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Young people speak out on volunteering and libraries

Has The Big Society debate forgotten about young people? Independent charity The Reading Agency has published new results showing how library and reading-based volunteering has massive potential as a springboard for involving young people in the community. And that it can help improve the skills, confidence and job opportunities of the next generation.

The Reading Agency and 20 library partners launched a volunteering pilot this summer. It focused on providing children with young role models to inspire them to complete the Summer Reading Challenge, the UK-wide scheme that keeps 765,000 children reading over the school summer holidays.

634 young volunteers were recruited, against a target of 250. 99.5% said libraries are a good place to volunteer. 99.2% of volunteers said they gained new skills and experience. Several young people went on to secure employment and 74.8% said they would like to continue volunteering in libraries.

Kate Fowler, 16, volunteered in Bolton Central Library. She said: "I am really grateful for the opportunity to volunteer at the library because I gained many new skills and also became more confident with other people."

"A shocking one fifth of eighteen year olds are currently not in education, employment or training*. This makes the resource of the library more important than ever and young people's voices must be heard in the raging debate about libraries' future," said Miranda McKearney, director of The Reading Agency. "In our work we're hearing that young people have a real hunger for libraries' support, and a massive appetite for volunteering." (*See "Notes to editors" for more information.)

This volunteering pilot was funded by the volunteering charity v, and the John Laing Charitable Trust. It builds on The Reading Agency's HeadSpace programme, which transforms young people's library spaces and activities by involving them in decision-making and volunteering. There are now 23 HeadSpaces around the country.

The work in the initial 20 HeadSpaces involved 5,623 young people, 40% of which were at risk of exclusion. 2,415 took on decision making roles and 309 have taken up longer term volunteering roles. (See "Notes to editors" for more HeadSpace information.)

This year, The Reading Agency surveyed young people around the country and 97.5% said they think libraries are an essential part of the community. (See "Notes to editors" for further survey information.)

"If I were a politician, I would make libraries a fundamental part of the community and allow for more commercial opportunities so that libraries are held in higher regard." Daphne Tona-Weyalo, 19, Summer Reading Challenge volunteer, Hounslow Library.

“We need to maintain libraries and the funds to them; they are a pillar of the community.”
Hannah Kehoe, 22, Summer Reading Challenge volunteer, Camberley Library.

“Libraries need to remain an integral part of the community and thus a welcoming place, providing various activities to engage and unite people from all walks of life.” Katharine Wootton, 17, volunteer in Leeds Central Library.

- The Reading Agency now has a tested youth participation programme ready to roll out through libraries and youth providers. To find out more, contact Sue.jones@readingagency.org.uk

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Notes to editors

- The Reading Agency is an independent charity working to inspire more people to read more. It is funded by the Arts Council and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.
www.readingagency.org.uk
- To view the full report on the [Summer Reading Challenge Volunteering](#)
- For further information about [Summer Reading Challenge](#)
- NEETs: www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/nov/23/not-employment-education-training-neet
(The Guardian, 23 November 2010)
- You can find out more about v and John Laing Integrated Services by visiting vinspired.com and laing.com
- Further information about [HeadSpace](#)
- Three surveys were conducted by The Reading Agency in 2010. 391 young people responded to a [national survey](#) in May; 214 young people filled in a [pre-volunteering survey](#) and 135 completed a [post-volunteering survey](#).