THE READING AGENCY

Why Reading Matters

a local authority toolkit

The Reading Agency
December 2025

Introduction

Reading has a proven power to spark personal and social change by improving individual and collective outcomes. Reading is creative and empowering. It underpins the skills we need for learning and digital inclusion. It has a demonstrated ability to support personal wellbeing, social connections and community cohesion. Substantial evidence also links reading to improved health outcomes and increased cultural and economic participation.

While barriers to reading persist for some groups, it remains one of the UK's most accessible and widely practiced cultural activities, embedded within local communities through public libraries. Reading can engage large and diverse audiences at relatively low cost while delivering significant social value. It is an established and effective means of addressing inequality and social division, enabling individuals to develop skills, confidence and connections that support positive participation in their communities and in wider society.

We are in the midst of an environment where local authorities are facing unprecedented pressures, driven by rising costs and constrained investment in services, coupled with growing needs to deliver a wide range of community outcomes. Public libraries are well-positioned to deliver these goals through reading-related activity accessible to all.

Developed with support from Arts Council England, this toolkit is designed to help position libraries centrally within the National Year of Reading and support fundraising and advocacy to amplify the library reading offer. It aims to give public libraries the language and tools to show how reading delivers against key local authority priorities such as health and wellbeing, community understanding and integration, employment, loneliness reduction, and skills and learning; positioning libraries' work with reading not just within the service itself but as a tool for delivering priority outcomes for the whole local authority.

How to use this toolkit

With the upcoming nationwide focus on reading, the National Year of Reading offers a great opportunity for libraries to make the case for their work with reading and the impact it can make to deliver local authority priorities and better lives for local people and communities. Use this toolkit and the evidence it contains to **start some new conversations**, **spotlight your work** and **unlock new partnerships and resources**.

The first section offers guidance on applying the evidence around the need for and power of reading to your local context. The data and evidence is then split into five sections, each speaking to a broad set of priorities:

1. Language, literacy and learning

2. Employment and economic growth

3. Health and wellbeing

4. Belonging and connections

5. A fairer world

Each of these sections provides specific statistics positioning the positive impact of reading on local authority priorities, as well as examples of the library offer that help deliver these outcomes. The data and key messages can be used alongside local evidence to support conversations with local Council and community partners, helping to make the case for reading in language that speaks directly to their aims and objectives.

The email templates are designed as flexible advocacy tools that libraries can adapt and use with decision-makers, partners and budget-holders to show how reading supports shared priorities beyond the library service itself. They should be tailored to the audience and context, used to open conversations, and followed up with local examples or opportunities for collaboration rather than treated as one-off communications.

The final sections of the toolkit focus on turning evidence into action, with guidance on evaluating activity, writing case studies and accessing further resources to support you to build impactful local partnerships.

Definitions

This toolkit primarily refers to the outcomes of reading that is done by choice, also known as 'reading for pleasure', 'volitional reading', or 'reading for fun'. It is reading that takes place voluntarily; the reader chooses what or when to read. It includes reading fiction, non-fiction, digital materials, print materials, picture books, comics, graphic novels, newspapers, magazines, reading aloud, listening to audiobooks, and more.

Applying the evidence: making the case locally

Before you decide how to communicate, you need to think about why you are reaching out to that particular audience.

Start with questions like…

- **Who is the evidence for?**
- **What do you want them to know?**
- **What do you already know?**
- **What do you need to find out?**
- **What do you need from them – what's your call to action?**
- **How will you go about asking?**

Here are six easy ways you can adapt your messaging to reflect local data and priorities:

1. Reference specific priorities and strategies that are already in place locally (e.g., Council Business Plan, Education Strategy, Economic Growth Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy).

2. Replace national figures with your own local or regional evidence of need.

3. Be selective in the data you choose. Focus on areas where need is widely acknowledged and focused on locally, for example, early years and school readiness, supporting mental health, or increasing digital inclusion.

4. Emphasise place-based impact. Give examples of how your libraries are responding to local circumstances and communities.

5. Reference frontline insights and examples alongside the data. Show the human side of the work you do to support reading.
   - "Our libraries are often the first point of support for adults seeking help with reading and access to information. For example…"

6. Align the outcomes to your audience, adjusting the evidence depending on who you're making the case to. For example:
   - For education partners: Talk about school readiness, attainment, transitions
   - For businesses: Talk about skills, productivity, workforce development
   - For health partners: Talk about health literacy, prevention, reduced demand

Language, literacy and learning

This broad priority area links in with local objectives such as improving outcomes for children in the early years, especially speech and language development; improving life chances for all children, including the most vulnerable families; improving social care and SEND outcomes; reducing the attainment gap; improving literacy for all ages; supporting life skills, critical thinking and personal growth.

The evidence in this section might be most relevant for reaching out to partners from Early Years and Family Services, Children's Services, Children's Social Care, Education Services or School Improvement Services, Youth Services, Adult Skills and Education or Adult Community Learning, ESOL provision, Digital Inclusion teams, Leisure, Culture and Community Development, and Equalities and Inclusion teams.

The need
- **Literacy and language development are the areas in most urgent need of improvement** for early years children (DfE, 2025).
  - 182,000 five-year-olds (30%) did not achieve the expected level of literacy in 2023/24.
  - 126,000 five-year-olds – 21% of the cohort – did not reach the expected level in communication and language.
- **One in four children hasn't reached the expected level of reading by the age of 11.** Many of these children will struggle to keep up at secondary school, as students are less able to learn other curricula if they do not develop sufficient reading skills by the middle of primary school (DfE, 2016, DfE, 2025).
- **More than 1 in 5 15-year-olds across the UK do not have a minimum level of literacy proficiency**: 20% in England and Scotland, 22% in Northern Ireland and 29% in Wales (PISA, 2022).
- **Over 1 in 6 adults (18%) struggles to read unfamiliar text** (OECD, DfE, 2024). This could cause problems such as not being able to fill in a job application or read a letter from the doctor or their children's school.
- **Adults who don't read are less likely to read with their children, creating an intergenerational cycle of poor literacy.**
- **1 in 5 adults have a learning difficulty, disability or personal circumstances that may affect their reading skills and confidence** (ONS, 2021). Adults who consider themselves as having a learning difference are over 200% more likely to say that reading makes them feel overwhelmed (Spaulding et al., 2025).
- **Prisoners have much lower levels of literacy than the general population.** 2 in 3 adult prisoners (65%) struggle with reading unfamiliar text (MoJ, 2024), compared to around 18% of adults overall. A lack of reading skills limits prisoners' ability to navigate life within and after prison.

Language, literacy and learning

The difference reading makes

Early years, children and young people

- **Reading is the single strongest factor in determining a child's future life chances – more than their socioeconomic background or parents' level of education** (OECD, 2021).
- **Shared reading supports children's early development.** It provides multisensory input linked to stronger brain activation in language, attention, memory, and executive function (BookTrust, 2025).
- **Reading at home and reading together is essential to children's development**, increasing security and building imagination and empathy (BookTrust, 2025)
- **Reading for pleasure in later childhood and adolescence reinforces early gains** by supporting higher-order comprehension, reasoning, problem-solving, and metacognitive skills (BookTrust, 2025).
- **Reading early in childhood is linked to better cognitive performance in adolescence** (Sun, et al., 2023).
- **Both early shared reading and independent reading for pleasure are linked to stronger academic outcomes** for children and young people across multiple subjects including vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and numeracy (BookTrust, 2025; PISA, 2018; 2021).

Lifelong learning

- **Adults who frequently read for pleasure score more highly on skills such as vocabulary**. The who read every day at 42 have an advantage of 4 percentage points in their vocabulary over those who do not read as frequently (Sullivan & Brown, 2015).
- **Literacy support can help prevent prisoners returning to prison**. A large-scale study of prison records in the United States found that prisoners who received literacy help had just a 16% chance of returning to prison, in contrast to a 70% chance for those who had not received help (Dewan, 2016).
- **Reading for pleasure can increase reading skills at a greater rate than through formal literacy lessons** (Hilhorst, et al., 2018). For less confident readers, providing a targeted route into reading – using short, accessible and adult-focused texts – has a positive impact on reading habits and helps to develop skills and confidence over time.
- **Reading supports informal learning, leading to growth and new opportunities**. Almost 1 in 4 16-24 year-olds (23%) say that reading has helped them learn a new skill and (18%) say reading has helped them start a new career or business (The Reading Agency, 2024).

In three key messages…

- Strong reading skills start early. Sharing stories helps children develop language, attention, memory and confidence – and sets the foundation for success at school and beyond. Libraries support families to make reading part of everyday life.
- Reading for pleasure is one of the most powerful ways to support learning. Children and young people who read regularly build stronger comprehension, problem-solving and skills across subjects. Libraries create space and opportunity for reading to thrive.
- Reading isn't just for school. For adults, reading builds confidence, skills and opportunities, supporting everything from learning to family life. Libraries offer inclusive, welcoming routes into reading at every stage of life.

Email template

Subject: Strengthening reading to improve outcomes across [your community]

Dear [Name],

I am writing to highlight the role reading plays in addressing several shared priorities across our community, from early years development and educational attainment to workforce readiness, health, and social inclusion.

Evidence shows that too many children are starting school without secure communication skills, [X% using your local data] do not reach expected reading levels by age 11, and literacy challenges persist into adulthood. These challenges are not confined to [Council service, e.g., Education Services or Adult Community Learning], they have direct implications for economic growth, community wellbeing and public services more broadly.

Reading is one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways to address these issues. Shared reading in the early years supports brain development and school readiness; reading for pleasure strengthens children's attainment across all subjects. Having adults in children's lives who act as reading role models can help break intergenerational cycles of low literacy.

Libraries are uniquely placed to deliver this impact. As trusted, accessible community spaces, we connect children, families and adults with reading opportunities that are inclusive, evidence-led and aligned to local priorities. With the right support and collaboration, libraries can scale this work and reach those who benefit most.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how we might work together during the National Year of Reading to strengthen reading outcomes and deliver shared value for our community.

Kind regards,

Examples of the library offer

Activities delivering against this priority might fall within the Reading or Information and Digital Universal Library Offers (Libraries Connected), or The Children's Promise (Libraries Rising). For example:

- Early years offers such as Baby Rhyme Time or Bounce and Rhyme, BookTrust's Bookstart, Storytime sessions for under-5s
- Shared children's programmes such as the Summer Reading Challenge; Lego, STEM or coding clubs; Early Reader Clubs; reading, arts and crafts clubs; Chatterbooks reading groups
- Support for less-confident adult readers through programmes like Read Easy, Quick Reads, Reading Ahead and adult literacy or ESOL classes
- Book clubs, reading groups and author events for those who want to expand their reading journey
- National, local and community celebration events in libraries, such as National Storytelling Week, British Science Week, Local and Community History Month, National Crime Reading Month, National Poetry Day and more

Employment and economic growth

This broad priority area links in with local objectives such as economic productivity and growth, improving employment opportunities, growing the economy, developing a flexible and productive workforce, tackling the rising cost of living, improving social mobility, supporting people impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, strengthening communities, improving wellbeing and increasing accessibility.

The evidence in this section might be most relevant for reaching out to partners from Employment and Skills Services, Economic Development and Regeneration teams, Adult Skills and Education or Adult Community Learning, Children's Services, Education Services or School Improvement Services, Youth Services, Housing Services, Business Support and Enterprise teams, Digital Inclusion teams, Communities and Partnerships teams, and Migration, Refugee and Integration Services.

The need

- **Low levels of literacy cost the UK an estimated £81 billion through lost earnings, and increased education and welfare spending** (World Literacy Foundation, 2018).
- **Poor literacy in early years children is estimated to cost £7,800 per child** on average over their lifetime, or around £830 million over the lifetimes of each year group of five-year-olds (Rodriguez Cabrera, et al., 2024).
- **People with poor literacy skills are more than 2x as likely to be unemployed.** They are also less likely to be satisfied with their job, feel secure in their job and have good promotion opportunities (Glick, 2023)
- **People with poor reading skills earn 12% less** than those with good reading skills (Hilhorst, et al., 2018).
- **Employers are looking for social and emotional skills as much as qualifications.** 94% of employers say that in the workplace, social and emotional skills are as important as academic qualifications (Cullinane and Montacute, 2017).

Employment and economic growth

The difference reading makes

The economy

- **Getting children to frequently read for pleasure is estimated to provide a boost of £4.6 billion annually to the UK economy.** The economic benefit of all children reading for pleasure almost or every day has been estimated to provide an annual boost of £4.6 billion (British Land, 2021).

- **For each school year group with poor literacy rates, the government loses the equivalent of £270 million.** This is made up of £50 million in increased education and welfare spending and £220 million in lower tax take (Rodriguez Cabrera, et al., 2024).

- **Loneliness reduction activities in libraries, such as book clubs, generated an estimated £913,000 each year in health, productivity and wellbeing value** across just six library services, meaning their true savings may be much greater (Shared Intelligence, 2025).

- **Children's reading programmes in libraries show a social value of £279 per participant.** Two-thirds of the economic benefit is received by taxpayers and one-third goes to families (UEA, 2024).

Employment

- **Children who read for pleasure are estimated to have earn £57,500 more over their lifetimes** (British Land, 2021).

- **Reading for pleasure impacts future employment opportunities.** Children and teenagers who read for pleasure are more likely to secure managerial or professional jobs in later life (Taylor, 2011).

- **Reading is associated with better career opportunities.** Adults who read are more likely to be satisfied with their job, feel secure in their job and have good promotion opportunities (Glick, 2023)

- **There is a wage gap as a cost of low literacy.** There is an average wage gap of 7.1% between the average wage and the average wage of workers with very low literacy skills. This is equivalent to £1,528, but as high as £2,207 in some UK regions (Kerr, 2023).

In three key messages…

- Reading shapes futures. Children who read for pleasure build the skills that can lead to higher earnings, better jobs and greater opportunities in adulthood. Libraries help children take that first step.
- Reading opens doors. Adults who read regularly are more confident, adaptable and better placed to progress in their careers. Libraries provide inclusive, supportive spaces for building these essential skills at any age.
- Reading fuels local growth. Children who read for pleasure are more likely to earn higher salaries and secure professional jobs. Strong literacy in adulthood reduces future costs for education and welfare while boosting local productivity. Libraries help our community thrive by connecting people of all ages with reading opportunities.

Email template

Subject: Supporting employment and economic growth through reading

Dear [Name],

I am writing to highlight the role reading plays in strengthening employment outcomes and long-term economic growth, priorities we share across [your community].

Low levels of literacy continue to have a significant impact on individuals and the wider economy. Poor reading skills are closely linked to lower earnings and higher unemployment, carrying long-term costs for public services, employers and local economies.

Evidence shows that reading for pleasure – also known as reading by choice or reading for enjoyment – makes a measurable difference. Children and young people who develop strong reading habits are more likely to achieve higher earnings and access professional and managerial roles later in life. At a systems level, improved literacy reduces pressure on education and welfare budgets and supports a stronger tax base. For adults, reading underpins confidence, adaptability and progression in the workplace.

Libraries are well placed to contribute to these outcomes. As accessible, trusted spaces, libraries support early literacy, foster reading for pleasure across the life course and provide inclusive routes for adults to build skills and confidence. This work complements efforts to improve employability, productivity and economic participation across the local area.

I would welcome the opportunity to explore how we can work together during the National Year of Reading to strengthen reading outcomes as part of a joined-up approach to economic growth.

Kind regards,

Examples of the library offer

Activities delivering against this priority might fall within the Reading or Information and Digital Universal Library Offers (Libraries Connected), or The Children's Promise (Libraries Rising). For example:

- Early years offers such as Baby Rhyme Time or Bounce and Rhyme, BookTrust's Bookstart, Storytime sessions for under-5s
- Shared children's programmes such as the Summer Reading Challenge; Lego, STEM or coding clubs and Maker Spaces
- Support for less-confident adult readers through programmes like Read Easy, Quick Reads, Reading Ahead and adult literacy or ESOL classes
- Support for entrepreneurs and career development such as Business & IP Centres or information on financial literacy
- Reading-related support around employability, including Job Clubs, CV or interview support
- Digital skills and digital inclusion groups, enabling access to reading in multiple formats
- Opportunities for reading-related youth volunteering

Health and wellbeing

This broad priority area links in with local objectives such as supporting mental health, improving health and wellbeing for children and families, improving wellbeing, increasing physical activity, improving lifestyle health, improving health literacy, dementia support, social prescribing, supporting life skills, reducing isolation and loneliness, improving health and care services and increasing access to services.

The evidence in this section might be most relevant for reaching out to partners from Public Health, Adult Social Care, Children's and Family Services, Health Improvement or Health Promotion teams, Integrated Care Boards, Social Prescribing teams, Health and Social Care, Housing Services, Youth Services, Commissioning and Strategic Planning, Dementia teams, Community and Voluntary Sector Partnerships, and Leisure, Culture and Community Development.

The need

- **1 in 5 adults in the UK are living with a common mental health problem** (Mind, 2025).
- **Poor mental health is estimated to cost the UK £300 billion per year** – double the annual NHS budget (Mind, 2025).
- **A third of those accessing support from their GP said it didn't meet their needs**, and over 1 in 3 reported a deterioration in their mental health while waiting for an appointment with their GP or a voluntary/third sector organisation (Mind, 2025).
- **Mental health problems are common, and rising in children and young people**, with 1 in 5 people aged 8-25 reported living with a probable mental health problem (Mind, 2025).
- **Children with reading difficulties are at greater risk of developing mental health problems later in life**, including depression, anxiety, behavioural problems, anger and aggression (Boyes, et al., 2016).
- **A global systematic review found a significant association between literacy and mental health**. People with lower literacy had greater mental health difficulties (Hunn, et al., 2023).
- **Adults with poor literacy skills are 1.5-3 times more likely to have adverse health outcomes** (Dewalt, et al., 2004).
- **Low literacy is associated with shorter life expectancy** (Gilbert, et al., 2018).
- **There are more than 980,000 people living with dementia in the UK**, a number expected to rise to 1.4 million people by 2040 (Carnall Farrar and Alzheimer's Society, 2024). 1 in 3 people will care for someone with dementia in their lifetime (NHS, 2023).
- **Loneliness, social isolation and low cognitive reserve** – meaning how much our brains need to work each day – **are all linked to increased risk of dementia** (Guarnera, et al., 2023; Liu, et al., 2024).

Health and wellbeing

The difference reading makes

Mental health

- **Libraries deliver a range of evidence-based community health interventions to support health and wellbeing**, helping mitigate against the expected increased strain on the health care system (Philbin, et al., 2019).
- **Reading for pleasure has been linked to a wide range of mental health benefits.** Reading for pleasure have been linked to feelings of positivity, self-understanding, empathic relations, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and connectedness (Sirisena, et al., 2025).
- **Regular readers report fewer feelings of stress and depression than non-readers** (Billington, 2015). Compared to non-readers, regular readers are 32% more likely say they don't feel anxious or depressed (Spaulding, et al. 2025).
- **Reading of any kind can increase health literacy, which can help support the understanding and management of health and wellbeing.** Reading books, newspapers, magazines, websites, letters, notes and emails is shown to maintain or improve health-literacy rates (Dinh and Bonner, 2023).
- **Regular reading is associated with higher self-esteem and greater resilience.** Adults who read for just 30 minutes a week are more likely to report higher self-esteem and a greater ability to cope with difficult situations (Billington, 2015).
- **Regular reading can support positive mental health and better sleeping patterns.** Compared to non-readers, regular readers are 58% more likely to report feeling generally happy, 51% more likely to report finding it easy to relax and 45% more likely to report sleeping well (Spaulding, et al. 2025).

Health management, including dementia

- **Libraries and reading have been shown to support the self-management journey** (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, 2018).
- **Reading enables people to better understand and manage their health through health information, book-based therapy and shared stories that provide support and combat stigma** (Hilhorst et al., 2018).
- **Reading just six minutes a day can reduce stress levels by 60% by reducing heart rate, easing muscle tension and altering state of mind**. Reading is more effective at reducing stress than music, drinking a cup of tea, going for a walk or playing video games (Lewis, University of Sussex, 2009).

Health and wellbeing

- **Engaging in reading can reduce the risk of dementia.** A representative population-level study found that engaging in a greater number of reading activities and hobbies, such as reading books, magazines, and newspapers, and spending a greater amount of time each week engaged in these activities resulted in a lower risk of incident (new diagnoses of) dementia (Hughes, et al., 2010).
- **Reading can help alleviate the symptoms of dementia.** Reading, through individual reading, reading groups, and bibliotherapy, can lead to a significant reduction in dementia symptom severity (Hilhorst et al., 2018).

Wellbeing
- **Reading can reduce stress and increases concentration.** Neurological research shows that just 5 minutes of reading can reduce stress by nearly 20% and improve concentration and focus by as much as 11%. (The Queen's Reading Room, 2025)
- **Reading for enjoyment is consistently associated with better mental wellbeing in adults.** Adults who consider themselves regular readers are more likely to report feeling happy, finding it easy to relax, and sleeping well, and are less likely to report feeling depressed or anxious (The Reading Agency, 2024; Spaulding, et al., 2025).
- **Shared reading strengthens the parent-child relationship.** Family reading supports children to bond with their caregivers and experience better mental wellbeing. It also has a positive impact on parent/caregiver mood, warmth, and sensitivity, and reduces feelings of stress (BookTrust, 2025).
- **Parents and children value the wellbeing benefits of reading.** The most common motivation for reading among children aged 8-18 is to relax (Clark, et al., 2025).
- **Reading in childhood is linked to higher mental wellbeing and resilience in adolescence** (Sun, et al., 2023).
- **Reading is associated with positive social behaviour and fewer emotional difficulties in children.** Analysis of the Millenium Cohort Study found that children who regularly read for pleasure at age 7 were less likely to show hyperactivity or inattention by age 11 compared to those who rarely read (Mak & Fancourt, 2020).
- **Reading regularly in childhood is linked to better sleep, reduced attention problems and lower screen time** (Sun, et al., 2023).

In three key messages…

- Reading reduces stress and improves focus. Reading for pleasure helps adults and children feel happier and more relaxed. Libraries make it easy to build these habits at any age.
- Shared reading strengthens bonds and boosts wellbeing. Reading together helps children develop emotionally and reduces stress for caregivers. Libraries provide spaces and resources to make family reading a part of everyday life.
- Reading protects the mind. Regular engagement with reading material can lower the risk of dementia and help those living with it manage symptoms. Libraries offer inclusive activities and reading groups to support cognitive health across the lifespan.

Email template

Subject: Supporting [your community's] health and wellbeing through reading

Dear [Name],

Il am writing to highlight the role reading plays in improving health and wellbeing, a priority that touches individuals and our wider community.

Mental health challenges are rising across all ages, with many people experiencing delays or gaps in support. Low literacy can exacerbate these challenges, and adults and children with reading difficulties are at higher risk of poor mental and physical health outcomes. Dementia and cognitive decline also represent growing pressures for individuals, families, and health services in the coming decades.

Evidence shows that reading supports wellbeing, reduces stress and strengthens social and emotional connections. For children, shared reading supports bonding and emotional development. For adults, regular reading is linked to fewer feelings of stress and depression and improved health literacy. For older adults and people living with dementia, reading activities can mitigate symptoms, maintain cognitive function and improve quality of life.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to deliver these benefits. Through inclusive reading activities and accessible resources, libraries help people of all ages engage with reading in ways that support mental health and promote lifelong wellbeing.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how we might work together during the National Year of Reading to harness reading as a tool for health and wellbeing across our community.

Kind regards,

Heath and wellbeing

Examples of the library offer

Activities delivering against this priority might fall within the Health and Wellbeing Universal Library Offers (Libraries Connected), or the Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise (Share the Vision) and The Children's Promise (Libraries Rising). For example:

- Reading Well: Books on Prescription collections (Reading Well for children, Reading Well for teens, Reading Well for families, Reading Well for mental health, Reading Well for dementia)
- Bibliotherapy initiatives or other signposting to health information, including information sessions with local health providers or community health partners
- Book clubs and reading groups, bringing people together around reading
- Reminiscence groups and dementia-friendly reading activities, including Dementia Friendly Libraries
- Physical wellbeing activities involving reading, such as walking groups or exercise
- Health equipment lending services, for example, blood pressure monitors or activity trackers alongside related reading or health information
- Wellbeing bags or self-care kits including reading materials
- National, local and community celebration events in libraries, such as Children's Mental Health Week, Dementia Action Week, Carers Week, Mental Health Awareness Week and more
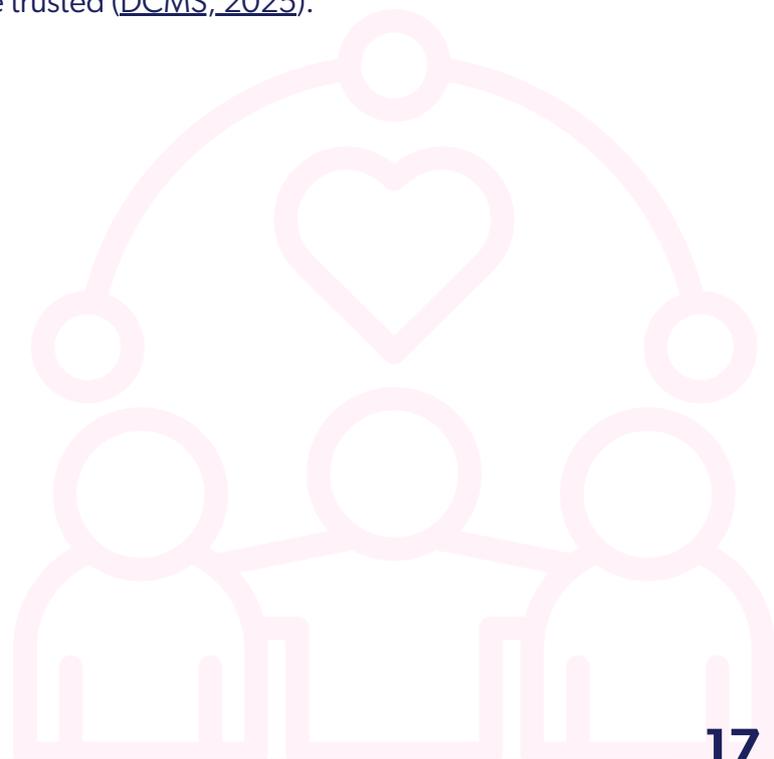
Belonging and connections

This broad priority area links in with local objectives such as improving wellbeing, reducing isolation and loneliness, social prescribing, dementia support, encouraging cultural enrichment, strengthening communities, making our communities safer, improving social care outcomes, connectivity, inclusion and supporting life skills and personal growth.

The evidence in this section might be most relevant for reaching out to partners from Public Health, Adult Social Care, Children's and Family Services, Health Improvement or Health Promotion teams, Integrated Care Boards, Social Prescribing teams, Health and Social Care, Housing Services, Youth Services, Commissioning and Strategic Planning, Dementia teams, Community and Voluntary Sector Partnerships, and Leisure, Culture and Community Development.

The need

- **8% of adults report feeling lonely 'always or often', rising to 10% of 16-24s.** (DCMS, 2024)
- **Loneliness can cause serious physical harm,** and research has found it to be as detrimental as obesity or smoking. (DHSC, 2018)
- **Some groups are at higher risk of loneliness**. People who live alone, are disabled or in poor health are among those at increased risk of feeling lonely more often (ONS, 2018).
- **Over half of young mothers in the UK say they have become lonely since having a child**. 57% of young mothers say they have become lonely since becoming a mother and almost 20% reported always feeling lonely (Hilhorst et al., 2018).
- **Feeling of belonging to local area and trust of neighbours is low in the UK**. Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) adults in the UK say they don't feel they belong to their neighbourhood, and over a quarter (27%) of people in the UK think that only a few, or no people in their neighbourhood can be trusted (DCMS, 2025).

Belonging and connections

The difference reading makes

Increased social connections and reduced loneliness

- **Reading frequently as a child is linked to positive social behaviours in teenage years**. Daily reading in childhood is independently associated with better behavioural adjustment at the onset of adolescence, including higher prosocial behaviour (Mak & Fancourt, 2020).
- **Regular reading is linked with reduced levels of loneliness**. Compared to non-readers, regular readers are 25% more likely to say they don't feel lonely (Spaulding, et al. 2025).
- **Neuroscience research shows that reading fiction can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness** (The Queen's Reading Room, 2025).
- **Reading groups can provide a route out of social isolation for young mothers**. Taking part in library activities involving books, songs, rhymes, and poetry has been found to offer positive mental health benefits to mothers (Hilhorst et al., 2018).
- **Reading fosters social connections**. Almost 1 in 4 regular readers (23%) say that reading helps them feel connected to other people (The Reading Agency, 2024).
- **Reading groups can support wellbeing and feelings of community.** Participation in shared reading groups is linked to enhanced relaxation, calmness, concentration, quality of life, confidence and self-esteem, as well as feelings of shared community and common purpose (Milani, et al., 2025).

Community cohesion

- **Reading is linked to feelings of community belonging and trust.** Higher reading skills are associated with a range of positive societal benefits, including having a stronger sense of belonging to society and being more likely to trust others (OECD, 2013).
- **A reading community is a cohesive community.** Compared to non-readers, regular readers are 86% more likely to report feeling a sense of belonging to their community (Spaulding, et al., 2025).
- **Reading, particularly fiction, is linked to stronger empathy and social understanding across the lifespan:** in children (BookTrust, 2025), adolescents (Currie et al., 2025; van der Kleij et al. 2022) and adults (Jackson, 2022).
- **Reading ability can help non-native speakers become more included in communities and society.** Evidence reviews have found that fluid reading and writing ability helps non-native speakers become more included in the communities and wider society of their new homes (Hilhorst et al., 2018)

Belonging and connections

In three key messages…

- Reading brings people together. Regular readers are more likely to feel connected to others and less likely to feel lonely. Libraries create welcoming spaces where reading becomes a shared experience.
- A strong reading culture supports strong communities. Reading is linked to greater trust, empathy, and a sense of belonging, helping people feel part of their neighbourhood. Libraries help build these connections every day.
- Reading groups offer books and so much more. They provide friendship, confidence, and a shared sense of purpose, supporting people of all ages to feel included and connected. Libraries make these moments possible.

Email template

Subject: Building community belonging and stronger connections through reading

Dear [Name],

I am writing to highlight the role reading plays in strengthening social connections, reducing loneliness and building a greater sense of belonging within our communities.

Loneliness and social isolation affect people of all ages and backgrounds, with particularly high impact on young people, new parents, people living alone and those in poor health. At the same time, feelings of trust and belonging within neighbourhoods remain low, with implications for wellbeing, community resilience and public services.

Evidence shows that reading can play a meaningful role in addressing these challenges. Regular reading is linked to lower levels of loneliness, stronger social and emotional skills, and greater empathy across the lifespan. Shared reading activities and reading groups provide welcoming routes into social connection, helping people feel part of a community with shared purpose. For children, early reading habits are associated with more positive social behaviours in adolescence; for adults, reading supports trust, belonging and social inclusion.

Libraries are uniquely placed to deliver this impact. As trusted, inclusive community spaces, libraries bring people together through reading groups, family activities, and informal social opportunities that foster connection and belonging. This work supports wider aims around community cohesion and inclusion.

I would welcome the opportunity to explore how we might work together during the National Year of Reading to strengthen social connections and community belonging through reading.

Kind regards,

Belonging and connections

Examples of the library offer

Activities delivering against this priority might fall within the Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Creativity or Reading Universal Library Offers (Libraries Connected), or the Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise (Share the Vision) and The Children's Promise (Libraries Rising). For example:

- Early years offers such as Baby Rhyme Time or Bounce and Rhyme, BookTrust's Bookstart, Storytime sessions for under-5s
- Shared children's programmes such as the Summer Reading Challenge; Lego, STEM or coding clubs; reading, arts and crafts clubs; Chatterbooks reading groups
- Book clubs, social reading groups and author events, bringing people together around reading, including creative writing or poetry groups
- Reminiscence groups and dementia-friendly reading activities, including Dementia Friendly Libraries
- Interest-led activities or clubs, including intergenerational or family activities
- National, local and community celebration events in libraries, such as National Poetry Day, World Book Day, World Book Night, National Storytelling Week, Loneliness Awareness Week, Empathy Day and more

A fairer world

This broad priority area links in with local objectives such as diversity and inclusion, sustainability, improving life chances, making our communities safer, building strong local politics, acting on climate change, democracy and participation, improving social mobility, encouraging cultural enrichment, strengthening communities and making our communities inclusive, diverse and accessible.

The evidence in this section might be most relevant for reaching out to partners from Public Health, Adult Social Care, Children's and Family Services, Adult Skills and Education or Adult Community Learning, Housing and Homelessness Services, Youth Services and Youth Engagement teams, Commissioning and Strategic Planning, Volunteering and Civic Engagement teams, Migration, Refugee and Integration Services, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion teams, and Leisure, Culture and Community Development.

The need

- **Many children in low-income families miss out on early shared reading.** Almost a quarter (23%) of parents/caregivers on low incomes don't share books with babies before age 1, despite the majority (95%) agreeing that reading is important (BookTrust, 2023).
- **There is a 1.4 million word gap for families who don't read together at home.** Children from reading-rich homes – families that read at least one book with their children each day over the early years – are exposed to an estimated 78,000 words each a year, or a cumulative 1.4 million more words during storybook reading than children who are never read to. (Logan, et al., 2019).
- **Inequalities in children's reading habits are widening.** Daily reading rates and levels of reading enjoyment are declining in children and young people, with the steepest declines among boys and children eligible for free school meals (Clark, et al., 2025).
- **There is an intergenerational cycle of engagement with reading.** If parents were read to daily as a young child, the probability that they read to their own child daily is 25% higher (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; The Reading Agency, 2024).
- **Socioeconomic gaps in reading performance persist.** Pupils from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds performed significantly worse than peers from less disadvantaged backgrounds in reading, maths, and science across all UK nations (PISA, 2022).
- **The reading attainment gap widens over time.** The learning gap between the highest and lowest achievers in reading is significant, with the lowest 10% equivalent to around 8.5 years behind the highest 10% (Jerrim and Shure, 2016).
- **Finding representative literature remains a barrier.** Only 1 in 2 UK adults report that they can easily find representative books and characters, and over 1 in 5 say that they cannot easily find reading material in their preferred language (Spaulding, et al., 2025).

A fairer world

The difference reading makes

Diversity and inclusion

- **Regular shared reading in the early years can help to reduce the impact of later disadvantage**. For disadvantaged children, being read to regularly in the early years is linked with better long-term outcomes – including a greater likelihood of high achievement by the end of primary school, and an increased chance of escaping poverty later in life (BookTrust, 2025).
- **Reading for pleasure drives academic progress.** For disadvantaged pupils aged 11-14, regular independent reading is linked with a higher likelihood of achieving 3 or more A-levels (BookTrust, 2025).
- **Shared reading boosts educational and social mobility**. Shared reading is associated with higher reading attainment and stronger academic performance, regardless of family background (BookTrust, 2025).
- **Readers are more skilled at understanding how others think and feel.** Reading fiction is associated with better social cognition (Tamir, et al., 2015).
- **Reading increases our knowledge of the world**. Adults who read for just 30 minutes a week are 57% more likely to have better awareness of other cultures (Billington, 2015).
- **Reading enhances empathy and the ability to understand one's own and others' identities**. Children's emotional responses to texts builds cognitive empathy (University of Sussex, 2025).
- **Reading stories has been shown to improve children's attitudes toward stigmatised groups**, such as immigrants, refugees, and members of the LGBT+ community (Vezzali et al., 2015).

Democracy and participation

- **Reading for enjoyment can help address inequality**. Engagement in reading and a desire to read for pleasure can mediate socioeconomic status and may be able to address inequality (OECD, 2021).
- **Reading impacts people's beliefs in political processes and likelihood of participation in volunteering**. Adults with lower levels of literacy are more likely to believe that they have little impact on political processes, are less likely to participate in volunteer activities (OECD, 2023).
- **Book readers are more likely to volunteer or to donate money or goods to charities** and non-profits than non-readers (Hill Strategies Research, 2008).
- Book readers are more likely to have performed favours for their neighbours in the past month (71% of readers compared to 65% of non-readers) (Hill Strategies Research, 2008).
- **Reading can be a pathway into critical engagement and political activism for young people**. Research with youth activists finds that many attribute key moments of political awakening to influential books or texts – even more so than peers or media (Zaino and Conner, 2024).
- **Public trust in librarians supports reading engagement**. Ipsos' Veracity Index has consistently ranked librarians among the top 3 most trusted professions; members of the public see them as highly credible sources of information (Ipsos 2021, 2023).

In three key messages…

- Reading helps level the playing field. Regular shared reading and reading for pleasure support children's learning and life chances – no matter their background. Libraries provide free, inclusive access to books and stories for everyone.
- Stories help us understand each other. Reading builds empathy, cultural awareness and respect for difference, supporting more inclusive and connected communities. Libraries offer spaces where everyone's story matters.
- Reading empowers people to engage. Strong reading skills are linked to confidence and participation in civic life, especially for young people. Libraries help open these pathways.

Email template

Subject: Using reading to widen opportunity and build a fairer society

Dear [Name],
I am writing to highlight the role reading plays in tackling inequality, widening opportunities and supporting a fairer society, priorities shared across our services.

Too many children and families face barriers to developing strong reading habits early in life, and these gaps widen over time. Inequalities in access to reading contribute to persistent attainment gaps, limit social mobility and reinforce intergenerational disadvantage. At the same time, declining reading enjoyment among children and young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – risks deepening these divides.

Evidence shows that reading can help counter these challenges. Regular shared reading in the early years is linked to improved long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children, while reading for pleasure in later childhood supports academic progress regardless of background. Beyond education, reading builds empathy, cultural understanding and inclusion, helping people better understand themselves and others. Strong reading skills are also associated with greater civic participation and confidence in engaging with democratic processes.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to support this work. As trusted, universal services, libraries provide free and inclusive access to reading material of all kinds and skilled support, particularly for families and communities least likely to have access elsewhere. This enables libraries to play a vital role in reducing inequality, supporting social mobility and strengthening participation in community and civic life.

I would welcome the opportunity to explore how we might work together during the National Year of Reading to use reading as a practical tool for fairness, inclusion and opportunity across [your community].

Kind regards,

Examples of the library offer

Activities delivering against this priority might fall within the Culture and Creativity or Reading Universal Library Offers (Libraries Connected), or the Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise (Share the Vision) and The Children's Promise (Libraries Rising). For example:

- Early years offers such as Baby Rhyme Time or Bounce and Rhyme, BookTrust's Bookstart, Storytime sessions for under-5s
- Shared children's programmes such as the Summer Reading Challenge; Lego, STEM or coding clubs; reading, arts and crafts clubs
- Support for less-confident adult readers through programmes like Read Easy, Quick Reads, Reading Ahead and adult literacy or ESOL classes
- Book clubs, social reading groups and author events, bringing people together around reading, including creative writing or poetry groups
- Digital skills and digital inclusion groups, enabling access to reading in multiple formats
- Opportunities for reading-related youth volunteering
- National, local and community celebration events in libraries, such as Empathy Day, Green Libraries Week, LGBT+ History Month, South Asian Heritage Month, Disability Pride Month, Black History Month, International Migrants Day and more

Evaluating your work: what data can you collect to make the case?

Reach Data
- Total number of attendees for reading events/activities ⋯⟩ shows how many people you reach
- Number of repeat attendees ⋯⟩ shows the value for your community
- Number of active library members and new library memberships ⋯⟩ shows the engagement with your service
- Number of book issues, including eBooks, audiobooks, ePress, etc. ⋯⟩ shows how you keep your users engaged

Impact Data
- Questions you can use to learn about the impact of your work ⋯⟩ choose 2-4:
  - I enjoy reading more. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I want to read more often. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I want to read more with my family. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I feel more confident reading. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I want to learn more about what I read today. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - Reading helped me feel better. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I feel more connected to other people. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I feel more connected to the community. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I felt welcome in the library space. (agree/disagree/not sure)
  - I would attend something like this again. (agree/disagree/not sure)

- Questions you can ask to capture qualitative feedback ⋯⟩ choose 1-2
  - In one word or short phrase, how would you describe your experience today? _____
  - What was your favourite part of today? _____
  - What next steps do you plan to take? _____
  - What advice would you give to someone thinking about taking part? _____

Data ethics and principles
- Keep evaluation simple and light-touch – collect meaningful but concise feedback
- Gather feedback immediately during or after events
- Keep personal data minimal and allow anonymous feedback if preferred
- Store all data securely

Writing a case study: how to bring the data to life

Purpose: what can you use cast studies for?

- Showing the impact of your work to budget-holders, decision-makers, partners and the local media
- Encouraging communities to take part in your programmes and activities
- Giving volunteers or colleagues across the local authority ideas they can adopt themselves
- Showing potential partners the work you are doing with existing partners

Style: what should a case study sound like?

- Journalistic, brief, direct, using short sentences with no jargon.
- Paragraphs to be no more than four sentences long and the whole case study should be no more than 600 words.
- Break up with subheadings so no section is longer than three paragraphs.
- Written for an external audience, so programmes should not be turned into acronyms and if an acronym is used (e.g., LGA) it should be written out in full in the first instance (Local Government Association).

Writing a case study: how to bring the data to life

Structure: how should you write and format a case study?

1. As you deliver your activity, make sure to capture and log feedback and quotes from library customers and volunteers. You can collect these directly from people on paper or sticky notes, through a voice note or poem, or by writing down what you hear people say during and after an activity. Collate your quotes and feedback in a spreadsheet to more easily track relevant information such as the date and type of activity.

2. When writing your case study, start with an introductory paragraph on the background of the individual, their reading levels, experience of loneliness, challenges with mental health, or other challenge they experienced before taking part in your activity. Also include name of the programme they took part in, the name of the library and the name of the library staff member, volunteer, tutor or other professional who will be quoted later in the piece.

3. Then include quotes from the individual on their experience: how they felt before the activity, how they found the programme or activity at first, what their highlight was, how they felt about their reading level, social connections or mental health following the activity.

5. Quotes from a library staff member, volunteer, tutor or other professional on the difference they've seen in the individual and a statement about the benefits of the programme or activity.

6. Advice for other participants from the individual.

Four top tips…

1. Try to record at least one 'good news stories' each day – you never know who might have an impactful story to share.

2. Make sure you have permission from the individual to share their story

3. Include photos or other images of the activity if you have some – or even share your case study as a video story instead.

4. Consider linking your case study to other related stories or resources and activities in the library that readers can access for support.

Other useful sources

Guidance on local advocacy:
- Libraries Connected Library Advocacy: A Beginner's Guide
- CILIP Impact Toolkit
- CILIPS Guide to Campaigning
- SLIC Engaging the Public with Research Toolkit
- SLIC Securing the Future of Scotland's Libraries Toolkit

Social valuation and evaluation tools:
- Shared Intelligence and Moresight The Power of Prevention (Libraries Connected South East)
- Moore Kingston Smith Predictive Impact Analysis (Suffolk Libraries)
- University of East Anglia Value and Impact of Public Libraries (Libraries Connected East)
- The Reading Agency's Reading Outcomes Framework Toolkit

More data and evidence:
- BookTrust The Benefits of Reading Report and Research
- CILIP Evidence Base
- Doorstep Library Research Report
- Empathy Lab Research
- Farshore Research and Insights
- National Literacy Trust Research and Literacy Changes Lives Reports
- The Queen's Reading Room Study
- Scottish BookTrust Research
- The Open University (Cremin, et al.) Reading and Writing for Pleasure: A Framework for Practice
- The Reader and University of Liverpool Research
- The Reading Agency Research
- World Book Day Research
- University of Edinburgh's Literacy Lab The Future of Books and Reading
- Libraries Connected Universal Library Offers calendar

Impact stories:
- CILIP Libraries Change Lives Case Study Map
- British Library's LibraryOn collection of case studies
- Local Government Association library case studies

Where to find your local data

Language, literacy and learning
- Early Learning Goals
- Early Years Foundation Stage Data
- Local Essential Skills Map

Employment and economic growth
- Costs of low literacy (p.24-25)
- Regional GP Boost Estimate (p.7)
- Literacy wage gap (p.17)

Health and wellbeing
- Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
- Mental Health Dashboards
- Local Authority Health Profiles
- Local Health Index Scores
- Local dementia statistics

Belonging and connections
- Loneliness Rates by Local Authority
- Community Life Survey