

# STRONGER FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

**GROWING SHARED READING WITH  
SUPPORT FROM THE SECOND HALF FUND  
MAY 2019**



**Supported by**



Department for  
Digital, Culture  
Media & Sport

The Reader – Charity Number 1126806 (Scotland SC043054)



# CONTENTS



**This is the thing, this truly is the thing.  
We dreamt it once; now it has come about**  
*From Dream and Thing, Edwin Muir*

- 3** EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
- 5** INTRODUCTION
- 8** THEORY OF CHANGE
- 12** OUR EVALUATION STORY SO FAR
- 14** BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE:  
METHODOLOGY
- 22** BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE:  
FINDINGS
- 30** STRONGER FOUNDATIONS  
FOR THE FUTURE
- 32** APPENDICES

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**In April 2017, The Reader was awarded funding for a new collaborative community-delivered programme for the North West with the aim of bringing the health and social benefits of Shared Reading to more than 2100 people in communities across the region.**

The project, called Shared Reading North West, was supported by innovation foundation Nesta and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Crucial through The Second Half Fund<sup>1</sup>. The work was also supported by a family of public sector commissioning partners including Knowsley CCG, Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, North West Boroughs Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and a collaboration between Halton Borough Council, Halton CCG and Well Halton.

The project enabled The Reader to transition from a staff-led delivery model to a new community delivered model. By training and supporting volunteers to run and support their own groups in their local area, we aimed to refine and evaluate a new Shared Reading model that could scale.

More than 500 new volunteers were recruited to deliver Shared Reading groups, with a particular focus on those aged over 50, over the lifetime of the project. This resulted in over 100 new Shared Reading groups, reaching more than 1700 people in communities across the region.

This report reflects on our progress in evidencing the impact of community-delivered Shared Reading throughout the two-year project.

<sup>1</sup> The Reader was one of 13 organisations selected to take part in the Second Half Fund, which was created to support the growth of innovations that mobilise the time and talents of people aged 50+ to help others, alongside public services.

# INTRODUCTION

Data highlights include:

## **Shared Reading improves wellbeing:**

- **91%** of community group members say the reading sessions make them feel better<sup>2</sup>

## **Shared Reading reduces social isolation:**

- **84%** say they've made new friends in their group<sup>3</sup>
- **82%** say the group helps them relate to others in a deeper way<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this project, we are now in a stronger position to articulate the impact of our community-delivered work. However, testing new ways of working at a time of rapid growth and organisational change has been challenging. We are proud to have built our data set significantly, at a time when we have been evolving and scaling our delivery model.

Having access to a larger data set has provided us with stronger foundations and the ability to tell the story of Shared Reading's impact through the words of our beneficiaries. The project has allowed us the opportunity to test different ways of evaluating Shared Reading through our volunteers. We are also now in a position to identify the digital solutions that will enable us to capture data more effectively through volunteers and/or communicate directly with our group members.

We are ambitious to keep moving forward with our evaluation work. The learning from this project will help us to design and commission new evaluation projects that will help further our understanding and evidence of impact.

## **ABOUT THE READER**

The Reader is a national charity that wants to bring about a Reading Revolution so that everyone can experience and enjoy great literature, which we believe is a tool for helping humans survive and live well.

Through a growing movement of 1,000 volunteers and partners across different sectors, we currently bring over 2,500 people together each month to share and discuss great novels, plays and poems. We call this Shared Reading.

Previous evaluations have shown how – by reading with school groups, families, adults, looked after children, older people in care homes, adults with physical and / or mental health conditions, people living with or recovering from addiction and individuals in the criminal justice system – our work is helping to improve wellbeing and reduce isolation. This report shows that community groups run by our volunteers and partners also have an impact in these areas, helping people to build deeper connections to each other and to feel better in themselves.

Everything we do – from our Shared Reading groups to our social enterprises and our publications – creates lively, connected, warm communities by bringing people together and books to life.

<sup>2</sup> 1408 respondents

<sup>3</sup> 1407 respondents

<sup>4</sup> 1383 respondents



**A tough life needs a tough language,  
and that's what literature offers...**  
Jeanette Winterson

## OUR PURPOSE

Life in the developed world is fast-paced and complex. Most of us are living longer, have more 'stuff' than we need, and exercise greater choice over how we live than any generation before us. Yet in spite of this, many people report low levels of wellbeing and connection to others.

For thousands of years, literature has helped humans to find meaning and connection by providing a powerful language to explore our inner thoughts and feelings. Ensuring that everyone can enjoy and experience literature as part of daily life has the potential to improve wellbeing and build social connections.

## WHAT SHARED READING DOES

Shared Reading is a powerful group experience that brings literature to life. A group of two or more people – one of them a trained Reader Leader – meet, usually weekly, and read books, poems, plays or other literary matter, aloud. It's not a course or a book club.

Reading the literature aloud, sharing it in real time, means that everyone is involved in a live experience. Group members are encouraged by the Reader Leader to respond to literature personally, sharing feelings, thoughts and memories provoked by the reading. While each individual experiences the text in their own way, the literature provides a shared language which can help open deep conversation and connection between group members.

## SHARED READING NORTH WEST: A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

**Siobhan has bipolar and first met The Reader during a research study at the University of Liverpool. She'd had the "good fortune" of being referred there by her psychiatrist – and she hasn't looked back. This is her Reader Story.**

My psychiatrist nominated me for a study to see if participating in Shared Reading groups might improve the mental health of people like me. For me, the exercise has been such a success.

Prior to getting involved, I was extremely isolated and led a solitary life. I felt that I just existed. I only left my house when I absolutely had to. Consequently, I was a cause for concern.

When I was invited to get involved, I felt motivated to give it a go – and I am so glad that I did. From the very first session, I felt a sense of purpose, it gave me something to look forward to. These were feelings I had not experienced for such a long time. And my mind was being stimulated.

I found I was taking more physical care of myself regarding washing, dressing and diet. I took time over deciding what to wear and making myself look presentable.

My state of mental and physical wellbeing has improved in so many ways.

I gained so much that I knew I would miss the sessions when the study concluded after 18 weeks. I was delighted, then, to find out that there was a group nearby and I've been attending these sessions since June 2018. I get great enjoyment from being a member of the group.

The reading materials provided are so good that excellent discussions are initiated. The Reader Leader subtly prompts these discussions by suggesting we deliberate over passages from the short stories, and poems, at certain intervals.

I don't think I can adequately express how profound an impact Shared Reading has had on me.

My psychiatrist has been delighted to see the improvement in my state of mental health. I told her it is all thanks to The Reader.

I have a very loving and caring family but we live very far apart from each other. They, too, were concerned about me being isolated and depressed. Now they have a sense of relief when I call them to talk about the group and they hear how much pleasure and interest I get from the readings, and the social interaction I now have with others.

I am not such a cause for concern for them anymore. So, not only has the group had a positive impact on me, but it has also had a positive impact upon all members of my family.

A priceless, unquantifiable source of good for myself and my family.



# THEORY OF CHANGE

Our findings show that Shared Reading transforms lives by increasing wellbeing and reducing social isolation, giving group members a new sense of purpose in life:

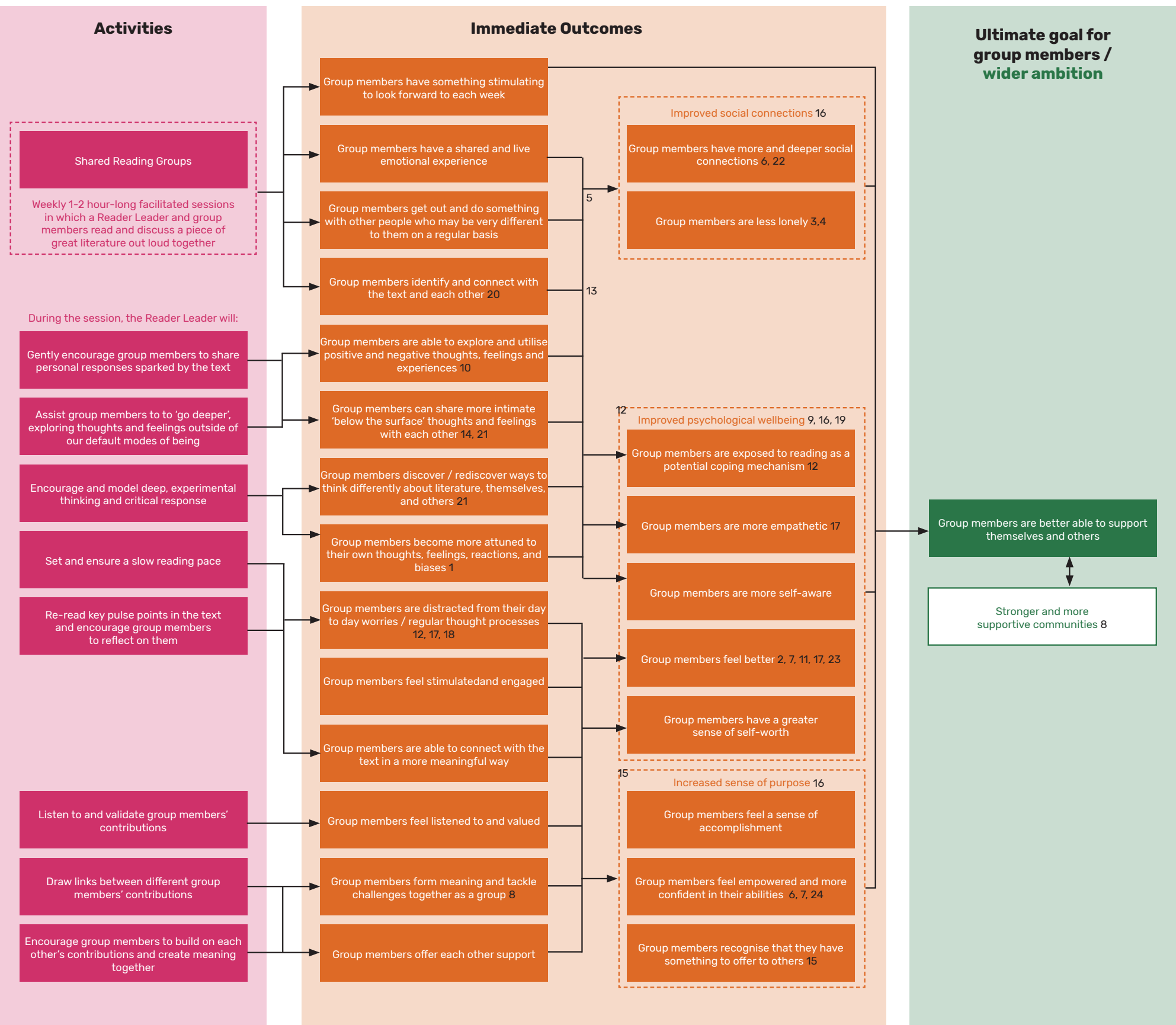


Free text questionnaire responses, community group members:

*It has extended my sense of belonging to a community, given me a leisure activity I really enjoy & introduced me to writings I didn't know. The sharing has helped in getting to know people at a deeper level.*

*Originally helped me back into society following medical problems. Now it is the highlight of my week and has strengthened the way I do things.*

*Reawakened my interest in life.*



## THE READER'S THEORY OF CHANGE - EXISTING EVIDENCE

1. Interventions targeting social and emotional learning have a valuable impact on pupils' interaction with others and self-management of emotions. (Higgins et al, 2018)
2. Activities that help to create and maintain social relationships lead to improved quality of life and reduction of service use. (Wood & Whitty, 2017)
3. Activities such as art, group exercises and discussions, therapeutic writing and other social capital interventions are effective in reducing the levels of loneliness in those age 55+ when tailored to the needs of particular demographics. (Victor, 2018)
4. Interventions such as befriending produced reductions on the UCLA Loneliness Scale in 88% of older people who were lonely 'often' and 70% of older people who were lonely 'some of the time'. (Karanian, 2017)
5. Older people who were introduced to a range of community activities through a Link Worker experienced a statistically significant decrease in the De Jong Gierveld 6-Item Loneliness Scale. (Brown et al, 2018)
6. People participating in a 'More than a Mealtime' intervention were able to form deeper connections as a result of spending time with small groups on shared tables and experienced improved wellbeing and confidence. (Wigfield & Alden, 2017)
7. There are positive associations between arts participation, including literary activities such as reading, and a range of wellbeing indicators including self-assessed general health, physical health, mental health, satisfaction with life overall and self-efficacy. (Lakey et al, 2018)
8. Creating spaces which promote social connections enable people to feel part of a network of shared meanings and improves community wellbeing. (Bagnall et al, 2017)
9. Reading groups produced statistically significant improvements in mental health for patients diagnosed with depression in Health and Drop in Centres. (Billington et al., 2010)
10. Reading groups help to emphasize wellness by complementing models of mental health recovery, building resilience in individuals and helping them take control of their lives. (Gray, 2013)
11. Reading groups significantly reduce the severity of dementia symptoms in people in care homes and contribute to their quality of life. These effects were maintained after the group had ended. (Billington et al, 2013).
12. Shared Reading improves mood and quality of life in patients with chronic pain. (Billington et al, 2017)
13. Reading helps to alleviate feelings of loneliness in interviewees aged 65+. (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008).
14. An association exists between reading and having close relationships, something that significantly reduces feelings of loneliness in people aged between 18-64. (Toepoel, 2013).
15. Shared Reading produces increases in confidence and self-esteem levels and reductions in loneliness by encouraging social connectedness. (Hillhorst et al, 2018)
16. Participating in Shared Reading groups enhances well-being and increases social connectedness and sense of purpose in life. (Longden et al, 2015).
17. Female prisoners experienced increased personal confidence and improved psychological well-being from attending Shared Reading groups, which fostered tolerance of conflict and escape from worries through absorption in literature. (Billington et al., 2013).
18. Shared Reading groups produces a sense of hope and a feeling of escapism in participants diagnosed with depression. (Billington et al. 2011).
19. Shared Reading is shown to have long lasting beneficial mental health effects as well as immediate benefits in people with neurological conditions. (Latchem and Greenhalgh, 2014).
20. Finding meaning in a text enables Shared Reading participants to relate the text to their own lives and experiences and reduces feelings of loneliness. (Shipman and McGrath, 2016).
21. Engaging with Reading Groups enables participants to broaden their views, widen their perspectives and share their feeling and thoughts. (Dee et al, 2017).
22. Reading together and reading aloud helps participants to share experiences and strengthens social bonds. (APPG, 2017).
23. Activities, including group psychotherapy, discussions and art activities produce a significant improvement in subjective health and result in lower mortality and less use of health services during a follow-up period (Pitkala et al, 2009).
24. Befriending results in a reduced incidence of depression, increased confidence and autonomy and reduced costs to the NHS. (Oxera, 2015).

## WHO WE REACH

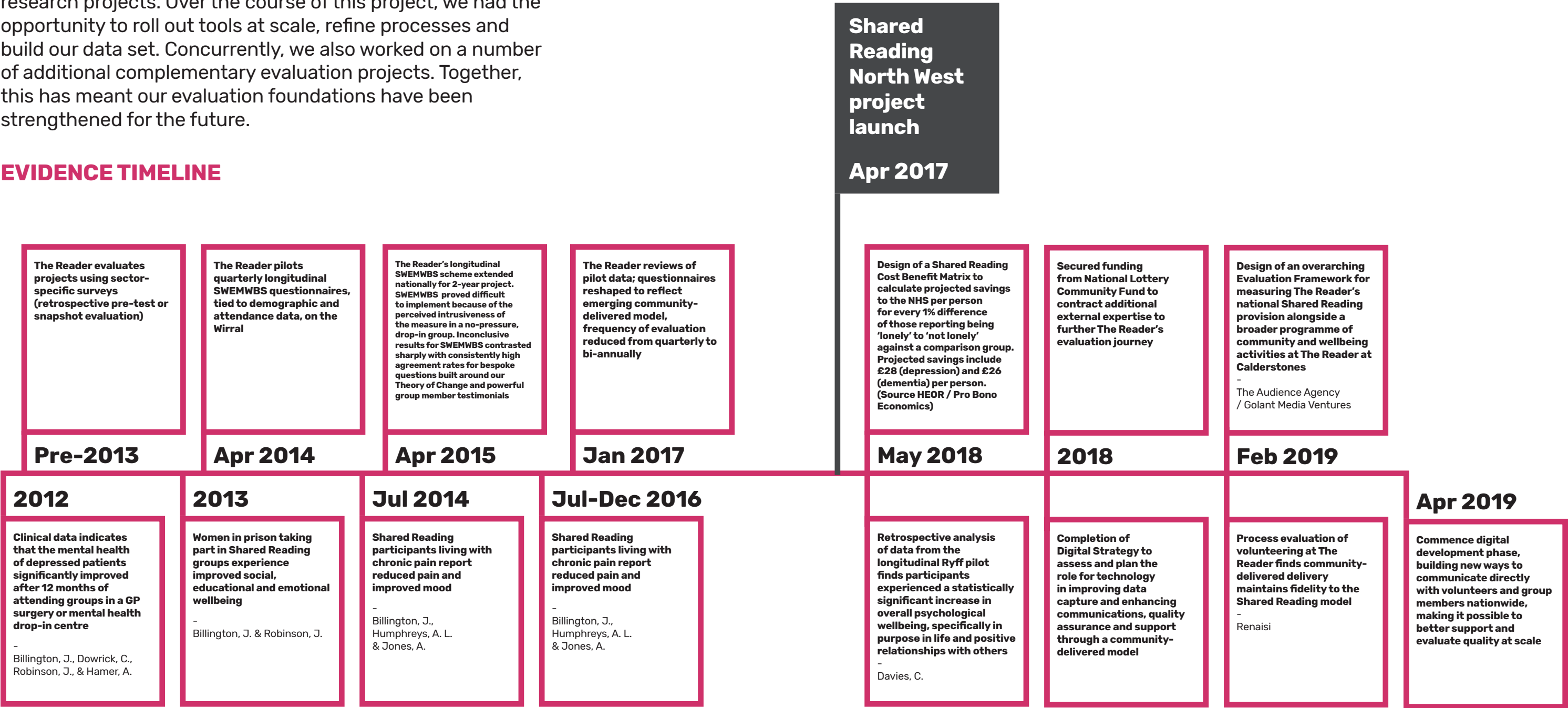
Across all sectors, we reach a vast range of individuals from different backgrounds whose life circumstances place them at greater risk of low personal wellbeing or social isolation. In March 2018, 65% of all group members nationally were aged 50+. 57% of group members and 26% of volunteers told us they had at least one disability or significant health condition. 17% of group members held no academic qualifications; 45% were retired. 70% were either single, widowed, divorced or separated. 12% described themselves as a carer for a friend or family member .

Every year one in four adults in the UK will experience a mental health problem; our community interventions play a vital role in providing the support that everyone needs from time to time. We want our community groups to be there before people need us, so that when times get tough personal mechanisms to reflect on unexpected life experiences, and a supportive community to safely explore these with, are already in place.

# OUR EVALUATION STORY SO FAR

Prior to this project, we had tested and developed a number of approaches for monitoring and evaluation, and had worked with the University of Liverpool on a number of research projects. Over the course of this project, we had the opportunity to roll out tools at scale, refine processes and build our data set. Concurrently, we also worked on a number of additional complementary evaluation projects. Together, this has meant our evaluation foundations have been strengthened for the future.

## EVIDENCE TIMELINE



<sup>1</sup> Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) © NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2006, all rights reserved.

## BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE: METHODOLOGY

At the start of the Shared Reading North West project in April 2017, we were already at a strong place in our evaluation journey. The data from past evaluations had focused on the impact of groups run by our own staff, primarily in closed environments like prisons or care homes and often in small geographies. As Shared Reading North West tested how best to extend our reach through volunteer- and partner-led delivery, our evaluation for this project was designed to help us understand what impact this community-delivered Shared Reading had on group members, and to test the feasibility of evidencing impact at scale for the future.

### OUR EVALUATION CHALLENGE

How do we increase our data set within our new community-delivered model to better evidence the outcomes of Shared Reading?

Targets:

- Implement new evaluation collection strategy for our community-delivered model
- Increase the number of evaluation responses from group members
- Strengthen the evidence for Shared Reading

## WHAT WE DID

### MEASUREMENT TOOLS

Our main evaluation was collected via group member evaluation snapshot surveys. Quantitative measures within the survey included bespoke Likert scale questions reflecting elements of The Reader's Theory of Change, the Office of National Statistics' four-item personal wellbeing measure (ONS4) and two items from social interaction sub-scale of the Duke Social Support Index. The survey included qualitative open response questions relating to participants' experiences of the group and collected basic demographic information (year of birth, gender) and an indication of how long the respondent had attended a Shared Reading group.

Variations of the survey were created for different group contexts, tailored to group members' needs. These included forms for those in criminal justice settings, living with dementia and experiencing acute mental illness. For the purposes of this report, our findings will focus on completion of standard group member evaluation only.

All tools were designed by The Reader with input from Professor Rhiannon Corcoran, Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool.

The standard survey tool can be found in Appendix A.



DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

1. Volunteer Reader Leaders were posted an evaluation pack containing evaluation surveys for their group members and directed to online advice about how to conduct the survey.
2. Reader Leaders conducted the survey at the beginning or end of one of their regular weekly sessions, within the normal running time of the group, during an allocated cross-organisational annual 'Feedback Week' (March 2018 and February 2019).
3. Surveys were designed to be snapshot, without need for separate baseline and follow-up measures, but with the ability for results to be analysed against group members' length of attendance.
4. Group members were asked to complete the forms independently, advised that forms were anonymous and encouraged to be as honest as possible in their responses. Support in reading questions or transcribing answers was offered where required.
5. Reader Leaders were encouraged to conduct the surveys with any individuals attending the group during which the evaluation session was scheduled to take place, regardless of how many sessions they had previously attended.
6. Reader Leaders posted questionnaires back to our headquarters in Liverpool, where they were inputted by a volunteer or member of staff. The freepost return envelope listed a pre-assigned identifier code, enabling responses to be attributed to their respective group and region.
7. Returns rates were monitored and reminders sent to Reader Leaders who had not yet posted completed packs.

WHAT DID WE TEST AND LEARN?

The evaluation design for this project was driven by our aim to increase response sizes whilst responding to the newly emergent community-delivered model. In order to reduce barriers and encourage participation wherever possible, we implemented a number of adaptations to our previous evaluation approach.

Applying learning from the EAST framework (Behavioural Insights Team, 2014) we trialled a number of new innovations:

<b>Make it Easy</b>	Post evaluation packs directly to volunteer home addresses, including a freepost return envelope.  Simplify the evaluation process to be anonymous and snapshot-only.
<b>Make it Attractive</b>	Make surveys look attractive and engaging through input from Communications team.  Provide a prize draw incentive for return of survey packs – incentives geared towards group members rather than volunteers - volunteers motivated to do something positive for the people they read with.
<b>Make it Social</b>	Provide training videos for volunteers to make process feel friendly, accessible and 'human'.  Promote Feedback Week as a national activity taking part across our whole Shared Reading community.  Create a free anthology of reading resources from groups across the country as a thank you for participating, including key headline stats from the surveys.
<b>Make it Timely</b>	Time email communications to go out when click-through rates are highest.  Use targeted reminder prompts and give clear ways for people to quickly flag difficulties.

We also tested a longitudinal telephone study (page 20).

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Evaluation packs were sent to all Reader Leaders of groups and one-to-ones during Feedback Week. In March 2018, 158 packs were distributed to community groups, and completed evaluation surveys were returned from 93 groups – a response rate of 59%.

In February 2019, 223 packs were distributed to community groups, and completed evaluation surveys were returned from 136 groups – a response rate of 61%.

In total, across the full period April 2017–March 2019, we received 1506 completed evaluation surveys. Reader Leaders were instructed to conduct the evaluation on a single session; as attendances fluctuate from week to week, the total number of possible respondents from these groups – and from those groups that did not return their evaluation pack – is not known.

## **LIMITATIONS**

### **1. EVALUATION IS CONDUCTED THROUGH THE VOLUNTEER READER LEADER**

This limits our ability to directly control the messaging around the evaluation exercise. It may also lead to a bias in our participant group, where those Reader Leaders who are less engaged (and thus might arguably deliver groups of a lesser quality, potentially achieving lesser impact) may be less likely to conduct the evaluation with their group members.

Reader Leaders were instructed to clearly show they were not reading the responses of their group members and put completed surveys straight into the return envelope. However, participants may be less likely to be critical in their feedback if they think there is a possibility that Reader Leaders would read the group's responses. Where Reader Leaders were required to offer assistance in completing the forms, group members may also have felt less able to return ambivalent or negative feedback.

### **2. QUESTIONS REQUIRING RESPONDENTS TO REPORT HOW MUCH THEY AGREE WITH STATEMENTS RELATING TO THE READER'S THEORY OF CHANGE ARE POSITIVELY PHRASED AND BESPOKE TO THE READER**

This may lead to acquiescence bias (where respondents tend to agree with positively phrased statements). Whilst questions were developed in consultation with the University of Liverpool, they have not been tested in the same way as externally validated measures.

### **3. EVALUATION IS TAKEN AT A SINGLE TIME-POINT AND IS ANONYMOUS**

Without pre- and post- data for individual group members we can learn much less about different impact journeys and how change may vary for people coming to Shared Reading from different starting points.

Asking respondents to indicate their length of attendance enables us to examine correlation between this variable and impact size, but correlation is not the same as causality; there is a risk that what is perceived as attributable change may simply be that those who choose to continue attending Shared Reading groups are those who are most likely to report higher levels of impact.

Length of attendance also doesn't indicate frequency of attendance – someone may have attended for more than 12 months, but only attended every few months within that period; conversely, someone may have only attended for three months but attended consistently throughout.

### **ACTIVITIES TO MITIGATE LIMITATION**

In order to address the primary issue of evidencing causality, as part of the test and learn project we decided to run shorter feasibility studies that would allow us to gauge attribution on a smaller scale. Brief methodologies and rationales for these pilots are outlined here:

#### **1. LONGITUDINAL ONLINE / TELEPHONE STUDY – SUMMER 2018**

New groups were randomly selected for participation at the point where Reader Leaders were trained (one Reader Leader per training cohort selected). Reader Leaders were asked to collect contact details from group members, who would be emailed by The Reader and invited to complete a six-month longitudinal study (over telephone or email) every six weeks. Despite ongoing efforts from our team we found this is to be an unsuitable recruitment methodology. We therefore halted this study and focused on alternative pilot projects that would make it possible to engage participants through our own staff attending during the normal running time of the groups (see next page).

#### **2. 6-WEEK PANAS TRIAL – WINTER/SPRING 2019**

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) is a short questionnaire of 20 emotion descriptors – ten positive and ten negative – which participants are asked to score from one to five, recording the extent to which they are experiencing each emotion at various evaluation points.

We had used the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule successfully in a previous evaluation pilot and knew it could give an almost instant indication of impact attributable to participation in the group. Responding to the findings of our online/telephone study about the difficulties of reaching participants through Reader Leaders, we decided to trial direct evaluation using this measure. Three community groups running in open settings were visited by trained staff members over six weeks, with group members asked to complete the survey at the beginning and end of each session. These included: a brand new group established in a library, an established group running in a church and a brand new group in a sheltered housing complex. In total, 13 group members completed the questionnaire on at least one occasion, although due to fluctuating attendance only five respondents completed the survey three times or more. These response numbers reflect some of the challenges The Reader is already familiar with in evaluating a drop-in programme such as Shared Reading, where people can come and go as they please and it may take a number of weeks for a consistent group of participants to become established.

#### **3. FOCUS GROUPS – SPRING 2019**

Qualitative data is able to provide insights about the specifics of causality, reach and attribution that quantitative data can rarely give. At the end of the Shared Reading North West project we randomly selected two adult community groups in open settings which had been established during the project and running for at least five months to receive focus group visits from an experienced member of staff. The focus groups were designed to help us understand individual impact journeys – what people's starting points had been, what changes they had experienced since joining the group and in what ways this change might have been attributable specifically to Shared Reading, rather than the general benefits of attending a community group activity. A plan of the focus group structure is included in Appendix C.

# BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE: FINDINGS

Our targets were to:

## 1. Implement new evaluation collection strategy for our community-delivered model

Between April 2015 and March 2017, feedback forms were collected by our own staff four times a year. Following our transition to community-delivered groups, we adjusted the evaluation calendar to conduct evaluation activities once annually through our community volunteers (with an additional six-month collection point where required by project funders).

By centrally administering our evaluation process, for the first time we were able to fully monitor response rates across projects and regions.

## 2. Increase the number of evaluation responses from group members

1506 community feedback forms were returned between April 2017 and March 2019, compared to 759 between April 2015 and March 2017: an increase of 98%.

The total number of Shared Reading groups supported by The Reader nationally in 2017-18 had remained largely unchanged from 2016-17, with our growth activities during this time focusing on restructuring projects from staff-delivered to community-delivered, so this 98% increase reflects real success in significantly growing our data set whilst simplifying feedback requirements for our new community-delivered model.

With the number of groups invited to take part increasing by 41% between year one and year two of the project, a small increase in the number of groups responding (59% in year one, 61% in year two), demonstrated that the new data-collection strategy could secure at least equivalent returns rates during a period of accelerated growth.

## 3. Strengthen the evidence for Shared Reading

### QUANTITATIVE

Data highlights include:

Shared Reading improves wellbeing:

- 91% of community group members say the reading sessions make them feel better<sup>1</sup>

Shared Reading reduces social isolation:

- 84% say they've made new friends in their group<sup>2</sup>
- 82% say the group helps them relate to others in a deeper way<sup>3</sup>

A full breakdown of responses for The Reader's Theory of Change questions can be found in Appendix B.

### QUALITATIVE

The qualitative data collected through our feedback forms and during the focus groups allow us to address the limitations discussed earlier, and strengthen our quantitative findings. The focus groups showed that a variety of individuals come to our groups, many bringing to the group positive past experiences of reading. Some participants spoke of being motivated to join the group to address a need for increased social connection, especially when ill health made it harder to spend time with other people or get enjoyment from reading independently. Key themes emerging from the focus groups are discussed in Appendix D.

<sup>1</sup>1408 respondents

<sup>2</sup>1407 respondents

<sup>3</sup>1383 respondents





*It has been a huge help in regaining confidence as a person whose life had deteriorated with a chronic illness. It has brought a new focus, inspiration and confidence, acceptance, helped me feel more positive.*

Free text questionnaire response, community group member

## ARE WE READING WITH THOSE MOST IN NEED?

With any community-delivered programme, there is always a risk that those who are most likely to take part are those who already participate in lots of groups, who are most proactive about and equipped to support their own wellbeing and who already have robust social support networks in place. Using two items from the Duke Social Support Index (social interaction sub-set) we could gain a general idea of how socially active our respondents were outside of their participation in Shared Reading.

At the time of evaluation, **40%** of respondents had gone to a meeting or a club, religious group or other group once or not at all in the previous week (599 of 1343 respondents, 218 of whom went to no clubs or meetings).

**18%** of respondents had spent time with someone they didn't live with once or not at all in the previous week (240 of 1322 respondents; 81 of whom spent no time at all).



*I am self-employed but also have a limited capacity for work due to mental health issues. I live alone and am often isolated. Coming to Shared Reading makes me feel connected, improves my mood drastically and gives me a chance to stretch intellectually.*

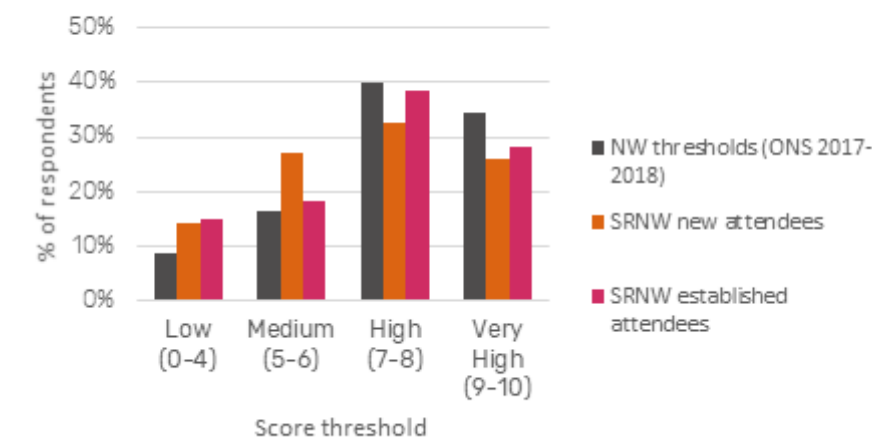
Free text questionnaire response, group member, hospital

## HOW DO OUR GROUP MEMBERS COMPARE TO REGIONAL NORMS?

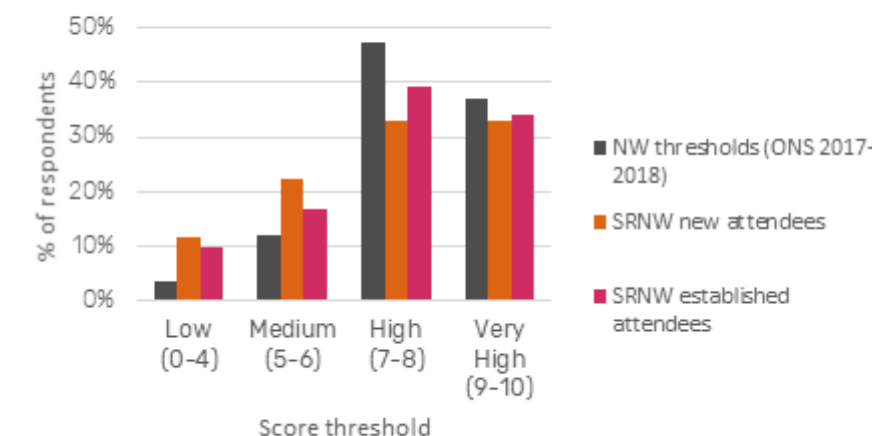
Comparing the North West thresholds of personal wellbeing from the Office for National Statistics Annual Population Survey (APS) with responses from group members within Shared Reading North West<sup>1</sup> shows that our adult community groups cater (and continue to appeal through long-term attendance) to a greater proportion of those reporting low or medium wellbeing than typical of the North West region as a whole.

Data suggests that group members surveyed at least four months into their experience of Shared Reading are more likely to report high or very high wellbeing than those who are within their first three months of participation, although this finding should be viewed in light of the methodological limitations of snapshot measurement outlined above.

Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?



Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?



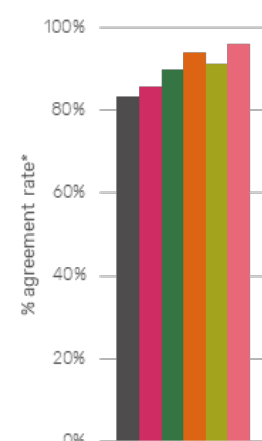
<sup>1</sup>ONS4 response breakdown for respondents attending a Shared Reading North West group April 2017 – March 2019: 76–77 respondents (depending on which of the four questions) attended for fewer than 4 months at the point of evaluation ('SRNW new attendees'); 493–498 respondents attended for 4 months or more ('SRNW established attendees').



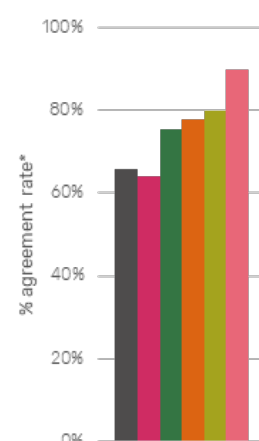
***It has been fantastic. I'm a lucky individual with a home, job and family but like many, I was stressed by expectations - Shared Reading gave me a focused 'break from all that'.***

Free text questionnaire response, community group member

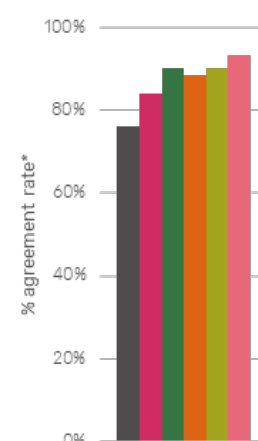
I look forward to the group as an important event in my week



I've made new friends within the group



The reading sessions make me feel better



■ This is my first time  
■ Less than a month  
■ 1-3 months  
■ 4-6 months  
■ 7-12 months  
■ More than a year

Further evaluation should be conducted to establish whether this correlation can be confidently attributed to increased effect size over time, whether frequency of attendance or length of attendance has a greater influence on effect size, and where the key points of the impact journey lie (e.g. minimum effectiveness period, when and whether impact plateaus for participants, what happens after someone decides to stop attending). However this data does show that our longstanding group members continue to benefit from attending their Shared Reading group.



***I have been attending groups since almost the beginning (7 years). My life has changed beyond recognition for the better. I am happy.***

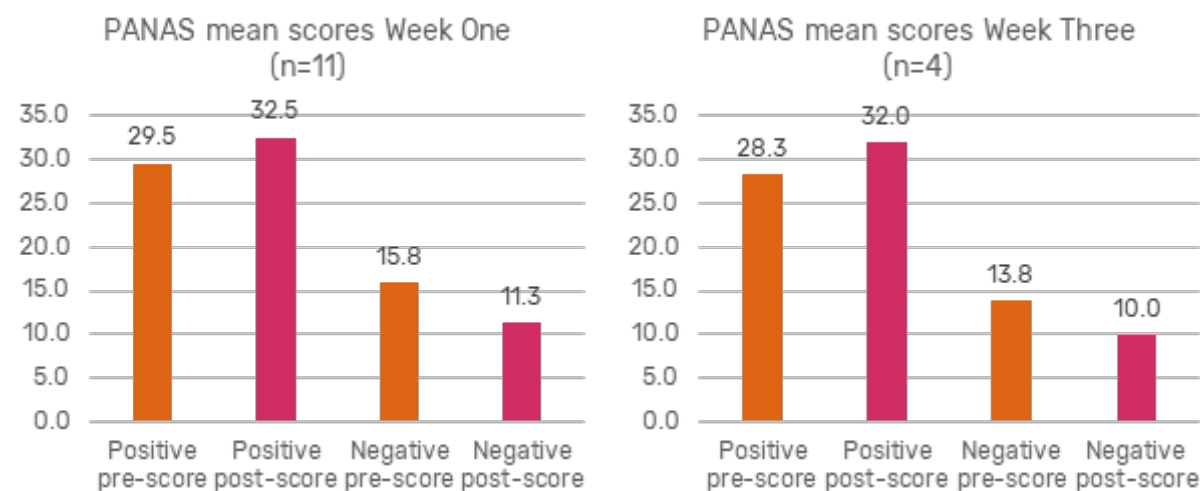
Free text questionnaire response, community group member

## THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AFFECT SCHEDULE (PANAS) - FINDINGS

13 participants completed at least one pre- and post-questionnaire within the six-week feasibility pilot. Despite targeting new groups, five of these respondents reported attending 12 or more Shared Reading sessions prior to Week One of the pilot (compromising the validity of using these results as baseline figures), and only two completed the survey at their first ever Shared Reading session. As reflected in our findings from the Focus Group study, this may be because certain individuals who recognise a benefit from attending Shared Reading tend to look for other groups they can also attend, and so may be the first to seek out and come along to a newly starting group. Three participants did not disclose how many sessions they had previously attended, which means we do not know whether their Week One data can be treated as a baseline. Of the 13 who completed the Week One survey, despite clear instructions from the staff evaluator, two respondents completed the schedule incorrectly - their data has been discounted from the figures below.

These limitations on the data collected during the PANAS pilot reflect some of the many challenges we've discovered since first evaluating Shared Reading groups - especially relating to the ad hoc attendance patterns of participants and evaluating those for whom literacy may be a barrier. The data quantity and quality resulting from this pilot raises challenges about how we must further refine the evaluation methodology before adopting a similar approach more widely or in a more formal research study.

Before and after the Shared Reading session, group members were asked to give a score between one (feeling that emotion 'very slightly or not at all') and five (feeling that emotion 'extremely') for 10 positive words and 10 negative words. For each measure - positive and negative, pre and post session - there was a minimum possible score of 10 and a maximum score of 50.



The mean positive score for Week One of the evaluation increased by 3.0 within a single Shared Reading session; the mean negative score decreased by 4.5.

For the third week of attendance, we received completed data sets from four participants. Scores show similar patterns as in Week One, with marginally lower scores for both positive and negative affect at pre- and post-points. With such a small data set it would be difficult to draw confident conclusions about outcomes over time; however these initial findings suggest group members tend to feel more positive emotion and less negative emotion at the end of a weekly Shared Reading session, whether new to Shared Reading or a returning group member.



***It is the highlight of my week.***  
Free text questionnaire response,  
group member, sheltered housing

## LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation project has enabled us to test the feasibility of collecting general evaluation feedback at scale whilst also testing more detailed evaluation strategies that could be adopted in a future external study. A number of recommendations from this project will help us to shape the next stages in our journey to evidencing impact for community-delivered Shared Reading.

In order to more fully understand the impact of these groups, future longitudinal evaluation should explore the following questions:

- How does the impact of Shared Reading vary over time?
- Which has the greater influence on impact  
– frequency of attendance or length of attendance?
- What happens to the benefits of taking part in a Shared Reading group when someone stops attending?
- How does a group member's 'starting point' affect the type or extent of change they experience as a result of Shared Reading?

It has also resulted in methodological findings which will shape how we commission and design evaluation studies in the future, including:

- Newly established groups may not return sufficient baseline populations. Longitudinal studies should consider alternatives to baselining or appropriate means (such as new geographies, standalone research groups, or planting evaluation participants in established groups) to ensure a large enough sample of truly 'new' group members are recruited.
- Successful evaluation relies on simple ways to get responses back directly from group members. This may require investment in staff time, trained volunteers or new systems by which The Reader is able to reach its Shared Reading community of group members directly.
- Our PANAS pilot demonstrated the importance of fully equipping evaluators to conduct more complex feedback activities. We've seen strong results when trained staff have used this tool previously in Criminal Justice settings and see benefit in continuing to trial the measure in the community. Further evaluator training and within-session support for participants will be key to securing a stronger data set in future studies.

## STRONGER FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This project has provided us with a larger data set to build upon for the future. We can now tell the story of community-delivered Shared Reading impact through the words of group members across the country. We've seen how we reach a greater number of people with low wellbeing in the North West than is typical of the region as a whole. We've discovered that our community-delivered groups help people to feel better, to make new friends and to connect more deeply with others, and that these benefits are higher for those who – at the time of evaluation – had attended their group for longer.

Pilot feasibility studies and undertaking this exercise with a larger population has helped us identify real challenges in how we complement our mass data sets with longitudinal evaluation data. Evaluating through volunteers is challenging and we now need to focus on the digital solutions that will enable us to capture data more effectively and streamline our back office processes.

Focus groups have helped us listen in detail to the voices of some of the group members behind our headline figures, giving us an insight into the range of experiences and motivations typical of community Shared Reading participants in the North West. We've discovered that many of our members already enjoyed reading before joining their group, but that taking part in Shared Reading has enabled them to address need in other areas of their lives. It's given people who would otherwise feel isolated a way to get to know others and has given previously enthusiastic readers the opportunity to continue an activity they love – and stretch themselves to enjoy new reading experiences – despite the barriers to participation brought about by poor health.

We are now in a stronger position to articulate the impact of our community-delivered work and to plan for the future. What we've learnt will help us to design and commission new evaluation projects which will help us get to the heart of understanding – and maximising – the impact Shared Reading has in the lives of our group members.



Free text questionnaire responses,  
community group members:

***Since becoming widowed following being a carer for my husband for 20 years, joining the group has given me a confidence, friendship and something to look forward to.***

***Makes me feel good, lightens my mood. My concentration is better.***

***Helps me understand people and myself better. Helps me look at other points of view. And gives me hope for the future.***

***I feel better while I am here.***



APPENDIX A - STANDARD GROUP MEMBER EVALUATION FORM

Let us know what you think!

Feedback form for group members

Whether you’ve been coming to this *Shared Reading* group for a long time or this is your very first week, we’d love to find out a little bit about you and what you think of our groups. This information will help us to understand the impact of *Shared Reading* and to do things as well as we possibly can in future. There are no right or wrong answers and the data will be stored securely, so please answer each question as honestly as possible.

Don’t forget that all questions are optional – if you’re not comfortable answering something, just leave that question blank.

3. How you feel about *Shared Reading*

	Strongly disagree							Strongly agree						
I’ve grown more confident since joining the group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							
I look forward to the group as an important event in my week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							
What we read in the group helps me to understand myself better	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							
The reading sessions make me feel better	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							
The group helps me to relate to others in a deeper way	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							
Having <i>Shared Reading</i> in my life supports me through difficult times	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							
I’ve made new friends within the group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7							

Please write below **three words** that describe **how you feel** in the *Shared Reading* group:

1. 2. 3.

What has *Shared Reading* and attending this group done for you? Has it had any impact on your wider life?

Do you have more to say? Talk to your Reader Leader if you’re interested in sharing your Reader Story.

Do you have any suggestions for how we could make these *Shared Reading* groups better?

Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about what you think of *Shared Reading* / the group you attend?

What you’ve written on this form will help us to understand the impact of *Shared Reading*. We will use the information you’ve provided here to inform our commissioners and the wider public about the benefits of our work. This form is completely anonymous.

Thank you for completing this form

The data we collect is stored securely in line with GDPR and The Reader’s Data Protection Policy, both of which are available on request. All queries should be directed to:

The Data Compliance Manager, The Reader, Mansion House, Calderstones Park, Liverpool, L18 3JB  
Tel: 0151 729 2200 Email: [data@thereader.org.uk](mailto:data@thereader.org.uk)

Office use only - PLEASE LEAVE BLANK

© The Reader 2018

Group:  
Facilitator / Evaluator:  
Date form completed: DD/MM/YYYY  
Inputted on: DD/MM/YYYY

GEN/180904\_snapshot

APPENDIX B - DATA SUMMARIES

Standard group member evaluation – who responded?

Gender	Responses	%
Male	357	24%
Female	1102	73%
Other	0	0%
No response	47	3%
Total	1506	100%

Year of birth (age in 2019)	Responses	%
1999-2008 (10-20)	9	1%
1989-1998 (20-30)	21	1%
1979-1988 (30-40)	63	4%
1969-1978 (40-50)	88	6%
1959-1968 (50-60)	195	13%
1949-1958 (60-70)	401	27%
1939-1948 (70-80)	392	26%
1929-1938 (80-90)	183	12%
1919-1928 (90-100)	45	3%
No response	109	7%
Total	1506	100%

How long have you been attending a Shared Reading group?	Responses: national	%	Responses: SRNW	%
This is my first time	54	4%	14	2%
Less than a month	46	3%	16	3%
1-3 months	178	12%	52	9%
4-6 months	156	10%	57	9%
7-12 months	192	13%	74	12%
More than a year	850	56%	385	64%
No response	30	2%	7	1%
Total	1506	100%	605	100%

How many times in the past week did you go to a meeting of a club, religious group, or other group that you belong to (other than work)?	Responses	% Total	% of those who responded
0	218	14%	16%
1	381	25%	28%
2	308	20%	23%
3+	436	29%	32%
No response	163	11%	-
Total	1506	100%	100%

How many times in the past week did you spend time with someone who does not live with you?	Responses	% Total	% of those who responded
0	81	5%	6%
1	159	11%	12%
2	226	15%	17%
3+	856	57%	65%
No response	184	12%	-
Total	1506	100%	100%

Outcomes - quantitative

	% Agree*	Population size	% non-response rate
I look forward to the group as an important event in my week	94%	1433	5%
The reading sessions make me feel better	91%	1408	7%
I've made new friends within the group	84%	1407	7%
The group helps me to relate to others in a deeper way	82%	1383	8%
What we read in the group helps me to understand myself better	73%	1377	9%
I've grown more confident since joining the group	72%	1384	8%
Having Shared Reading in my life supports me through difficult times	70%	1348	10%

\*Agreement classified as a score of 5 or more on a scale of 1-7

Groupings (+ive items)	Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?	Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?	Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?	Groupings (-ive item)	Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?
Low (0-4)	4.55% 11.84% 13.65%	3.63% 11.84% 9.70%	8.82% 14.29% 15.12%	Very low (0-1)	41.78% 25.97% 26.98%
Medium (5-6)	13.88% 25.00% 19.68%	12.08% 22.27% 16.77%	16.50% 27.27% 18.15%	Low (2-3)	22.43% 27.27% 24.95%
High (7-8)	51.55% 43.42% 39.16%	47.41% 32.89% 39.39%	40.10% 32.47% 38.51%	Medium (4-5)	15.43% 22.08% 18.86%
Very High (9-10)	30.03% 19.74% 27.51%	36.87% 32.89% 34.14%	34.58% 25.97% 28.23%	High (6-10)	20.35% 24.68% 29.21%

Headline estimates of personal well-being from the Annual Population Survey (APS): by counties, local and unitary authorities, year ending March 2012 to year ending March 2018 (threshold figures 2017/18) – Office of National Statistics, Sept 26 2018

Shared Reading North West respondents attending for 3 months or less at point of evaluation (n=76-77, depending on item)

Shared Reading North West respondents attending for 4 months or more at point of evaluation (n=493-498, depending on item)

APPENDIX C - STRUCTURE FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Pre-recording briefing

Focus group content:

- Why did people decide to come to the group? (How did you hear about it?)
- Was the group what you expected? (How so/not?)
- What do you get out of taking part in Shared Reading?
- Does it have any impact on life outside the group? (Have you noticed any changes in yourself since taking part?)
- How is Shared Reading different to other groups you may attend?
- Is there anything you've read that has really 'spoken to you' personally? What impact has it had?
- Final thoughts – things you haven't had a chance to say

Thanks and end.

APPENDIX D - FOCUS GROUPS: EMERGING THEMES

Who comes to our groups?

Shared Reading groups attract readers and non-readers alike. Those taking part in the focus groups reported a variety of past experiences and attitudes towards reading.

*I first heard about [Shared Reading] during Fresher's Week at the School of English at Liverpool ... but I then had a long break and, after I got my degree, I went to a lifelong learning at Mount Pleasant and [the tutor] said 'ooh when you've done this, you need to get involved'... (4, Group B)*

*I had a terrible education, you know, I left school at fifteen. And they never really taught you because you were supposed to become a wife and a mother. [Another group member says: Well that's the beauty of a group like this. You don't have to have had the education behind you.] I've always read because I was an only child until the age of ten. (6, Group B)*

*I came because of a notice. I was a very sickly child and reading became very, very important to me. I'd just had a long spell in hospital in a ward where we didn't have a television or a radio and I just couldn't sit and look at look at the four walls so everyone was bringing me books in to read and that kept me sane. (2, Group B)*

Some group members spoke of positive past experiences of reading, but mentioned other factors in their lives as driving their decision to give Shared Reading a go or to keep coming:

*I'm trying to make reading great again for me because I can write and stuff ... but I find it hard to focus on other people's work ... I'm trying to get my concentration back again. Because I've got bipolar disorder, you see. (2, Group A)*

*It was on the notice board in the block of flats where I live in and my daughter kept on at me 'go on mum, go and meet some people' because I was new to the area so I just started going along [...] The first time I came, we had a couple of poems ... I said I prefer Winne the Pooh because reading to the kids and the grandkids, you know. (1, Group B)*

Reducing social isolation

For some participants, the social aspect of attending the group is an important part of their Shared Reading experience:

*I don't go out very much. I'm quite solitary really but I try to make the effort to come here when I can and when I do, when I go back home I feel so much better. I feel almost like I've accomplished something. (7, Group B)*

*It's a social thing for me because I'm not from Liverpool and I don't make friends easily and I don't connect that well. I've got no family, I've got no support, you know, I don't have much support in my life so this is like a big thing... I know I'm young, relatively young, it doesn't matter. You can still be lonely when you're young. I'm not a student, I'm not working so I haven't got that kind of connectivity so at the moment this is dead important to me and is part of the structure of my week. (2, Group A)*

Some group members had started attending more than one group:

[Interviewer: It sounds like you've been in several of the groups then?] *Yeah I've been to loads. (2, Group A)*

*I go to several different of these Shared Reading groups and every single one is different because it's different people, different participants, different facilitators. Every single one, even the same regular group, can be different each week depending on who's there and what's happening in the story. (3, Group B)*

Group members' previous experiences of literature had associated reading with a sense of being alone or isolated:

*I've always read because I was an only child until the age of ten. (6, Group B)*

*I'd just had a long spell in hospital in a ward where we didn't have a television or a radio and I just couldn't sit and look at look at the four walls... (2, Group B)*

However, participants used the focus group to reflect on how Shared Reading transformed what might otherwise be considered a solitary activity into a communal experience:

*When you do a Shared Reading, someone will suddenly say something and I'll think 'oh, that's a totally different way of seeing it' and I get much more out of it that way so it's not so much an inner dialogue, it's more of a communal thing. I love seeing it through different people's eyes, through different people's experiences. It helps you connect. (Reader Leader, Group A)*

*It's lovely to get an opportunity as well to use your voice and to read some literature as well. You'd never do that when you read a book at home very quietly but to hear people saying the words it's just lovely. (3, Group B)*

*When you're a writer, you always write in the vacuum all the time ... you're just writing in this imagination which is just vast but it's silent and it's still and it's within. But to be with this [gestures at group], it's great for me. (2, Group A)*

Some commented on how the model of Shared Reading made reading accessible in ways that private reading is not:

*I come with someone who's visually impaired so it's lovely for her to be able to hear stories shared out loud. (3, Group B)*

*I used to be an avid reader but due to sudden illness and that, I find it quite difficult to concentrate sometimes so short stories are ideal (7, Group B)*

## Reservations about what is read

Responses to what was read in the groups were mixed, and group members reflected on the difficulty of joining the group to begin with, often linked to feelings of inadequacy:

*I didn't think it was for me when I first came. [Another group member asks: Because ... you didn't like a couple of the stories or the poems?] I suppose and I felt inferior. (6, Group B)*

*The first time I came, we had a couple of poems and I didn't like them and I thought they'll think I'm stupid. (1, Group B)*

One Reader Leader reflected on their initial reservations about taking part, and how the experience itself, coming at a difficult time in their life, had motivated them to give something back.

*... I owe a lot to The Reader myself. I lost my business, I joined a reading group ... I'd never been to a reading group before. I didn't think whether it was going to be for me or not and I loved it. I loved it so much that afterwards, I was so grateful for what I got out of it. That's why I decided to volunteer and give something back which is what I've done. I will carry on doing it even if I have to drag people from the streets. (Reader Leader, Group A)*

## Discussion

These two groups, randomly selected from those established during the Shared Reading North West project, show how individual community groups reach a diverse range of people from a variety of backgrounds, including members who self-identify as being solitary or as having a significant health condition.

When trying to reach the people who might most benefit from Shared Reading, The Reader typically tends to underplay the role great literature plays in the Shared Reading model, focusing primarily on promoting the social benefits of taking part; however most of the group members interviewed during the focus groups had some previous positive relationship with reading. For some, Shared Reading had enabled them to continue enjoying literature despite health barriers that had impacted their ability to read independently; for others Shared Reading provided new insights and ways of meeting with others that added something to their own personal reading or social circle, or addressed a perceived lack in other areas of their lives. For some participants the literature – or expectations around what a Shared Reading group might be – created an initial feeling that 'this isn't for me'. However, those people had continued attending, becoming regular members of their group – one even becoming a Reader Leader.

These findings pose questions about how The Reader can best reach those who could most benefit from taking part in Shared Reading groups in order to maximize the impact of our work in the future. A previously established love of reading does not preclude someone from falling ill or being at risk of social isolation, and might be the means by which someone who is unlikely to join a social group feels empowered to do so; however for some the barrier of 'great literature' is what might hold them back from venturing further into the model.



