated on making sure that participants were introduced to a range of reading material that they might not otherwise pick up, and that they had the opportunity to hear and discuss the recommendations of other group members.

One facilitator described his role as follows:

... I just come up with prompts really. I always read out a synopsis of the book at the beginning and then if anyone pipes up after that they just start talking. And then I have four or five prompts, just general questions... Their favourite bit that I bring to the meeting is...some reviews, a good one and a bad one.

An experienced facilitator of a Shared Reading group drew attention to a powerful metaphor used in the Read to Lead training to explain the dual perspective required of the person who leads the group:

We talk a lot about the fish and the cat... You've got to be the fish in the bowl, enjoying the group, swimming along, really happy. But you've also got to be the cat, looking at the group as a whole, seeing what's going on and trying to work out the mechanics.

A senior librarian also trained in Shared Reading expanded upon some of the expectations and challenges for the facilitator in enabling the discussion in a Shared Reading group:

The important thing is that ... the reading is done in stages... You choose points to stop and discuss. But preparation is important because you have to have chosen points to stop and prompts to help the group to explore what you have read. One of the most important parts about it is not being directive, not leading the discussion so that it means that your opinions are dictating the discussion. And I think that is one of the things that we have all found the hardest: how to encourage the group to start talking without you saying what you think.

Whatever the approach adopted, there was general agreement that the facilitator needs to be sensitive to group dynamics, with a good sense of timing, and to know when to participate, or even intervene, and when to allow the meeting to develop organically.

[Our facilitator] does a really good job encouraging people to speak or feel free, but she generally keeps her hand on the tiller.

Facilitators also emphasised the importance of knowing and understanding the individuals in the group in order to manage boundaries within the discussions. Particularly in groups such as those in hospitals, care homes or prisons, the facilitator needed to understand and manage different experiences, challenges, cultures and expectations. A librarian who started a prison reading group acknowledged that she had to lead the group:

...quite a bit at the beginning, because nobody had had any experience before. So we made it quite simple... I did have to guide it quite a lot.

Occasionally during the meeting the reading material could open up difficult issues for group members. In such cases the facilitator needed to establish limits to the discussion, avoiding areas which might become too personal or difficult to handle in a group setting.

... It really opened up a lot of things, and I had to pull back there because I'm not trained to deal with those kinds of things. You have to be careful and bring it back.

### *Influencing the selection of reading material*

As well as creating a warm, supportive atmosphere and enabling the group discussion, facilitators also played an important part in helping to choose the reading material (novels, short stories, plays or poetry) for the group to focus on. In the case of all groups the reading material needed to be something good enough to capture attention and stimulate discussion, and to be suitable subject matter for the members. For this task, facilitators combined knowledge of literature with their understanding of the interests and preferences of the group. Using these sources of inspiration, they were often able to suggest reading material that would not just generate good discussion but also extend the experience of the group. For example, one facilitator explained:

I look over what they've read already. Like *Brighton Rock* – they said they'd like crime but they'd like to read something a bit more literary, something like an established author, that's how that came about.

Members were impressed by and appreciative of the knowledge and enthusiasm of their facilitator, often mentioned as important for their motivation:

I told him that I like Superman comics and when I came for the first meeting, he'd found me lots of Superman comics I had never seen! So I thought Wow this guy [the librarian] takes things very seriously, he cares about what you like, and then it went on from there.

People who had previously avoided poetry, often because they found it difficult, had begun to develop a renewed interest as a result of discussing poems in their groups. Together, they discovered poetry's capacity to engage emotions and trigger reminiscences. In Shared Reading groups, for example, a poem which linked in some way to the other reading material (usually a novel or short story) was typically included in the reading experience. One group member said:

Previously I would never have read poetry. I found this poem very moving because I have had [a similar experience]. Having read and discussed the poem, I do understand it.

### *Attending to practical matters*

The facilitator's attention to seemingly minor details was also important to the success of the groups. There were some practical tasks that needed to be thought about and acted upon prior to and subsequent to meetings. For instance, once decisions about reading material had been made, books needed to be ordered, and in some cases requests made for them to be purchased by the service.

Before the meeting the room needed to be organised. Often refreshments were provided, and this could be difficult if the facilitator was working alone. Any specific access issues for group members needed to be anticipated and addressed.

Just little things like how the room is set up, how it's risk assessed, putting down drinks and telling them where the handle is, and just things that you don't perhaps think about with people who are sighted.

Facilitators also kept in touch with group members by email, notifying them of the dates of future group meetings as well as alerting them to library and other local events.

### *Challenges for facilitators*

The complexity of the role of facilitator was without doubt the main challenge. As one experienced facilitator said:

... It's tougher than you think to facilitate a group, and not everyone can do that... If someone is engaged in the literature, and has that background to be able to source the quality material needed, they also need to be the right kind of character to form the group ... and then to step back.

Some facilitators welcomed the opportunity of working with a colleague, not just for practical reasons, for example to cut down on preparation time, but because it was



good to observe how other people work, and to discuss issues arising in the management of the group.

Other challenges generally related to the supply of reading material. Whether the library stored and supplied sets for groups or relied on gathering from the branch collections, facilitators cited problems such as shortage of books, sourcing suitable material, and obtaining out-of-print books no longer held in the library catalogue.

Sourcing books could be time-consuming:

[If] I have a title in mind and there aren't sufficient copies in the library or they are Quick Choice, which I can't always reserve, and I try to be more diverse... it can be quite frustrating. I can spend an hour and a half just trying to find a book with enough copies. But if the library has got cutbacks, it has got cutbacks.

Finding suitable reading material for Shared Reading groups also took time. Although The Reader anthologies *A Little Aloud* provided useful suggestions, one volunteer told us:

...I'm trying to find things that aren't in *A Little Aloud*, to widen and deepen the pool, but it's hard. I have read three books of short stories and got two out of them, stories that don't have explicit sex in them! Or just not a very good story.

The size of a group could bring its own difficulties for the facilitator.

[When I started] the group wasn't as big then as it is now. It was probably six or seven, eight at the most. A bigger group is more challenging because you've got more input, haven't you?

Library staff also had to cope with competing time pressures. Facilitators were often working elsewhere in the library, not just on traditional librarian duties but also running other groups, for example toddlers', English language or writing groups.

Sometimes I have to let them do their own thing while I go and do something, because there aren't enough staff and sometimes I'm in charge of the library, so I can't just sit and chat.

### *Why facilitators value their role*

These challenges were more than outweighed, however, by the rewards of the role. There was an overwhelming sense that facilitators relished the pleasure of passing on their love of reading. They enjoyed using their skills to help members develop wider tastes and experiences.

Some members have said to me that they just wouldn't know how to schedule their reading either, the fact that I'm sort of directing them. So they might read [the book we've chosen] this month and that might influence their choices in their own time.

Facilitating a reading group and engaging with people at first hand around their reading was a very positive experience, enabling library staff to stay optimistic in difficult times. As one senior librarian reflected:

... It's been such a tough time for our services, seeing them contracting so rapidly, that for me this [Shared Reading groups] has been something that has been so positive in contrast to what else is happening. Because it has been something that we have been able to develop that has been really positive and constructive.

Facilitating had become an important part of the lives of some of those who took on this role as volunteers, especially if retired.

Having finished working for the library service, I was still interested in the pleasure that reading can bring to other people... So this was an opportunity to get involved in volunteering, read aloud and fall in love with books all over again.

Others expressed awareness of their contribution to the community, both in the sense of creating an effective group within the library that brings such satisfaction to the group members, and also in the broader sense of making the surrounding community a better place to live.

Very often when people come to me on the counter, for instance, expressing interest in coming to the group, I say, if you don't finish the book come anyway, even if you don't pick it up, or you don't like it. Yes, come and have a chat and see – maybe no one else liked it either. Be included. Be part of something.

Overall, the facilitators we spoke to appeared to have a clear understanding of the value of their work. As well as feeling a sense of responsibility they considered it a source of great satisfaction.

It became very clear to me in the groups that I run, in various places, that people were coming through a need, and the way the group was run was actually helping that need.

The facilitator's role was certainly demanding, but it was also thoroughly worth the effort because, as one librarian put it:

... If it's done right it does fulfil a basic human need which is interaction and being heard.

## **Reaching Out**

So far we have explored in some detail what the library services we visited were doing to support and foster their existing reading groups. However, managers were also thinking imaginatively about how to engage members of their local communities who did not use libraries and who did not usually read for pleasure. Services were working hard to extend their reach within the communities they served. One manager explained why outreach work is important if more people are to be engaged in reading for pleasure:

I think it's not one of those things you can just sit in a library or a school and really deliver everything. If you're passionate about engagement, I think the days of 'you come to us' are gone. I think we have to go out to them.

## *Extending into the community*

One of the ways in which library services were reaching out was by encouraging and supporting the establishment of reading groups in a range of locations such as:

- Places of work
- Care homes and community centres
- Doctors' surgeries
- Prisons

They were also exploring ways to raise awareness of the many benefits to people's well-being that membership of a reading group can bring to all its members, including those with health-related issues. Strategies included, for example:

- Encouraging referrals by health professionals and voluntary organisations
- Putting notices in medical centres and doctors' surgeries
- Inviting people to come for a taster through placing notices in community centres and public spaces
- Visiting local care homes, advice centres, community groups and sheltered accommodation to talk about the groups
- Having stalls promoting the work of libraries at local open days such as MENCAP, or at Public Health events
- Establishing links with their local NHS Recovery College
- Making contact with local universities to recruit student volunteers to act as facilitators.

Some libraries were setting up a series of carefully planned initiatives based on local knowledge and aimed at raising awareness of reading groups within the community. This operated at a strategic level, as described earlier, for example using book swaps among council staff as a first step towards creating reading groups. But it also operated at a local level, as individual librarians, seeing opportunities to attract new members, took the initiative themselves. For example, an assistant librarian who ran Shared Reading groups always made a point of attending the final of six Shared Reading sessions run by a local Later Life and Memory Service (held three or four times a year). In this way, she made contact face to face with existing members and was able to extend a warm invitation to them personally to join her library-based groups.

The widening role of some librarians has also enabled them to promote reading groups through assisting in community-based activities. For instance, in a Northern city borough with a high male suicide rate, an assistant librarian, Alan, who also ran a reading group, collaborated with a local charity whose aim was to support people with a range of health and social issues, many of which stemmed from social deprivation. Together they mounted a photography course in the local library where two of the participants struck up a friendship. The two men explained what happened next:

**Jo** Yeah and he [Brian] saw me a few weeks later outside [the library] and he just passed me a leaflet and he said you might be interested in this. And I'd been on a photography project in here with Alan so I knew Alan.

**Brian** I heard him [Jo] mention that he'd started to do a bit more reading than he used to do so I thought this might appeal to him.

**Jo** Yes, I never used to read at all, only magazines and things like that. I was too busy working but I'm not working now. I'm in recovery and this is another option for me.

This phased approach could equally well be supported by technology. Here a senior librarian explains how they are attempting to reach isolated visually impaired readers:

One Click Digital ... is an on-line eBook, eAudio platform around what's known as a boom box... You buy the box and you give it to the visually impaired person and then you can download audio books on a memory stick that just plugs in on the top... The home library service will take the boom boxes to individuals with the memory stick and plug it in for them, and obviously there's a conversation to be had about what do you like to read? ... If we can establish that, then the next stage would be: how do we develop this into some sort of visually impaired persons' reading group? So there's two phases to it. We need the first phase, then the second is how can we get them communicating with one another to break down their isolation?

As the same senior librarian explained to us, the first step in engaging with people who, up until then, had not been library users and would not have considered joining a reading group, was often simply to involve them in a project that reflected their life experiences and concerns. He described to us one such inspiring project in which young homeless people, as part of a literacy-based festival organised centrally by the library service, had worked with a group of artists to put on a play at a local young people's theatre. The play, which they researched and wrote themselves, was about the barriers that they had experienced personally in terms of reading and expressing themselves, and was performed to a sell-out audience.

It gave you goose bumps because your heart went out to these young people. It was brilliantly done... each member of the cast went to go towards the microphone to say how he or she felt and something blocked them. And they all went close but never got there. It was extraordinarily powerful.

### *Broadening the range of groups on offer*

The library services that we visited were also seeking to target under-represented groups by offering reading groups more likely to capture their interest or meet particular access requirements. Local knowledge was important in making decisions about new groups. A manager explained how, in her service, the task of initiating new groups was taken on by librarians working in local communities, as part of a process of community engagement. If the librarians thought that a new reading group would be a good way of encouraging more people to engage with library services, they would consult locally with a view to establishing one. Groups we heard about that were designed to appeal to a wider demographic included, for example, graphic novel reading groups and gaming groups to attract young people; also

Saturday groups aimed at fathers and sons involving them in playing games and doing arts and craft activities as well as reading.

Aware that the approaches used within their reading group meetings, including the nature of the reading material, could inhibit participation of some people, some library services had started to introduce Shared Reading groups.

...we already had groups where people came and met and discussed a book together. But we were aware that not everyone had the confidence to do that, and also aware that people were struggling with reading who might have liked to get involved but couldn't.

The Shared Reading approach where, as we have seen, the text is read aloud in the meeting, has enabled libraries to reach a much wider group of people including those with learning disabilities, people with dementia and their carers, and those with mental health issues. It was important, though, for group members to come together as people, irrespective of their personal issues. As one senior librarian explained:

We did a number of open groups, and a number of people with mental health issues and depression were attracted to them. We didn't need to discuss any of that because we weren't psychotherapists or psychiatrists, but people in that kind of environment were able to open up a little bit, and say things like (we were doing *Silas Marner*) 'You know, I've felt lonely at times...'

Reading texts aloud, section by section, and talking about the meaning helps make them accessible to people who are inexperienced readers or who have learning disabilities. Several respondents also referred to the importance of poetry in enabling the participation of people who might otherwise be unable to take part, for example because of limited memory or attention span:

Poetry can be quite a challenge but it can also be more accessible for some people. We have a husband and wife who come along. The man has dementia and his wife is his carer, and I know that the poetry for him is easier than the story or novel, simply because it's shorter. By halfway through the story, he may have completely forgotten the beginning, but the poem he can usually respond to very well.

Poetry could be powerful in evoking strong memories and feelings, and when the focus of a discussion is feelings, people, whatever their background, are on an equal footing. As one facilitator said:

Emotions are a level playing field, no matter who you are. There's never any conflict there.

### *Personal support and encouragement*

Once new members were interested in joining a reading group, librarians and facilitators were sensitive to the importance of providing support during the early days of their membership. One member recalled:

At first I was quite nervous. No-one used to get a peep out of me when I first started to come... I ran out of excuses not to come so I thought I'd try it and see what it was like.

Strategies used by the library services we visited included:

- Encouraging attendance even if members have not read the book
- Getting others such as an existing group member, care worker or teacher, to accompany new members
- Providing crèche facilities, bus fares, refreshments.

In some settings, for example in prisons or care homes, it could be rules and systems that presented barriers to people's attendance. In such cases the facilitator would sometimes need to advocate on behalf of members. For instance, the facilitator of a prison-based group told us:

You often have to ring up to get the people along, because often they [prison wardens] say, 'He's not going anywhere today'. So you're fighting, working with the system but also pushing against it all the time, because the system would prefer that they didn't do anything, that they stay where they are.

In these various ways, library services were attempting to draw people in and then smooth their path to becoming a reading group member, in the belief that once they joined and experienced the benefits for themselves, they would be keen to continue coming. Indeed, that seemed to have been the experience of the facilitators and group members that we spoke to.

## **Building Partnerships**

A further way in which library services were reaching out to their local communities was through the creation of partnerships of many different kinds. Library managers we talked to emphasised strongly how important it was to build partnerships, for example with local community groups, colleges, arts organisations and charitable groups, to sustain and extend what the library services could do alone.

Our audiences are people who wouldn't think a reading group would be for them, so that's where most of our time and effort is. So we will look for different partners to find a way in.

### *Partnerships linked to The Reading Agency initiatives*

One important source of ideas, support and inspiration came from The Reading Agency. As one manager told us, 'Most of the stuff they get involved in we buy into and promote'. Their Reading Groups for Everyone website was seen as a significant initiative. In all the library services we visited, managers were aware of the website and actively encouraged reading group facilitators to upload details of their open, library-based groups as a way of attracting new members and drawing attention to the range of groups on offer in each locality.

Their Reading Ahead scheme (formerly known as the Six Book Challenge) has been widely used in libraries, colleges, prisons and workplaces for the past ten years. The

scheme is designed to support young people and adults by changing their perception of reading, opening up opportunities and building confidence. While ideas and support such as this were greatly valued, other local partners often had the knowledge and networks that helped to bring ideas to fruition.

With The Reading Agency they are great initiatives but you've got to understand that there's work involved if you want to make it a success. That work is very much with outreach and working with other partners to deliver it.

In one metropolitan borough, for example, a senior librarian explained that the Reading Ahead scheme was developed in partnership with the local further education college. College librarians became involved with adults on courses designed to boost their literacy skills, supporting and enabling them to complete the challenge successfully. As a result, the number who did so increased dramatically. Involvement in this initiative was very much a first step towards membership of a reading group. As already discussed, it was intended to get people reading, encouraging them to become regular library users and perhaps then join a reading group.

### *Innovative partnerships*

Following the success of their first Read Together group, a library service obtained a grant from Better World Books to set up a second Read Together group for speakers of other languages who wanted to practise their English. Better World Books is a pioneering social business that collects unwanted books for free and resells them online. From the funds generated in this way, the enterprise makes donations to literary charities and supports initiatives to further the development of literacy and reading for pleasure.

Another service had been invited to link up with a local radio programme to create a virtual reading group, with a book chosen and reviewed by a member of the library staff, who posted the review on the library's website and joined the host of the programme to discuss the text on air. From the library service perspective, a central aim was to create interest that would draw people into libraries, and eventually encourage them to take part in a range of library-based activities including reading groups.

Some partnerships were not negotiated in advance but came into being as library staff responded creatively to opportunities that arose to extend participants' experience. For instance, a senior manager told us that, as part of their outreach work, a library service made contact with young women in their teens who had become socially excluded because they had babies while at school. They were invited to join a Baby Bounce session which they enjoyed, and things were going well until they discovered that they couldn't find any picture books that authentically reflected their experiences. So, in response and following the principle of working in partnership, the library service sought out and obtained funding for a poet to work with them. The young women put together their own picture book and it was

published. Their involvement in this project led to such growth in their confidence that they were willing, eventually, to lead Baby Bounce sessions themselves.

So from one year before when I first met them and they were very reticent, a year later to see those young women stood up in front of a group of babies and their parents and deliver a story-time session was remarkable. And they all loved it, they got really enthused by it.

### *Partnerships with The Reader*

As noted in earlier sections, several of the library services we visited were working in partnership with The Reader to help extend their offer of book groups to include groups using the Shared Reading approach. One library service close to Liverpool, where The Reader is located, had shared in pioneering the development of the approach.

The Library Services Manager was deeply committed to the approach based on her own experience of leading groups:

You could see how therapeutic it was... I felt suddenly that I was doing something really valuable, I could see the results of it, and once you'd had a taste of that you want to do more and more.

Her aim had been to get a group in every library and at one stage this aim was nearly achieved. Despite the changed situation nationally, she was still optimistic about the future of the initiative:

We're very proud to say we still operate quite a number of Get Into Reading Groups, and we are still doing wonderful things and we still have library staff trained to deliver alongside our project workers.

However, with the cuts increasingly constraining what library services could take on, obtaining funding to maintain existing reading groups or initiate new projects was a constant source of worry. We noted earlier how, to maximise resources, the Locality Manager of a county-wide library service in the Midlands forged a partnership with Public Health to fund a project to develop Shared Reading groups across the county. Public Health agreed to fund a pilot project for a year, and this funding allowed the library service to commission The Reader to help set up the project. The Reader provided training for about a dozen volunteers and appointed a project worker to help set up groups around the county.

By October 2015, with funding from the library service for the second year, there were nine successful Shared Reading groups operating in libraries across the county, reaching 230 people. There were also a number of creative ideas for expanding the project, for example by setting up a group for parents and carers of children in a junior school or by widening the pool of potential volunteers, drawing on English literature students from the local university. However, only if the project leaders were successful in obtaining external funding to take the initiative into a third year



would it be possible to build on these successes and realise further ideas for development.

## **Managing resources**

We have seen how, through outreach and partnership work, the library services we visited have been attempting not just to maintain but to further develop their work in support of reading groups in recent years. We have mainly focused on their successes, but as acknowledged initially, our study was conducted against a backdrop of unprecedented cutbacks and closures in library services. In these straightened circumstances, service managers have nevertheless justified the continued existence of reading groups by stressing their positive impact on library offer.

In one service, for example, where there had been a considerable growth in the number of reading groups over the past decade, a senior manager told us:

I wouldn't see [reading groups] as hugely draining on resources. We see supporting them as a positive thing, as part of the library offer, as a kind of added value.

In another service, a senior librarian explained how she justified to the holders of the purse strings the introduction of Shared Reading groups by emphasising their importance in enabling the library service to meet its obligations to the whole community. She recalled that:

... It took a while to get our strategic bosses on board, who were looking at numbers and costing but we were saying if you have a look at the type of people coming and the things that they are saying, both the qualitative and quantitative evidence they are giving, it's something we can't afford not to do.

## *The impact of cuts*

Nevertheless, the general situation was one of constantly having to adapt to reducing budgets. A manager in one of the services we visited told us that they had responded to the squeeze in funding by asking the more confident reading groups to facilitate themselves rather than being facilitated by library staff. While this development was regrettable, it did have its positive side, she said, in that some of the people who had volunteered to take over had flourished in their role as a facilitator. The library service still provided help with recruitment and ordering sets of books, as well as offering access to an online toolkit with advice about how to run a successful group.

In another setting, as noted earlier, the reduction of staff within the library service meant that the member of staff designated to facilitate the group was sometimes obliged to leave participants to their own devices due to the call of other library duties.

Some library services dealt with the cutbacks by reducing library opening hours or relying more heavily on volunteers, who were sometimes reluctant to work evenings or at weekends. The knock-on effect of these two factors had narrowed the range of people able to join the reading groups, particularly if they were employed or had other daytime commitments. Book stocks, including Talking Books, have also been reduced. In a large Northern conurbation the closure of all but one Talking Books group, combined with higher transportation costs, meant that some members now had to undertake long and expensive journeys to get to their monthly meetings.

### *Alternative sources of funding*

In the face of these cutbacks, library services have turned to other sources of funding, as noted in the previous section of the report. It was noticeable, for example, that funding for Shared Reading projects often came from sources other than the library. As one senior manager explained:

Most of the funding doesn't come from the library service but from the health service, one of the ring-fenced and protected groups, and there is good evidence that it is benefiting people's health.

But this short-term funding can mean that projects are often short-lived and consequently fragile. Funding streams that have been protected may themselves dry up. The continual need to write bids for funding is expensive of time and can be a distraction from the on-going development of the initiative.

In a Midlands metropolitan borough, for example, a project was set up by a group of people who later became founder members of The Shared Reading Company, a social enterprise organisation, in partnership with the local Primary Care Trust and library services. With funding from the Big Lottery Communities Programme, and inspired by the work of The Reader, the project aimed to run Shared Reading groups in local libraries. The project was designed to complement the Reading Well: Books on Prescription scheme developed by The Reading Agency in partnership with the Society of Chief Librarians. Funding helped to pay for the Read to Lead training by The Reader. While this project ran successfully for six years, and involved over 200 participants, funding had run out by the time that we heard about it. While libraries continued to be supportive in principle, and indeed provided meeting rooms, we learned that since that time, they have been unable to offer funding or staff due to local authority cutbacks.

### *Relationship between evaluation and funding*

The need to bid for external funding and to be accountable for its use has increased pressure on libraries to develop more formal and systematic methods for evaluating the quality of reading groups. We found that where library-based reading groups were supported through library services' regular budgets, evaluation tended to be informal. Facilitators usually kept records of attendance, as numbers fed into libraries' user records, and sometimes provided feedback sheets to allow members

to have a voice and contribute to the process of ordering new stock. The success of the group was judged informally: by attendance figures, observation of levels of participation and general ambience within the group.

The shift to more formal methods of evaluation has meant confronting a number of issues and dilemmas about the form of the evaluation. One senior manager explained how the pressure to collect statistical data can alter the atmosphere of a group:

We want people to be able to use our services anonymously, so tracking people is quite difficult for us because we know that can be a real barrier and we want people to feel relaxed and comfortable about dropping in and out as it suits them, without having to tell us anything about themselves. So we're always very apologetic when we give people a questionnaire to fill in, and say 'it's really useful for our funding if you can tell us this'.

Another manager expressed similar concerns:

[The evaluation] is changing the whole nature of the group, the anonymity, the fact of just being here and being yourself. Instead people feel they're being watched, they're a statistic.

Funders usually showed a preference for quantitative over qualitative evidence, despite the fact that 'soft evidence' in the form of individual stories often provided deeper insight into the impact of participation on individual members of reading groups, and could be both moving and inspiring. So, despite feeling that evaluation methods were intrusive, managers were under pressure to provide the kinds of information needed to access much-needed funds.

They get us money to do what we want to do. It's one of the things we can't get around. If every commissioner across the country was happy to exist on qualitative evaluation then we'd be jumping for joy, but unfortunately they're not anymore.

Sometimes however funders can have different and more empathetic approaches to evaluation, as demonstrated by a local Public Health Authority:

Interestingly when we started out, Public Health's attitude was, well there's plenty of evidence out there nationally that this works, we don't want you to prove that it works, what we're interested in is what is happening as a result of setting this project up, so who's coming along, are they sticking with it, what sort of people are coming, what are they saying about it, that kind of thing.

This way of thinking freed up the project leaders to adopt an approach to evaluation which was more consonant with the ethos of the groups, while still having an eye to future bids for funding.

As well as collecting information from the groups, we have also done some informal collecting of feedback from volunteers because we think that's extremely important. So up until now it has been informal, but a couple of weeks ago [my partner] and I put together a short questionnaire which we sent out to everybody to start collecting in a more systematic way feedback from volunteers.

## *Cuts in funding: the human cost*

Nevertheless, in several of the library services we visited, staff expressed sadness about what was in danger of being lost as libraries became more finance-driven:

They're looking for a different kind of manager now, making the library service a business rather than a service, attracting funding, which is very important. But some of these things which are perhaps not utilitarian are going by the board a little bit...

A number of people noted with regret the trend in libraries for people to be replaced by machines:

People can't just be replaced by machines, but people think a lot of information is all on line now and people can have access to it. What's missing is the personal touch, interpretive stuff that only people could do.

One senior librarian spoke for many when she said that libraries should be places where people came to enjoy human interaction around books and literature, precisely what reading groups of all kinds provide:

So many people feel lost in today's society. There's very little place for community. A lot of people do say to us 'You're the first person I've talked to today.' They go to the bank and meet a machine, and the supermarket. When do they have a chance to meet someone who goes 'Hallo, how are you?' There's no opportunity, and how can that be right?

## **Reading groups, libraries and communities**

In this final part of our report, we reflect on what we have learned about the place of reading groups in the work of library services and about what libraries do to support them. When we embarked on this study, we saw reading groups as just one of many activities that occur in libraries: the one that happened to be of especial interest to us because of our own experience as members of a reading group. Gradually, however, through talking to all the people involved in the various services visited, we have come to appreciate why reading groups can and should occupy a pivotal place in libraries' work.

## **Taking forward a rich tradition**

Every day, library services around the country, against all odds, are upholding the legacy of collective interaction around literature and ideas that has its roots in the mutual improvement societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Rose, 2001). These societies were self-help groups consisting mainly of working and lower middle class men, and some women, who met in people's homes or places of work, in churches or chapels, to read and explore ideas. Today reading groups supported by libraries are uniquely placed to continue this rich tradition of collective, community-based discussion on books and reading. Simon Jenkins in a recent *Guardian* article on the future of

libraries (Jenkins, 2017) describes people's 'desire to congregate, share, hear writers, experience books in the context of their local community'. While he does not refer directly to reading groups we would argue that reading groups are the embodiment of this desire.

What do we mean by 'community'? As a recent report published by Disability Rights UK states, 'Everyone understands "community" differently. There is a general sense that community is "a good thing" but there is no consistency in how community is understood...' (Gowar, 2014 p.3). In the context of this study, people invoked the idea of community to explain the value of reading groups in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they had discovered from their experience that reading groups can become powerful, supportive communities in their own right, bringing about the many benefits for members individually that this and many prior studies have shown (for example, The Reading Agency, 2004; The Reading Agency, 2015a; The Reading Agency, 2015b). On the other hand, they also used it to refer to the networks of people living and working in the localities served by libraries. Recognising that the benefits of reading groups were felt far beyond the groups themselves, they used it to express their conviction that reading groups have an important contribution to make to social inclusion and connectedness, to people's identification with and sense of belonging to their local communities.

### **Fostering the community of the group**

Through this study we have come to understand that reading groups have the potential to become powerful, supportive communities and that the many different forms of support that library services provided were helping to put in place the conditions needed to realise that potential. As we have seen, much of this work took place behind the scenes through careful planning and organisation and by enlisting the skilled and empathetic contribution of facilitators. With the right kind of support, individual groups gradually grew in cohesiveness, partly through the collective discussion of selected reading material, and partly through growing relationships of trust and respect within the group. Indeed, the two dimensions of the group's activities interacted, each determining and enabling the other in an on-going process.

In the groups we talked to, the shared interests and needs (intellectual, social, health and well-being) that had brought people together were often addressed by inclusion in the group: participating as a member, and caring for and being cared for by others in the group. Sometimes this gave people opportunities to experience a different sense of their own identity, as not just a carer, prisoner or patient. In so doing they were able to let go of a fixed notion of themselves and their lives and perhaps become more open to new possibilities beyond the life of the group.

Experiences such as this helped to strengthen participants' awareness that, over time, something special took place in reading groups. They saw and experienced it for themselves but found it difficult to put into words. One facilitator said:

I thought, something is happening here, more than just reading, although I couldn't put my finger on it... I suddenly thought I was doing something very valuable.

Discussion of a poem 'O tell me the truth about love' prompted one member of a Shared Reading group to comment:

We were a group of strangers who now have great respect and love for one another.

We suggest that what people were struggling to express in words was their feeling of belonging to a strong and supportive community, of being empowered to think, have their say and be listened to. In the words of a facilitator, quoted in an earlier section, a reading group 'fulfils a basic human need for interaction and to be heard'.

## **Strengthening communities**

The study has shown us that as well as being communities in their own right, reading groups also contribute to people's identification with and sense of belonging to the communities served by the library. The library groups encourage social inclusion and community feeling through their open, egalitarian and inclusive qualities, welcoming and facilitating the participation of everybody. They encourage the mixing of people who would not otherwise come into contact with one other, helping to overcome feelings of loneliness and isolation. People become friends and 'see beyond the labels'. With Shared Reading, the format of reading aloud, following the text and discussing meaning supports everyone. At its best, the discussion allows meaning to be constructed jointly. As an experienced facilitator explained:

Those great ideas in a book are for everyone. They're not just for a literate readership, and when people see that, with everyone joining in putting it together, it's like a jigsaw puzzle, they feel included, they feel part of the interpretation... it's a wonderful thing to see.

There were also instances where the benefits of the group were extended to engage with others beyond the group, and in some cases at a great distance, for example, the care home resident who left out copies of things she'd read in her Shared Reading group for other residents to enjoy, members of a Talking Books group who wanted to ensure that everyone with visual impairment in their city had a chance to join a reading group, the mother who discussed her reading with her daughter in New Zealand.

We have explored many strategies that the library services we visited were using to encourage wider community participation, and especially to engage people who had not previously been library users. This called for innovative thinking and partnership work with other local services. As a senior manager of a metropolitan borough

explained to us in some detail, through such partnerships libraries were becoming lively community hubs for reading, learning and volunteering.

Fundamental to this process is the work of creating an ethos in which people feel welcomed and where librarians are regarded as trusted members of the local community. Some librarians we talked to expressed a pride in their own part in helping to create an inclusive society:

The ethos of the library is to make people from a very diverse customer base all feel welcome... So I felt proud to be part of such an inclusive service.

Libraries can also give people a sense of pride in their own localities. Sarah Wood in *Public Library* (Smith, 2015) describes how as a child, when her local library was opened 'it was a really fantastic moment in my life, in our lives, a real moment of change'. Similarly a group member told us:

I feel proud of it [my library] ... because it's local too ... I think also it's nice to have something nearby that you can feel proud of. Part of your home turf.

At a time when many of the traditional places of meeting and social contact are disappearing, library-supported reading groups fulfil a deep and fundamental need in people to come together, to be connected, a sentiment echoed by the group member who noted:

The reading group offers something valuable to the community in a context where there is very little going on in the town.

We conclude that library-supported reading groups have a vital role to play in the life of communities in fostering collective debate and discussion, building on the early work of mutual improvement societies. Libraries and their reading groups provide 'a sense of place ... [the] joy of human congregation' (Jenkins, 2017). Through supporting and enabling these groups to flourish, libraries help to strengthen the very fabric of communities. There is an important, indeed essential connection between reading groups, libraries and communities, a connection nowhere more powerfully captured than in the words of the library assistant who said:

[Reading groups] are really vital, this is really important stuff. This is what communities are about. There used to be more opportunities for people to get together in lots of different ways, in cinemas, in libraries, in pubs. And all that's going, and the way I see it and the service I'm part of, is keeping that alive.

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## How the research was conducted

Our original intention was to include in our case study the work of five library services in different contexts and locations. We decided initially to limit our focus to exploring three library services, leaving decisions about the other two to be made at a later date when it was clearer what additional information was needed to extend and enrich the insights provided by the first three.

Recommendations from the Society of Chief Librarians helped us to select services which exemplified good practice in support of reading groups and provided a range of localities and groups. We began by contacting the chief librarians of each of these services to seek permission to undertake the research. They agreed, and put us in touch with the relevant senior managers whom we interviewed to discuss the overall organisation of support. During the interviews, we asked for their suggestions of reading groups to visit, and we then made our selection, ensuring that we included a range of different types of group from across the services involved (for a breakdown of the types of groups included, see page 5 of the report).

The opportunity to broaden the case study beyond the three library services originally chosen arose naturally as we followed up interesting lines of inquiry that came to our attention during the course of the research. For example, we met with Sue Wilkinson, CEO of The Reading Agency, who told us about their principles, their current research and how they were supporting reading groups. She put us in touch with Jane Davis, Director of The Reader, who in turn explained her Shared Reading approach. Through this contact, and with the help of The Reader website, we were able to include in our study two additional library services, a small number of individuals and a social enterprise company, who had all been involved in developing reading groups using the Shared Reading approach. We allowed the research to grow organically, following up opportunities as they arose. For example we interviewed a reading group member who ran a multi-cultural reading group and another group member, a former librarian, who under the auspices of the local authority had initiated a reading group in a prison.

### Number of interviews/questionnaires undertaken

Key personnel in national organisations	Library service senior managers	Reading group facilitators	Reading group members
4	5	15	89

We arranged to visit the selected groups and individuals in person, and we interviewed the facilitator(s) and the group members. Where it was not possible for people (facilitators and group members) to be interviewed in person, we used a combination of telephone interviews and email questionnaires to seek their views. In a few cases, we had the opportunity to observe groups in action and, in the case of Shared Reading groups, even to participate ourselves.

We obtained the written consent of all participants, assuring them that, unless otherwise agreed, they would not be named or identified in a written report. We sent transcripts of our conversations to all senior managers and facilitators for approval and amendment, and prior to publication we sent them copies of our report for verification.

## **The research team**

**Lesley Dee** was a Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. She has a background in Further and Continuing Education.

**Susan Hart** was also a Lecturer in Education at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Since retiring, she has continued to be involved in educational research projects located at the Faculty.

**Cathy Jennings** is an editor and former adult education teacher with broad experience in educational publishing.