

**A NATIONAL  
PUBLIC LIBRARY  
DEVELOPMENT  
PROGRAMME  
FOR  
READING GROUPS**



# CONTENTS

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Introduction and Purpose	2
Aims	4
Methodology	5
<b>Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
Public Libraries and Reading Groups: Key Messages	8
The Case for a National Approach to Public Library Reading Group Development	10
A National Public Library Reading Group Development Programme	15
Quality Framework for Progression	18
Three-Year Plan	20
<b>Main Report - Making the Case</b>	<b>23</b>
Setting the Scene	24
The Value of Public Library Reading Group Provision	28
Examining the Reading Group Model	42
Meeting the Challenge of Public Library Reading Group Provision	53
Case Study One: Essex Libraries	56
Case Study Two: Lincolnshire Libraries	59
Case Study Three: Bedfordshire Libraries	61
Reading Group Tools and Resources	63
Literature Search	69
Appendix One: Steering Group Members	74

# Introduction and Purpose

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*Framework for the Future* is the Government's new strategy for the development of the public library service.<sup>1</sup> It is being put into action by The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

The action plan includes a strand of work to develop a strategic approach to reading group provision in libraries. This piece of work directly addresses the challenge in *Framework for the Future* to develop universally available and distinctive library services.

The work has been led by The Reading Agency in partnership with The Society of Chief Librarians and in consultation with the library profession, partners and stakeholders. It has resulted in this report, which begins the process of defining what a national public library reading group offer might look like and the benefits for readers, libraries and their partners. It makes the case for reading group development, maps the territory of existing provision and resources, begins the process of consulting with strategic partners and identifies key priorities and recommendations for action to take the work forward.

This report is the first phase in building a national public library development programme for reading groups that is responsive to local needs. In stage two there will be a sustained period of consensus building, working with The Society of Chief Librarians, MLA and key professional networks. This will work towards getting agreement on approach and structure, confirming a baseline for provision supported by a quality framework for progression and developing and piloting appropriate tools.

Stage three will then focus on the promotion and marketing of the public library reading group offer, the mainstreaming of activity and building the quality framework into core provision.

## Libraries' Modern Mission

*Framework for the Future* identifies the need for a modern mission for libraries that can be clearly communicated to the communities they serve. A national public library development programme for reading groups helps to inform the main strands of such a mission.

**Evolution:** reading groups build on libraries' traditional core skills in promoting reading, informal learning and self-help.

**Public value:** reading groups deliver benefits to society and to the individual. They provide support, for instance, for adult literacy and children's learning.

**Distinctiveness:** reading group provision builds on libraries' open, neutral and self-help culture and provides a distinctive service that, at the same time, shares common ground with private- and public-sector partners.

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<sup>1</sup> *Framework for the Future Libraries, Learning and Information in the Next Decade*, DCMS, 2003.

**Local interpretations of national services:** a national library development programme for reading groups will provide equal access to common library services adapted to local needs.

A national development programme for reading groups also delivers on the three areas of public library activity identified in *Framework for the Future* as being at the heart of the modern public library mission. It supports the promotion of reading and informal learning, increases access to digital skills and services and tackles social exclusion, builds community identity and develops citizenship.

# Aims

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The aims of this piece of work were:

- To establish a national framework to help libraries develop local reading group provision.
- To support the development of a national reading group offer that ensures that readers everywhere have access to reading group provision and a broader and more satisfying reading experience.
- To identify the value of reading groups for public libraries as a tool for reader development, partnership building, user consultation and for delivering on national and local government priorities such as learning and social inclusion.
- To explore the evidence base for these benefits and the knowledge gaps to be filled.
- To identify the existing range of library/reading group models, partnership structures and support resources and any obvious gaps to be filled.

# Methodology

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The following methodology was used to consult with the library profession, research relevant evidence, tools and support material, and begin the process of outlining a national public library development programme for reading groups.

The work began in the autumn of 2003 and was completed in March 2004.

## Supporting Structures

- SCL support and endorsement of the research and development process was formalised through the nomination of an SCL representative, Brian Ashley, Assistant Director (Libraries, Information and Communication), Nottingham City Council. His role was to chair the strategy steering group, guide the consultation, research and development process and present the outline framework to SCL Executive in May 2004 as the first step to building national policy for work in this area.
- A steering group was established with senior level representation from the public library sector, its professional bodies and networks and stakeholder agencies. A list of steering-group members is in Appendix One of the full report. The steering group supported the drafting of the development programme and quality framework for progression and the structuring of the full report. They also helped raise the profile of the work in the profession and provided valuable help with research and information gathering.

## Mapping/ Research

- Desk research was undertaken to survey existing evidence, tools and models for reading group development.
- A literature search reviewing national and international literature/web-based information relating to reading groups and public libraries was commissioned from LISU. This is included in the full report.
- Case study development was used to identify and present models of good practice.
- First-stage mapping of the public library reading group landscape was undertaken by The Reading Agency. This was supported by a sample survey of ASCEL members undertaken by a steering-group member and other evaluation studies by individual library authorities which coincided with this study.

## Consultation

- Consultation on the relevance of a national public library development programme for reading groups was achieved through a series of regional SCL-driven workshops linked to a wider piece of *Framework for the Future* work to develop a national vision for libraries' work with readers.
- A small sample of library authorities was consulted about the policy implications of reading group development.
- Individual practitioners were consulted on the development of case study material and the identification of models of good practice.
- Consultation was undertaken with a range of partners and stakeholders with an interest in reading group development in libraries.

# SUMMARY

# Public Libraries and Reading Groups

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## Key Messages

### Public Libraries Are Central Players in the Reading Group Movement

- Public libraries are supporting a thriving, diverse and developed network of reading groups.
- This includes over 4,500 groups for adults, children, young people, families and readers with special needs.
- Library reading group networks are flourishing. In the five years since Essex set the target of a group in every library, its network has grown from 74 groups to over 240 and is still growing.
- Libraries are evolving the traditional reading group model to bring new readers to reading and the experience of talking about books.
- Library reading groups attract a wide and varied membership. They can also target specific groups.
- Libraries offer reading groups an inclusive community venue; a wide choice of books - including backlist titles - in all formats; expert staff to recommend reading; events and activities; access to ICT resources and a national network to bring groups together.
- Libraries also offer direct reading group services. 75% of library authorities provide staff to administer or lead groups; 68% offer group loans; 38% offer free reservations.

### The Value for Libraries

Reading group provision helps libraries:

- Serve the local community better
- Increase and widen the library audience
- Improve book issues
- Deliver reader development policy targets
- Deliver on the broader policy agenda
- Get closer to their users
- Raise their profile with users and partners
- Develop national, regional and local partnerships
- Support the wider cultural economy
- Support staff development

## **The Impact on Readers**

- People in reading groups read more, read more widely and have a more enjoyable and satisfying reading experience  
50% of adults and 100% of children read more.  
45% of library reading group members borrowed more.  
17% of library reading group members buy more.  
41% of Chatterbooks' coordinators said children enjoyed libraries and used them more.
- Enthused adults and children talk about books beyond the reading group. A reading group the hub of a significant community network and its members powerful reading activists.

## **Other Benefits**

Reading group membership:

- Supports learning
- Provides opportunities for relaxation and for enjoyment
- Develops individual confidence and self esteem
- Builds a feeling of belonging and inclusion
- Promotes a sense of well-being
- Provides a lifeline in difficult circumstances

## **The Impact on Communities**

- Reading groups bring communities together.
- Promote cultural understanding through reading.
- Equalize access to cultural and creative activity.
- Promote a sense of belonging and local pride. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The evidence and the arguments in this section are taken from the main report: *Making the Case for Public Libraries and Reading Group Development*.

# **The Case for a National Approach to Public Library Reading Group Development**

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## **Setting the Scene**

- A reading group is a collection of people who come together to discuss books. It provides an enjoyable social experience and creates a reader-focused environment in which readers can explore the creativity of reading.
- Reading groups challenge readers to widen their reading horizons by reading more and reading more widely. They are an important highlight in the lives of many readers.
- There are indicators to suggest that the reading group movement is not so much a tide as a tidal wave. There is already an extensive and thriving network of private groups and groups either meeting in public libraries or linked with them in some way.
- Public libraries are central players in the reading group movement. Initial mapping indicates the existence of a diverse and developed network of reading groups linked to public libraries. It is estimated that over 4,500 public library groups serving adults, children, families and readers with special needs already meet. This network reaches an audience somewhere in the region of 45,000 people. The reach through existing and potential links with private groups is even greater.
- The framework for a national public library development programme for reading groups is already in place; there is a firm foundation on which to build. The need to map this landscape more accurately is an urgent priority in order to get a statistical overview of provision and a baseline from which to evaluate the impact of a national approach. An accurate reading group map would increase public access, support partnership building and national developments such as the creation of a literature touring circuit for libraries. It would raise the profile of libraries and their work with readers.

## **The Value of Public Library Reading Group Provision**

### **For Readers**

Reading groups in public libraries:

- Broaden and widen people's reading.
- Support an enjoyable and more satisfying reading experience for all readers.
- Support learning.
- Empower the individual and support skills development.
- Give members a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Bring communities together.
- Provide a lifeline in difficult life circumstances.

## **What Libraries Offer**

- An inclusive community venue open to all.
- A wide and varied choice of books, including backlist titles, in all formats.
- Expert staff able to recommend books, widen reader choice, offer advice and in some cases facilitate groups.
- Information, events and activities including links to other learning activities in the library.
- Access to ICT resources and The People's Network.
- As a national network, libraries can help different groups of readers to come together.

## **The Value for Libraries**

Reading group provision enables public libraries to:

- Serve the local community better, increase library use and develop the library audience.
- Support user consultation by bringing staff and users together and providing direct feedback on services.
- Support staff development by increasing and widening reading, developing confidence, increasing contact with users and allowing for the learning of new skills.
- Raise their profile and highlight their role as a community service delivering a quality reading experience to all readers. They also enable libraries to challenge stereotypes about libraries and increase understanding about the demographic groups they serve.
- Support the cultural economy by building audiences for literature events, author visits, writing initiatives and related arts events. In particular, reading groups form a network to underpin local, regional and national literature touring, promote new writing and less mainstream forms of literature and reinforce a vibrant publishing scene, both independent and commercial.
- Develop a powerful creative force as enthused readers discuss and recommend books and reading beyond the confines of their group. A reading group is the hub of a significant community network and its members are powerful reading activists.
- Increase book issues and user satisfaction.
- Develop joint working around a shared agenda.
- Deliver on broad policy agendas including literacy, learning, creativity, community cohesion and healthy living.

## **A Library Policy Tool**

- Reading groups usually feature in local authority Reader Development Strategies and Public Library Position Statements. Some authorities are starting to use reading group provision as part of the Public Service Agreement target-setting process. Reading group provision also provides evidence for the public library service's contribution to the local authority's performance within the frameworks for Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Best Value. There is, however, more work to be done to develop the evidence and arguments for the role of reading groups in relation to these key policy frameworks.
- Some authorities are beginning to link reading groups into the learning agenda.
- A relationship is emerging in relation to healthy living, social cohesion, community regeneration and crime reduction, particularly in the context of work with young people. Clear links exist to an increasingly important creativity agenda.
- Local Strategic Partnerships have supported the development of public library reading groups where it can be seen to encourage take up of services within Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies or Public Service Agreements.
- Reading group activity also helps deliver the vision set out in *Framework for the Future* and the Government/Local Government Association Shared Priorities.
- It is, however, not always easy to prove the links to the wider policy agenda; the arguments and evidence need to be developed further.

## **Partnership Potential**

- Reading groups offer libraries potential for partnership development around a shared agenda. Partnership working brings important benefits and helps libraries serve their readers better. Through partnerships libraries can develop new skills and approaches, new audiences and venues, new networks and funding sources and new ways of working. Joint working also helps raise the public library profile with users and partners.
- Partners for a national public library development programme for reading groups include the book trade, the media, the business sector, the health sector, the arts and cultural sector, the children's/youth sector and the education sector.

## **Examining the Reading Group Model**

- The reading group model is flexible and can be adapted to meet the needs of a diverse range of readers. Public libraries are playing a unique role in this evolution while still maintaining its relevance to the traditional reading group member.
- There is enormous potential for the library service to extend the public library network of groups by developing a relationship with groups that meet outside the library building. Many library authorities already offer a range of services to these groups.

- Cross-cutting reading group models are meeting the different needs of an enormous range of readers. There are reading groups serving specific demographic groups defined by age, gender or ethnicity, readers in different locations, readers with special needs in relation to format and reading levels and with specific needs relating to their life situation or reading interests.

### **Key Characteristics of Reading Groups**

- Existing evidence enables us to identify and build on common reading group characteristics relating to book choice, meeting structure, group size, demographics and why readers join groups.

### **Meeting the Challenge of Public Library Reading Group Provision**

- There are a number of challenges and barriers to local public library reading group provision that could undermine the success of a national public library development programme. These include the lack of strategic profile of reading groups in some authorities, persisting stereotypes linked to libraries and group membership and a library authority's own capacity to provide, service, support and extend the reach of reading group activity.
- In the long term, a national public library development programme for reading groups could ease some of these pressures. In the short term, a number of effective strategies are beginning to emerge at local and regional level. These include:
  - Partnership building to support development and delivery.
  - The use of emerging national programmes e.g. Chatterbooks
  - The development of effective structures, systems and services combined with new and different models of book use.
  - Building capacity through staff training and development.
  - Building capacity in groups to underpin sustainability and independence.
  - Targeting resources to priority areas/communities of greatest need.
  - Building virtual provision.
  - Using the investment in reading group provision for the wider benefit of the service. Many authorities are building on the positive impact of reading groups on library audience, membership, book issues and staff development. They are also using their audience potential for events and promotions, the stimulation they provide for other readers through reader reviews, the opportunity to consult with ready-made focus groups and their power as a creative force in the community.

### **Reading Group Tools and Resources**

- There are tools and resources available to support a national public library development programme for reading groups. Some of these are already being used; others exist independently of reading group activity but have a potential relationship to it. There are also new tools and resources emerging from *Framework for the Future*.
- A first stage mapping of these tools provides the basis on which to build a public library reading group tool kit with reader-facing resources and guidelines for the profession. This would be the result of consolidating existing provision and developing new material to fill the gaps.

- The on-line reading group model being developed by Opening the Book as part of the *Framework for the Future* action plan will play an important role in underpinning a baseline reading group offer for adult readers. Other opportunities for on-line activity are also emerging in relation to Chatterbooks and the work of other organisations.
- On-line public library training in reading group development for both adults and children is available through Branching Out and Their Reading Futures.
- There are other web-based and physical resources available to underpin a national framework for development.
- Effective evaluation is crucial to the success of any national offer. There are a number of tools to be explored, including better collection of quantitative data through existing structures and using the Inspiring Learning for All tool kit to measure qualitative impact.

# A National Public Library Reading Group Development Programme

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This section identifies the value of a public library reading group offer both for libraries and readers. It begins the process of defining what the strategic framework underpinning this offer might look like and a development plan for achieving it. The quality framework for progression and the development plan will be refined in consultation with the profession in stage two of the work.

## **The Value of a National Programme**

The development of a national public library development programme for reading groups supports a modern vision for the public library service.

It will help transform libraries by:

- Creating a national programme offering an agreed minimum level of public library reading group activity to all readers wherever they live.
- Providing local benefit from a sustainable national framework flexible to local need. The integrated approach of a national programme will support better use of resources, the production of high-quality support materials, dissemination of good practice and effective workforce development.
- Raising the profile of the public library service as a national network offering a vibrant local service that increases access to the enjoyment of reading for all readers.
- Providing a firm infrastructure for increased public-sector investment as illustrated by the recent DFES investment in Chatterbooks, a national network of children's reading groups in public libraries.
- Providing common ground for partnership building and joint working with other sectors interested in the value of a national public library reading group network.
- Raising the profile of the public library contribution to a range of key policy objectives.
- Supporting public library advocacy.

## **The Vision**

*To be developed in line with the outcomes of the national reader development vision consultation.*

## **The Aims**

- To provide all readers with access to reading groups through public libraries.
- To broaden opportunities for reading which build and sustain people's reading confidence and enjoyment and support their sharing of the reading experience.
- To increase the use of libraries and widen the reading audience.
- To provide support for lifelong learning through reading in relation to MLA's five key areas of service delivery and other priority areas.<sup>3</sup>
- To support creativity in the individual and community.
- To consult and involve people in shaping reading services that meet their needs.
- To widen the reading audience served by libraries by targeting specific groups of readers.

## **Outline Strategic Priorities**

The following strategic priorities underpin a national public library development programme for reading groups. They are subject to further consultation on timescale and delivery mechanisms and will involve library authorities and support agencies in:

- Providing locally appropriate baseline reading group support and services supported by a quality framework for progression. Standard provision will include a menu of referral and advice for readers supported by access to real and/or virtual reading group provision. Medium and enhanced provision will build on the standard service through the offer of more developed reading group support and provision, resources and networking.
- Providing on-line opportunities/resources and ICT-based reading services to support reading group activity and outreach work.
- Creating national and local partnerships to develop reading group activity, increase the range of readers reached and broaden the library audience.
- Developing the staff skills and expertise in the sector to deliver a national reading group offer.
- Linking reading group development with resource and service development.
- Developing an effective approach to evaluating the impact of reading group activity.
- Developing a research and evidence base to reinforce the value of public libraries' work with readers and using this evidence to support library advocacy.

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<sup>3</sup> Service delivery relating to Early Years, out of school hours learning opportunities for young people, services for teens/young adults, adult learners and high-quality reading experiences for adults.

## Recommendations for Action

It is recommended that a development plan be put in place to support libraries in offering local baseline provision within a national framework. This will include the following actions and will be implemented on the timescale shown in the three-year plan.

- Consensus building with the profession on the quality framework for progression underpinning the national reading group offer and the development plan. This would be supported by further consultation on the tools and mechanisms needed to support baseline local provision. (See quality framework for progression and three-year plan.)
- Integration of the quality framework and development plan with other key programmes emerging from *Framework for the Future*.
- Integration of developing on-line resources into the delivery of the national public library development programme for reading groups.
- Development of nationally and regionally brokered programmes of reading group activity available at a local level. These programmes will build on and extend existing models and be delivered with a range of partners.
- Development of a portfolio of nationally brokered partnerships to support generic resource/tool-kit development and support activities in the form of events, promotions and touring.
- Delivery of reading group training modules for library staff through existing structures of staff training and development.
- Development of a comprehensive reading group map supported by a central database of public library facilitated/linked reading groups identified by type and purpose.
- Implementation of a coherent framework for collecting national qualitative and quantitative data about reading group activity and impact.
- A research and data collection programme to support the development of the arguments and evidence for the value of public library reading group provision and its relevance to overarching policy objectives.
- A programme of effective library advocacy.

# Quality Framework for Progression

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A sustainable national public library reading group offer will be responsive to local needs while maintaining a baseline of provision. This will mean that some authorities will deliver the baseline public library reading group offer. Others will deliver medium provision and a few authorities will deliver enhanced provision with stretched targets. The outcomes in each authority will depend upon the level of provision available.

However, the national framework for reading group delivery will ensure that all readers, wherever they live, have access to some form of reading group activity through their local library.

This framework for progression is expressed in the following table.

Standard/Baseline Provision	Medium Provision (Standard Provision Plus...)	Enhanced Provision ( <b>Stretched Targets</b> ) (Medium Provision Plus...)
<p><b>Referral and Advice</b> Access to a reading group referral and advice service, e.g. the library can direct readers to information about local groups and on-line reading group activity.</p> <p>Access to a downloadable starter pack with information on setting up a group, support material and information about library resources</p>	<p><b>Library Reading Group Provision</b> Access to some form of direct library reading group provision, through library-based groups or local groups with a link to the library service.</p> <p><b>Reading Group Services</b> The provision of other reading group services including free reservations, group loans, access to library staff to recommend books or run the group, links to other groups, use of the library venue and access to events, activities and authors.</p> <p><b>Consultation</b> Reading groups consulted on how to develop reading group activity.</p>	<p><b>A Reading Group Network</b> Management of a network of library-linked groups meeting the needs of a range of readers including key target groups.</p> <p><b>Developed On-line Activity</b> Local and regional on-line activity in place to complement national programmes.</p> <p><b>Target Setting</b> Local targets linked to population/demographic ratios used to shape provision.</p> <p><b>Core Capacity</b> The library authority has the capacity to support and sustain existing reading group provision and stimulate demand.</p> <p><b>Consultation</b> Local reading group resources, events and services developed in consultation with groups. Readers also consulted on local reading group policy development, target setting, stock provision and other key service issues.</p> <p><b>Partnerships</b> Evidence of supporting partnerships being used to develop and extend reading group provision.</p> <p><b>Evaluation</b> Effective evaluation of reading group activity using national frameworks. The evidence used to advocate the value of reading group provision to a range of policy objectives and to promote the public library service and its work with readers.</p>

# Three-Year Plan

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There are three main stages underpinning the development of a national approach to public library reading group development.

Year One: Consultation and development of consensus; defining the case for public library reading group development; mapping the territory of existing resources and provision; formation of strategic partnerships and alliances; identifying key priorities.

Year Two: Formation of quality and improved frameworks; development and piloting of tools and mechanisms.

Year Three: Rolling out of tools; promotion and marketing of offer, mainstreaming of activity and building into core.

## A NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

	03/04 Consultation and Development of Offer	04/05 Formation of Quality Framework, Development of Tools	05/06 Roll out, Promotion and Marketing of Offer
Development plan	Creation of and consultation on three-year development plan.	Further consultations on development plan/agreement to strategic objectives. Define link to Standards and other key policy frameworks. Identify funding to take the work forward.	Link to marketing and advocacy work at national level.
Quality framework for enhancing local provision	Development of outline quality framework/definitions. Link in with national reader development vision work.	Consensus building, piloting of approach to quality framework/ further consultation and review. Consolidate links with reader development vision work.	Marketing of the library offer to readers.
Other F4F strands	Identify links with other strands of work emerging from F4F.	Integrate with work strands emerging from Vital Link, Chatterbooks, Early Years programme, teenage strategy, books in business and other relevant F4F programmes.	Roll out integrated programmes of activity as part of reading group offer.

Tools for building the provision			
On-line resources	Research and development of on-line models.	Roll out of OtB adult programme. Scope and fundraise for children's offer, linked to Chatterbooks. Scope and fundraise for basic skills offer, linked to Vital Link. Scope and fundraise for y/people, linked to F4F strategy work.	Integration into reading group offer, roll out of provision.
Partnerships supporting national strands of activity and resource development	Partnership research and consultation.	Develop national partnerships feeding in new resources/profile and programming opportunities. Focus on emerging Reading Partners book trade initiative and other emerging partners such as BBC and Open University. Scope potential future developments linked to health sector, arts and cultural sector and other key areas. See link with other F4F strands section.	Roll out resulting programmes/resources.  Develop and extend partnership base.
Workforce development/training	Identify existing training provision.	Workforce development/training: Branching Out and TRF.	Ongoing training development and support.
Evaluation of impact	Identify relevant frameworks.	Development of stronger links between reading group framework and the collection of library data. Explore links with LISU and Inspiring Learning For All. Develop proposals for and fundraise for user impact research linked to GLOs.	Produce and disseminate reading group evaluation tool kit.
Research and data collection	Identify knowledge gaps.	Develop a prioritised research and data-collection programme to include mapping/database development and policy links. Secure funding for first stage of programme.	Undertake first stage of research programme. Use findings to underpin national offer.
Advocacy	Identify advocacy potential	Identify key audiences and plan advocacy programme linking in with other key advocacy developments. Develop support resources.	Link advocacy to national marketing and vision programme.



**MAKING THE  
CASE FOR  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARIES AND  
READING  
GROUP  
DEVELOPMENT**

# Setting the Scene

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## What is a Reading Group?

*Renaissance! Rejuvenation! Re-discovery of the world of books.*<sup>4</sup>

*...the camaraderie and shared experiences within a safe environment; the stimulation of conflicting views; the pleasure of discovering a new author; the satisfaction of listening and being listened to; the delight of debate; the coming in and greeting old friends; appraising the biscuit selection; dissolving into giggles; sharing information about local events; sharing lives.*<sup>5</sup>

There are as many different kinds of reading group as there are different kinds of reader, but at its simplest a reading group is a collection of people who come together on a regular basis to discuss the books they are reading. The reading group provides an enjoyable social experience. It creates a reader-focused environment in which readers can explore the creativity of reading and share their thoughts and feelings about a book.

*Like anything you love you want to talk about it with other people who feel the same way.*<sup>6</sup>

Reading groups are fun. They also challenge readers to widen their reading horizons by offering them the chance to read more, to read more widely and to talk about their reading with others. Reading groups provide a unique combination of creative and intellectual engagement and social entertainment, making them an important highlight in the lives of many readers.

*I regard these evenings as very special.*<sup>7</sup>

*Will our book group ever stop? Not unless it is made illegal, in which case we will go underground. At the moment we have twelve members ... most of whom attend regularly. We have watched the rise of reading groups with interest and tried not to feel too smug – after all, we've been doing it for years.*<sup>8</sup>

Book chains provide a similar form of reader to reader interaction but without the immediate social interaction of the reading group model. Book chains represent a useful variant on the reading group model, often acting as an introduction to the reading group experience for both public libraries and readers.

*Books can be read in isolation, but when shared with others they are much more enjoyable.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Reading group member quoted in Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize, shortlisted entry, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Reading group member quoted in Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize.

<sup>6</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*, Book Marketing Ltd and The Reading Partnership, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups*, Jenny Hartley, Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Reading group member quoted in Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize.

<sup>9</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

## The Wider Reading Group Map

While 'reading in groups has been around for as long as there has been reading'<sup>10</sup>, there has been a real boost in the profile of reading group activity in recent years as the reading group model has evolved to meet changing demands. More and different types of readers – children, teenagers and adults, readers with special needs or from different cultural groups – are finding groups to suit them. Readers are meeting virtually and in real time and in all sorts of places, particularly libraries but also in the home, in bookshops, churches, hospitals, offices and even on beaches.

Public libraries are a central player in the reading group movement. Their work with readers has helped shape a reader-development landscape in which reading groups are centre stage. They have, for instance, pioneered the Readers' Day, a new model bringing networks and groups of readers together to talk about books with each other and with writers. Public libraries are also working to forge partnerships with publishers and booksellers, the arts and education and other sectors such as health and business. These partners are also interested in the power of the reading group to underpin customer satisfaction, promote and broaden reading, encourage well-being and develop a creative workforce. The reading group is a flexible friend, bringing benefits to members and to public libraries as well as providing solid ground for partnership building.

It is difficult to quantify accurately the level of interest in reading groups by the general public as there has been no research in this area. There are, however, indicators to suggest that the reading group movement is not so much a tide as a tidal wave. An extensive network of reading groups consisting of private groups and groups either meeting in public libraries or linked to them in some way is clearly already in place. Essex library service alone has over 240 groups spread across the authority and there are an estimated 4,500 groups linked with the national public library network.<sup>11</sup> There were at least 99 new Big Read reading groups established in libraries and a minimum of 784 groups and 6,783 readers involved in Big Read reading group activity. There were also over 100,000 downloads of *The Little Guide to Big Reading* reading group guide produced by Book Trust to support the BBC Big Read project.<sup>12</sup>

*The Mail on Sunday* monthly reading group feature a few years back resulted in 40,000 readers purchasing discounted books, presumably to read in their reading groups.<sup>13</sup>

## The Public Library Reading Group Map

Research is needed to identify the full extent and nature of the public library reading group map. Existing reading group databases such as the BBC Big Read database and Orange's reading group database administered by Book Trust are not comprehensive public library databases and do not therefore present a clear overview of the public library reading group network.

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<sup>10</sup> *Reading Groups*, Jenny Hartley.

<sup>11</sup> Data from The Reading Agency Mapping Survey, 2004. The figures for the national network are indicative only.

<sup>12</sup> BBC Big Read evaluation data.

<sup>13</sup> *Reading Groups*, Jenny Hartley.

## An Indicative Map

A first-stage mapping exercise undertaken by The Reading Agency as part of the supporting research for this report suggests that a national network of public library reading groups already exists as a firm foundation on which to build a national offer to readers.

A sample of 117 responding authorities, 55 per cent of total UK library authorities, reveals an extensive public library reading group infrastructure. This consists of 2,014 adult groups, 198 children's groups, 117 groups focusing on a specialist audience, 59 teenage/young people groups, 51 family groups, 45 specialist genre groups, 23 groups using a specialist format, e.g. spoken word or Braille, and 8 virtual groups. There is therefore a total of 2,515 reading groups for half the national public library network.

An aggregation of these figures to represent a 100 per cent response rate provides a useful if only indicative measure of the extent and nature of the public library reading group map. Over 4,500 groups may already exist in the UK serving an estimate in excess of 45,000 people.<sup>14</sup> The reach through existing and potential links with private groups is clearly even greater.

Adult groups predominate but there is evidence that the reading group landscape is becoming increasingly varied and more specifically targeted as a result of strategic developments and joined up working with other partners. The Orange Chatterbooks network in libraries, for example, reaches 3,000 children.<sup>15</sup> In addition, 30 per cent of library authorities run reading groups for young people in at least one of their service points.<sup>16</sup> A recent survey of information provided by ASCEL members from 22 authorities also indicates an extremely diverse and innovative range of provision for young people. This includes groups for teenagers, children and families including groups for families from specific cultural communities. There are also groups based in schools, kidz clubs and children's homes as well as groups for home-educated children, parents and carers, dads and lads and babies and toddlers.

The Reading Agency mapping survey also indicates that libraries currently offer a range of services to support reading groups. In the sample of responding authorities, 80 or 68 per cent offered group loans, 44 or 38 per cent offered free reservations, 19 or 16 per cent provided a newsletter and 88 or 75 per cent provided staff to run the groups. A range of other services was offered by 35 or 30 per cent of authorities, including free accommodation in the library, author events and activities, web sites, noticeboards, networking support, support with reader choice and reading lists.

First-stage mapping suggests that the infrastructure for a national public library development programme for reading groups is already in place. Public library reading group activity is at present both flourishing and inclusive.

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<sup>14</sup> This is an indicative figure only based on an average group membership of ten members.

<sup>15</sup> Chatterbooks is an Orange Prize for Fiction educational initiative supporting a network of children's reading groups in libraries. *Chatterbooks Report, 2003*, The Reading Agency.

<sup>16</sup> *A Survey of Library Services to Schools and Children in the UK 2002–2003*. Claire Creaser and Sally Maynard, LISU 2003.

The need for a detailed database of the public library reading group landscape is a priority. It would serve a number of functions:

- Providing a statistical overview of provision.
- Providing a baseline from which to evaluate the impact of a national approach to reading group development.
- Offering a service to the public facilitating access to the full range of public library reading group provision.
- Supporting reading group access to new resources.
- Providing a valuable tool for partnership building and acting as a motivator for partnership development.
- Supporting innovative development such as a national reading group events programme and the creation of a national touring circuit for libraries.
- Operating as a key advocacy tool for libraries promoting the extent and power of their work with readers.

# The Value of Public Library Reading Group Provision

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## The Value of Reading Groups for Readers

### Broadens and Widens People's Reading

Evidence indicates that membership of a reading group encourages people to read more and to read more widely, particularly books that they might not otherwise choose. It also provides an opportunity to talk about reading and to hear other people's opinions of books, and increases the extent to which people recommend and discuss books outside the group.

In recent research, 50 per cent of library reading group members surveyed felt that they had read more books as a result of being in a reading group.<sup>17</sup>

Chatterbooks' coordinators said that 100 per cent of children were reading more widely as a result of their involvement in a reading group.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence also suggests that children involved in reading group activity motivate interest from their peers in joining a group and in reading and talking about books.<sup>19</sup>

*Read books I wouldn't otherwise have come across.*<sup>20</sup>

*Since school I'd never read anything but sauce bottles and newspapers. The things we've read in the group have opened up an entirely new concept for me – The reading group is the highlight of my week.*<sup>21</sup>

### A More Satisfying Reading Experience

Being in a reading group benefits readers by helping them to get more out of their reading.<sup>22</sup> There was *a fundamental increase in the awareness of the pleasure in reading and talking about a wide spectrum of material by the children.*<sup>23</sup>

It also provides an opportunity for enjoyment and social engagement, particularly for the lonely and isolated.

*I enjoy reading... I also enjoy discussing what I have read. Not always easy when you live alone.*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

<sup>18</sup> *Chatterbooks Report.*

<sup>19</sup> Reading group survey undertaken on a sample of ASCEL members, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

<sup>21</sup> Reading group member quoted in Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize.

<sup>22</sup> 68 per cent of reading group members surveyed in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research* said membership had helped them get more from their reading.

<sup>23</sup> Chatterbooks coordinator quoted in *Chatterbooks Report.*

<sup>24</sup> *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

## Supports Learning

Reading groups also support learning, enabling members to acquire knowledge in an informal and sociable context and develop their language, literacy and communication skills.<sup>25</sup>

22 per cent of Chatterbooks' coordinators felt that children's reading skills had improved since joining the reading group.<sup>26</sup>

*I joined because I wanted information on what was happening in the black community. I also wanted to find out about the latest black books on the market and discuss aspects of the book with other reading group members.*

*Activated my brain. One gets lazy as old age approaches.*<sup>27</sup>

## Empowering

Many members also find that their general knowledge improves, appreciate the opportunity to relax and enjoy themselves, and notice an increase in confidence particularly when talking about books and reading in other contexts.

44 per cent of Chatterbooks' coordinators said that children's confidence and skills in self-expression had increased since joining the reading group.<sup>28</sup>

*It gives me a chance to talk in a group which is something I am not good at.*<sup>29</sup>

## Inclusive

Reading groups give members a sense of belonging and inclusion.

*We get a real sense of belonging and community spirit through meeting every month.*<sup>30</sup>

*I am Chinese whose first language is not English but I love reading English books and always wondered if somebody could share my feelings after reading wonderful books. Another reason for me to join ... is that the members are very friendly.*<sup>31</sup>

*I felt more part of the wider community and have gotten to know a wide circle of people.*<sup>32</sup>

## A Lifeline

Reading groups can be a lifeline in difficult or demanding life situations.

*I joined the book group when I was suffering from clinical depression. For the first time for many months I felt I could cope with something new. This was something I could 'do', felt*

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<sup>25</sup> *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

<sup>26</sup> *Chatterbooks Report.*

<sup>27</sup> Reading group members quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

<sup>28</sup> *Chatterbooks Report.*

<sup>29</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

<sup>30</sup> Reading group member quoted in Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize.

<sup>31</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries.*

<sup>32</sup> Reading group member quoted in a survey of reading groups in North Lancashire conducted by Gill Entwistle, Assistant Divisional Librarian.

*comfortable with, could contribute to. I wasn't being judged as a person but was accepted as someone with an interest in reading...*<sup>33</sup>

## **Defining the Library Offer**

Public libraries make a unique contribution to reading group support and provision.

## **A Community Venue**

They provide an inclusive community venue open to all.

*This is a welcoming library with friendly staff. We are all welcome regardless of age.*<sup>34</sup>

*A library reading group is a democratic and eclectic public forum. You can't be excluded by anyone except yourself.*

*A public library reading group tends to have a more varied membership than private groups, which often comprise a particular social group.*<sup>35</sup>

## **Free Books**

They supply a wide and varied choice of free books including backlist titles, in all formats.

There are 116 million books held in public libraries, 21 per cent of which are children's books, 26 per cent are adult fiction and 26 per cent are adult non-fiction.<sup>36</sup>

*The library staff are surrounded by books and they see the new ones as they arrive ... a wider choice of books and ideas about other books.*

*A library can provide copies of the book ... so nobody is deterred from attending by lack of money.*<sup>37</sup>

## **Expert Staff**

They provide knowledgeable library staff able to recommend books and offer support in widening reader choice as well as advice on setting up and running groups and on authors and themes. In some cases, they also provide staff to coordinate and lead groups.

*Librarians are very supportive – books galore on hand. Librarians make good discussion leaders.*

They can provide formal arrangements for book supply including group loans and free reservations.

*It is easier to get hold of the books with free reservations.*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Reading group member quoted in Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize.

<sup>34</sup> Reading group member quoted in a survey of reading groups in North Lancashire.

<sup>35</sup> Reading group members quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*

<sup>36</sup> *LISU Annual Library Statistics 2003*, Loughborough University, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Reading group members quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>38</sup> Reading group members quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

## **Information, Events and Activities**

They supply information about promotions, produce reading group newsletters, support other networking initiatives including Readers' Days and provide web site resources, reading group noticeboards, reader guides and book reviews. They also offer reading events, author visits and links to other learning activities.

*You get to hear of other literature events.*

*Professional organisation and advice. Access to up to date information on books, authors, reviews and loans of copies.<sup>39</sup>*

## **ICT**

Libraries also offer access to ICT resources available through The People's Network to support readers in following up their reading interests.

## **Networking**

Libraries are part of a national network so they can find ways to bring different groups of readers together in both virtual and real time.

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<sup>39</sup> Reading group members quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

## The Value of Reading Groups for Libraries

### Serving the Local Community Better

Reading groups support the public library service in serving readers and their local communities.

They increase library use and widen the library audience.

*My opinion about reading groups has shifted since I have been running them. I believe that less confident readers can be attracted ... not just regular readers.*<sup>40</sup>

*Participants get involved in other library activities.*<sup>41</sup>

### Supporting User Consultation

The development of library-based reading groups can improve staff relationships with users. Work with reading groups brings staff and users into closer contact; supports increased user consultation and can be used to obtain focused feedback on library services.

Library staff running reading groups in North Lancashire said that members had used the opportunity to talk about stock selection for adults and children, stock withdrawal policy, computer facilities and their use, and local developments such as building work and library alterations.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, young people's reading groups provide an opportunity for members to show an interest and be involved in book purchasing and other library services.<sup>43</sup>

*Keeps staff in touch with what the public are interested in reading. Makes library staff feel valued.*

*Ready-made means of receiving feedback on our services.*

*I have always enjoyed the library. The book club has made it more personal.*<sup>44</sup>

### Staff Development

Reading groups are also an important staff development tool. In a recent survey in North Lancashire, all staff involved in reading group development remarked on the impact it had had on increasing and broadening their reading. It had also helped develop staff confidence and given professional staff the opportunity to talk to customers about books; an element of their work that many felt had been eroded in recent years. Staff below grade three felt that

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<sup>40</sup> Salford librarian quoted in a survey of reading groups in the North West conducted by Jane Mathieson, Regional Reader Development Coordinator.

<sup>41</sup> Rochdale librarian quoted in a survey of reading groups in the North West.

<sup>42</sup> Reading group survey in North Lancashire.

<sup>43</sup> ASCEL survey of reading groups.

<sup>44</sup> Librarian and reader quotes from *Reading Groups and Public Libraries*.

their involvement in reading group development had given them access to skills not normally associated with their work, such as project management and the chairing of meetings.<sup>45</sup> There were similar findings in a recent library survey of reading groups in the North West.

*This is empowering staff and boosting their confidence.*<sup>46</sup>

## **Supporting the Cultural Economy**

Reading groups also provide a ready-made audience for literature events, author visits, reading promotions, writing initiatives and related arts activities. One library authority, for example, has noted that reading group members are very enthusiastic supporters of rural touring theatre tie-ins.<sup>47</sup>

In particular, they form a network to support local, regional and national literature touring development, providing an informed and engaged reading audience able to engage in a creative dialogue with writers, support new writing and underpin a vibrant independent as well as commercial publishing scene.

*The increased success of literature in translation with reading groups has had a practical impact on sales and library loans of translated literature. This financial demonstration of the widening of the market for literature in translation is an invaluable help in persuading publishers of the demand for literature in translation as well as raising the profile of the literary translator.*<sup>48</sup>

## **Raising the Profile of Libraries**

Reading groups raise the profile of public libraries, highlighting their role as a community service and the potential of a reader-centred approach to meet the needs of users. They also challenge stereotypes about libraries and the demographic groups they serve.

*Readers groups are a cornerstone in turning perceptions of the library service around.*<sup>49</sup>

*Good publicity for the library. Excellent way to promote stock.*<sup>50</sup>

*Added a sense of liveliness; sense of community. Has brought new readers in. Helped the library to focus on READING as a pleasurable and motivating activity.*<sup>51</sup>

## **A Creative Force in the Community**

Reading groups are a key reader development tool for libraries. They help to raise the profile of reading and develop a powerful creative force in the community. Enthusiasm is contagious and creates a buzz that goes beyond traditional advertising and promotion.<sup>52</sup> Reading groups encourage members – both adult and children – to read more and to talk about their reading with others. This creates a ripple effect as enthused readers discuss and recommend books beyond the confines of their group. A reading group can therefore represent the hub of a significant network in the community with its members acting as powerful reading activists.

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<sup>45</sup> A survey of reading groups in North Lancashire.

<sup>46</sup> Sefton librarian quoted in a survey of reading groups in the North West.

<sup>47</sup> Cheshire librarian quoted in a survey of reading groups in the North West.

<sup>48</sup> Catherine Fuller, Director, The British Centre for Translation, UEA.

<sup>49</sup> Catherine Blanchard, Head of Libraries, Arts and Heritage, Leeds City Council (research interview).

<sup>50</sup> Librarian quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>51</sup> Librarian quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>52</sup> 'The New Big Idea', Ruth Killick, *The Bookseller*, 3 October 2003.

**Denise was originally a Basic Skills Learner, then got involved in a Reading for Pleasure course run by an ABE tutor and library staff. She is now involved in an emergent readers' group. She approached her children's school and told the head teacher there should be a reading group for children. He asked her to set one up, which she has done – or rather four different groups for children and two for adults – one after school and one at lunchtime. She has got the whole school buzzing – talking about reading.**

**Not content to stop there, Denise phoned the managing editor of BBC Radio Essex and said there should be a weekly book programme. It starts next Saturday morning and there will also be a recorded session going out in the evening.<sup>53</sup>**

### **Positive Impact on Issues**

The implications for borrowing and audience development are obvious. More people reading more books means more readers borrowing from the library. A more satisfying reader experience means increased user satisfaction.

In total, 45 per cent of library reading group members surveyed said that they borrowed more from libraries as a result of being in a reading group.

In addition, 41 per cent of Chatterbooks' coordinators said children enjoyed libraries and used them more because of their involvement in a reading group.<sup>54</sup>

*Obviously it has gained new members and that means more issues for the library.*

*Has brought new members in, who think that the library is wonderful for running the group.*

### **Partnership Development**

Reading groups also provide libraries with fertile common ground for partnership building as is illustrated in the section **Public Library Reading Groups and Partnership Potential**.

### **Policy Links**

Finally, many library authorities are beginning to use reading group provision to demonstrate links to broader policy agendas including literacy, learning, creativity, community cohesion and healthy living.

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<sup>53</sup> Case study provided by Essex Libraries.

<sup>54</sup> The evidence and quotations in this section are taken from *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research and Chatterbooks Report*.

## A Library Policy Tool

Reading Groups usually feature in local authority Reader Development Strategies and Public Library Position Statements. It is not yet clear whether they will feature in the revised Public Library Standards. Some authorities are starting to use reading group provision as part of the Public Service Agreement target-setting process. Reading group provision also provides evidence for public libraries' contribution to the local authority's performance within the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Best Value. There is, however, more work to be done in developing the evidence and the arguments relating to these key policy frameworks.

Reading groups help libraries contribute to other strategic policy frameworks. Some authorities are beginning to link reading groups into the learning agenda, particularly in the context of literacy development and individual attainment.

*Library staff are working hard to build partnerships (e.g. with the Youth Service and Adult Learning) and they use the contribution of reading groups to literacy and the wider learning agenda to build the case.<sup>55</sup>*

*Our work with readers' groups is firmly linked into the learning agenda. We can also demonstrate links with healthy living, social cohesion and crime reduction ... We are able to make these links to other agendas by demonstrating impact, e.g. using postcode data to show participation/involvement and tracking development.<sup>56</sup>*

Other policy relationships are beginning to emerge in connection to healthy living, social cohesion and community regeneration and crime reduction particularly in the context of work with young people. Clear links also exist to an increasingly important creativity agenda.

Reading groups clearly help local authorities build stronger relationships with users and thus serve their communities better. When used proactively they show how engaging with local people in the development of services supports the modernisation of service delivery. Local Strategic Partnerships have supported public library reading group development where it can be seen to encourage take-up of services from target groups within Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies or Public Service Agreements. Similarly the power of reading groups to encourage more local people to get involved in community development is starting to emerge. Stronger evidence is now needed to show how belonging to a reading group can have a direct impact rather than a supporting influence on specific educational, health and crime reduction targets.

*It is not always easy to demonstrate the links to the wider policy agenda.<sup>57</sup>*

*Reading is seen as supporting broader policy objectives but not always having a direct impact on them.<sup>58</sup>*

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<sup>55</sup> Rob Froud, County Librarian, Somerset County Council (research interview).

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Blanchard, Head of Libraries, Arts and Heritage, Leeds City Council (research interview).

<sup>57</sup> Rob Froud, County Librarian, Somerset County Council (research interview).

<sup>58</sup> Joyce Little, Head of Libraries and Information Service, Liverpool City Council (research interview).

## **Framework for the Future and Government/Local Government Association Shared Priorities**

*Framework for the Future* sets out the Government's vision for the development of public libraries in the coming decade. The *Shared Priorities* identify seven areas in which it is most important for central and local government to deliver tangible improvements in the next three years. They cover some of the most challenging areas of public policy and will provide the basis for assessment and inspections of local authorities with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment framework. Revisions to the Public Library Standards are being developed with both *Framework for the Future* and the *Shared Priorities* in mind.

The proposed national public library development programme for reading groups helps to deliver the agenda set out in *Framework for the Future* by showing how a national approach can be delivered with all the strengths of local distinctiveness. A national reading group programme will also support the delivery of MLA's key objectives for the *Framework Action Plan*.

Public library reading group provision:

### **Builds capacity**

- Promoting the role and contribution of public libraries in delivering reading.
- Sharing tools and approaches within an agreed quality framework.
- Building capacity by developing workforce skills, quality leadership and partnership working.
- Achieving maximum impact from available resources through national programmes of reading group activity, shared marketing, resource development and advocacy.
- Supporting effective planning and evaluation.

### **Delivers books, reading and learning**

- Promoting literacy skills and an appetite for reading and learning.
- Widening people's reading horizons and their participation in self-determined and enjoyable learning.
- Widening participation and showing the impact of libraries in supporting learning.
- Providing support to curriculum-based study through library staff trained in developing reading and through new opportunities for speaking and listening.

### **Promotes digital citizenship**

- Supporting library services in weaving together reading and IT services.
- Providing access to real and virtual services through ICT.
- Contributing to targets for audience engagement.

### **Supporting community and civic values**

- Delivering an inclusive service that reflects and helps to build cohesive communities.
- Providing a library focus for a community activity that brings people together and gives them a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Increasing access for more people to community-based activities.
- Developing cultural understanding through reading and talking about books.

Reading group provision in libraries also contributes most effectively to five of the *Shared Priorities* by:

### **Raising standards across our schools**

- Promoting educational attainment by stimulating an enjoyment of wider reading.
- Offering additional access routes into developing literacy leading to stronger engagement and participation in learning.
- Stimulating creativity in learning.
- Empowering the individual and supporting the development of language, literacy and communication skills.
- Improving the educational attainment of children in care, looked after and disadvantaged children.

### **Improving the quality of life of older people, and of children, young people and families at risk**

- Providing creative, enjoyable and diversionary reading opportunities that meet the specific needs of particular groups of readers.
- Improving quality of life through engagement in a rewarding activity that supports skills development, improves confidence, supports a sense of inclusion and belonging and brings enjoyment.
- Providing a lifeline in difficult circumstances, e.g. for those who live alone, are at risk or are suffering exclusion.

### **Creating safer and stronger communities**

- Delivering an inclusive service that reflects and helps to build cohesive communities.
- Helping people feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Encouraging wider use of an inclusive community venue.
- Involving local people creatively in the development and running of a popular service.
- Providing a library focus for an activity that brings people together in a positive and sharing context.
- Developing cultural understanding and appreciation of difference through reading.

### **Promoting healthier communities and narrowing health inequalities**

- Increasing access to the sense of well-being that reading and talking about books can bring.
- Providing opportunities for relaxation and social contact.
- Enabling participation in therapeutic activity in otherwise stressful or lonely lifestyles.
- Providing a healing opportunity for those combating ill health.
- Providing access to health information in specific contexts.

### **Promoting the economic vitality of localities**

- Supporting the cultural economy by developing an audience for literature events, author visits, writing initiatives and related arts events.
- Offering a market for local small press publishing and creative writing.
- Supporting the wider cultural and creative industries.

### **Other Implications**

Reading group activity and provision is clearly also relevant to other key policy areas ranging from Early Years plans to local and regional cultural strategies, but again more work is proposed in the development programme to define and evidence this relationship clearly.

## Public Library Reading Groups and Partnership Potential

Reading groups offer libraries huge potential for partnership because of the benefits they offer to users and host organisations. Partnership working brings important benefits to the library sector, and help it serve users better. It supports:

- Access to new skills, ideas and approaches.
- Access to new audiences. Partnership work with reading groups is proving very effective in targeting specific groups and communities and radically evolving the reading group concept to meet their needs.
- Access to new networks and funding sources.
- Experience of new sites and venues.
- The development of new ways of working.
- A higher profile.

## Potential Partners

### The Book Trade

The close link between borrowing and buying,<sup>59</sup> the fact that reading groups encourage more and wider reading and provide powerful word-of-mouth marketing for books, means that reading group activity in libraries benefits the commercial book trade as well as the public library sector. Research indicates that 17 per cent of library reading group members buy more books as a result of being in a reading group.

*Sometimes I have subsequently bought the set books both for myself and others.*<sup>60</sup>

Reading groups provide an informed and enthusiastic audience able to engage in a creative dialogue that benefits both the writer and the reader. They are a source of reader feedback and a platform from which to launch new writing. A national reading group network could underpin a powerful literature touring circuit that would benefit writers and readers, publishers, booksellers and libraries.

Evidence suggests that a closer relationship with the book trade would bring other direct benefits to libraries. Publisher support and involvement in library reading groups would stimulate, enhance and sustain activity within groups by providing a direct link to authors, access to book news and support for events.<sup>61</sup>

A national framework for public library reading group development therefore provides common ground for building a range of mutually rewarding library/book trade partnerships. The potential to develop partnerships around a shared agenda is clearly illustrated by the initial interest in a national reading group programme by booksellers and publishers.

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<sup>59</sup> *Reading the Situation: Book Reading, Buying and Borrowing Habits in Britain*, BML/The Reading Agency, 2000.

<sup>60</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>61</sup> ASCEL reading group survey.

## Booksellers

*There is an overwhelming case for a joined-up approach to readers' groups through a national partnership between Ottakar's and The Reading Agency on behalf of libraries. The current fragmented set-up means that many would-be members of readers' groups do not know how to go about joining or setting up a group, yet very much want to. The advantages of a national strategy would mean that advice in libraries and Ottakar's would be easy to find and of a uniformly high standard, enabling more people to take advantage of groups as well as paving the way for encouraging Readers' Days, where authors could discuss their work around the country.*<sup>62</sup>

## Publishers

*We are already working with readers' groups in some areas like Essex. If the idea of the national strategy were to raise the level of service in other areas we would definitely support it. If we can open up the channel by creating a database, we could pour all sorts down it. We would all market to it; we would send all sorts of offers and support packages via it – like special deals on reading group sets.*<sup>63</sup>

*You can see how a database would be useful in connecting children's reading groups in different places. It would be fantastic to link up a group in Essex with a group in Orkney.*<sup>64</sup>

## The Business Sector

The workforce development potential, social benefits and creativity of reading group activity also creates the opportunity for a closer relationship with the business sector, as clearly demonstrated by the Books & Business American Express workplace reading groups case study.

## The Health Sector

The value of reading as a creative activity that can be both individual and shared, a tool for learning and a contributory factor to development of individual and community well-being means that it has an important role to play for health-sector partners. This is clearly shown in the increasing interest in bibliotherapy and health information reading group role models. Primary Care Trusts in particular are beginning to develop partnerships with the library service to provide a neutral and therapeutic opportunity for people to explore issues that relate to their condition, to inform and educate and to provide an opportunity for relaxation and enjoyment.

Arts Council England is currently developing a strategic approach to reading and health as the result of recent research in this area.<sup>65</sup> This provides a useful framework within which to develop new partnerships with the health sector around reading group development.

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<sup>62</sup> Paul Henderson, Marketing Director, Ottakar's.

<sup>63</sup> Joanna Prior, Group Marketing Director, Penguin.

<sup>64</sup> Noel Murphy, Marketing Director, Faber.

<sup>65</sup> Reading and Health Mapping Research Project, Arts Council England, 2003.

## The Arts and Cultural Sector

The creativity of reading also makes the reading group model a relevant one for the arts and cultural sector. At the most obvious level it is being linked with writing, but other arts partners are also interested in its relevance to film, theatre, the visual arts and other art forms. Reading group members make an enthusiastic and informed audience for these art forms. Cross-sector projects such as Books Connect demonstrate the potential of reading groups as a basis for wider cultural sector partnership building. Reading groups play a key role in Books Connect in delivering book-inspired creative partnerships between libraries, museums, arts and archives.<sup>66</sup>

## Children's/Youth Sector

Children's agencies and the youth sector are emerging as library partners in reading group development, as clearly demonstrated by YouthBOOX, a library/youth service partnership to bring excluded young people back to reading.

## Education

The education and basic skills sectors also have a professional interest in the potential of reading groups to deliver their aims and objectives. This is true within local authorities where *community-learning colleagues are interested in reading groups as a form of learning. Funding can be obtained from this source.*<sup>67</sup>

Evidence suggests that partnerships with schools also work very well in supporting reading group activity for young people. The school link means that parents take the activity seriously, reinforcing reading at home. Schools-based groups have also proved a useful means of bringing families into the library, breaking down barriers and reaching reluctant readers, as well as a means of injecting creative reading into the curriculum.<sup>68</sup>

The Open University in particular is interested in exploring the common ground between their own work with adult learners and a national approach to public library reading group development. In initial discussions, The OU have identified clear potential for joint working in relation to the development of generic marketing and support resources, the use of OU tutors and academics to speak at readers' events and links to the OU archive of programmes featuring books. They have also identified potential links with the Open 2 web site.

*We can also do excellent deals on the buying in books via our co-publishing team – we should exploit this far more in my view.*<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Books Connect is an East Midlands partnership project where books and reading provide the launch pad for joint working between libraries, museums, the arts and archives sectors.

<sup>67</sup> Salford librarian quoted in a survey of reading groups in the North West.

<sup>68</sup> Evidence drawn from ASCEL reading group survey.

<sup>69</sup> Ann Stevens, The Open University.

## **The Media**

The recent involvement of public library reading groups with the BBC Big Read initiative signals another important emerging partnership for libraries. The reading group strand of the project was a great success, adding value to the activities of existing groups and stimulating the development of over 100 new groups. The national partnership also initiated valuable regional links between libraries and the BBC. The BBC is interested in further developing this emerging relationship between the public library reading group network and broadcast initiatives. The huge success of Channel 4's Richard and Judy Book Club also reinforces the potential of a public library/broadcast joint working.

## **Other Partners**

Reading groups offer common ground with the interests of a diverse range of other partners. These include Orange, who sponsor Chatterbooks, an Orange prize for Fiction educational initiative involving a network of children's reading groups in public libraries.

A national public library development programme for reading groups would provide a range of opportunities to both develop and reinforce public library reading partnerships around a shared agenda.

# Examining the Reading Group Model

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## A Flexible Model

The flexibility of the reading group model is demonstrated in the way it has adapted to meet the needs of a diverse range of different readers. Public libraries are playing a unique role in this evolution, developing a range of innovative models of reading group provision to ensure that all types of readers, whatever their needs, can enjoy reading group activity. They are, at the same time, maintaining the relevance of reading group activity to the traditional reading group member.

There is also enormous potential for the public library service to extend the library network of groups by developing a relationship with different groups of readers who meet outside of the library building. Research suggests that many non-library groups would welcome a closer relationship with libraries and access to the benefits that this relationship can bring. Overall, two thirds of adult private group members consulted indicated that they would find at least some level of library involvement in their group useful.<sup>70</sup>

## Library-based Groups

Many of the following reading group models already meet in or have a relationship with the public library. They may have been set up by a library authority or have developed a relationship with an authority over time. It is important to remember that not all groups linked to libraries meet in the library building.

Library reading groups gain a number of benefits from their relationship with the library service. These can include access to book stock, free reservations, group loans, the expertise of library staff in either recommending books or running the group, networking with other groups and the safety and neutrality of the library as a venue.

## Demographics

Many reading groups serve a specific demographic audience of readers. The target group may be age-related, e.g. children, teenagers, adults or the elderly. It may focus on families, on gender-based membership, on profession e.g. student groups, staff or professional groups, or on culturally specific groups such as those defined by their ethnicity.

### **Guildford Book Group**

***We're an all-women group because it grew out of the National Women's Register. We've discussed introducing men but it's always been voted out. Members are afraid the men will dominate.***<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research.*

<sup>71</sup> Extract from reading group entry to Penguin Orange Readers Group Prize.

### **Chatterbooks at Waterbeach Library, Cambridgeshire**

**Waterbeach Library is a small village library, with premises in a portacabin, and is the meeting place for the Chatterbooks Waterbeach Family Reading Group. This was set up initially in partnership with the primary school, which shares the same site. Waterbeach is a large village to the north east of Cambridgeshire of which approximately 18 per cent of the population is made up of personnel and dependents of the local army barracks.**

**The school agreed to a promotion by the Children's Team of the new reading group. We agreed to target specifically KS2 pupils, which also gave the library the opportunity to involve parents with their children's reading and those members of the community who had not come into contact with the library before.**

**The response to the promotion by the school, parents and pupils was overwhelmingly positive. It was decided that the group size should be no more than 14, a Children's Team member plus support from colleagues from across the service. The reading group was oversubscribed from the start. A waiting list was put in place to manage demand. Display boards in the library and a duplicate one in the school promotes the reading group, their activities and regular book reviews. The group reads a wide range of reading material.**

**The reading group fits in well with key objectives within the library service plan. These are reader development; partnership – working together for the benefit of the community; the use of ICT; lifelong learning and social inclusion.**

***The children have commented, we really love coming along to the group. I have really enjoyed the books at Chatterbooks and think Chatterbooks is a really good reading group. It has also been a positive experience for parents. Their reading has grown and changed and developed since the start of the group. The children have had access to and are now reading a range of books that we didn't envisage at the beginning.***<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *Chatterbooks Report.*

### **Bradford Bangladeshi Group**

**As Reading Promotions Officer for Bradford Libraries, I had been working in partnership with The Walking for Health Project here in Bradford. The coordinator is Bangladeshi and a keen reader, wanted to be part of a reading group and recognised the value of reading. We organised a meeting with a Bangladeshi community development worker to get a male perspective.**

**On advice from the two members of the community it was decided that male and female groups should be separate – members would be more comfortable with this. It was suggested that for the first meeting with the men’s group – all young fathers – we would not describe it as a reading group. Instead the men – all known to my Bangladeshi colleagues – were invited to meet in a curry restaurant, to open the fast during Ramadan. They were told that a (female) member of library staff would be present and there would be something free for their children! This initial meeting was very much a discussion group about the merits of reading, especially for boys and for them to have male role models as readers. I was able to obtain some funding to buy some children’s books. I took along a regular reading group book for the men.**

**The book was not a huge success and since then I have tried to obtain books that have been suggested, for example *Brick Lane*. It tends to be a very sociable event in a curry restaurant, with the food being an important element.**

**I go to the men’s group with my female Bangladeshi colleague – and take the books with me. I am hoping the group will become self-sufficient and the library will provide the books. I also want to organise related events such as theatre/cinema visits and make it a mixed family event. I have been told that in the Bangladeshi community ‘babysitters don’t exist’, families want to go out together. We would also like to make them multi-cultural events and eventually for the groups to be a mix of cultures. Some members have come to Film Extra events.**

***Members like the opportunity to discuss reading with other people. It made one member think about how important it is for my kids to see me reading. Others have commented, It’s good that the library has organised this for us. I now try to take my kids to the library at the weekend. Makes me read – I don’t want to look like the stupid lazy one!***

**The work supports the Annual Library Plan target of libraries as a multi-cultural facility and supports the 2020 Vision and the Community Cohesion strategy for the district. Community Cohesion is the key element in both the Council’s Corporate Plan and in *Framework for the Future*.<sup>73</sup>**

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<sup>73</sup> Case study provided by Bradford Library Service.

## Location

Groups can also be defined by their location. There are groups of readers that are work-based, library-based – including those that are facilitated by the library or are independent but meet in a library space –, groups based in readers' homes and those located in residential homes, prisons, bookshops and schools. There are also seasonal groups who meet in specific locations such as the park and the beach.

### **American Express Workplace Book Groups**

**Personnel staff at American Express offices at Brighton and Burgess Hill set up book groups in partnership with Books & Business. The aim was to explore their potential to improve the working atmosphere by bringing staff together from different parts of the company and at different levels of seniority and to take part in a relaxing and stress-busting activity. The groups worked with a facilitator from West Sussex Libraries and were asked to read a selection of carefully chosen novels.**

**The experience was a positive one for members. The group *relieves stress* and members were *motivated to read more and different books*. It also altered the *perception of the value and enjoyment of reading, rebalanced priorities, provided an environment for viewing differences as learning opportunities, a chance to practise verbal communication and listening skills and an opportunity for open and honest communication and debate*.**

**There were also benefits for management. *From a business perspective we were delighted with the team work that the group engaged and it broke down barriers. We hope that it will lead to increased employee engagement – through creativity and innovation, enhanced listening skills and awareness of different cultures and values.***<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Books & Business Good Practice Handbook*, The Reading Agency, 2003.

### **Ottakar's/ Coventry Libraries and Information Services Readers' Group**

**Ottakar's and CLIS have decided to link up on reading group development. This decision was reached to allow the store to access potential readers by utilising our database of people that would be interested in joining a readers group in the City but not necessarily within the library building. CLIS benefits by helping more people to access reading as well as being able to utilise the venue. We are still in the planning stages but will launch three readers' groups during Adult Learners Week in May 2004.**

**Staff involvement from the library service has been through the literature development worker who will attend meetings to ensure they run smoothly. At Ottakar's, a member of staff has been allocated to each specific readers' group. We have decided that we will ask members during the first meetings to recommend at least two books that they would like the group to read so that we can have a backlist of titles we can buy in. We also wish to respond to literary awards so we will buy in the shortlist of the Orange Prize, The Booker etc, as we do with our other readers' groups.**

**Where the benefits of the partnership become more apparent is how we buy our books. We will buy the copies from Ottakar's at a reduced rate to service each member of the group. They then also have the option to buy their own copy from the store at the same reduced rate. We have agreed to this as we are so keen on utilising the venue as well as the other benefits that linking up with Ottakar's brings. For example, in linking up we can get hold of books on a sale-or-return basis for our author events and avoid competing for the same authors to host events.**

**As the main contact for reader development within Coventry, the establishing of a new readers' group within the city ties in with my reader development strategy and as such, any new enquiries relating to readers' groups are informed of the existence of this particular group.**

**It remains to be seen if the partnership works well but with the necessary interest from readers and the commitment from CLIS and the manager of Ottakar's, all of which are in place, we envisage that the readers' groups will go from strength to strength.<sup>75</sup>**

### **Format**

Reading groups can also serve readers with specific reading needs in relation to format. There are listening groups, those reading large print and Braille, virtual groups meeting on-line, media groups including those linked to magazines, newspapers and radio.

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<sup>75</sup> Case study provided by Coventry Library and Information Services.

### **Newbury Library VIP Bookclub**

**We started our VIP (visually impaired) Bookclub in July 2001. Approximately 12 people meet every month at Newbury Library and chat over a cuppa. The majority of the group are over 50 and need transport to get to the group, so we are helped by Berkshire Blind Society and Calibre cassette library in providing transport and cassettes of the chosen books.**

**The best thing is that it provides an opportunity for us VIPs to get together and take part in a mainstream activity where the common theme is books, as opposed to our disability ... We get a real sense of belonging and community spirit through meeting up every month. One of our members says, *It is lovely to be part of the Visually Impaired Readers' Group at Newbury Library. It has made such a difference to my life especially since I lost my husband last year... If someone asks me to go out with them on my VIP Readers' day, I say No ... I am going to the library and that's special.*<sup>76</sup>**

### **Reading Level**

Reading groups can also respond to the level of reading skills of members. There are, for example, basic skills/emergent reading groups and groups for dyslexic and academic readers and gifted children.

### **Quick Reads Project – Essex**

**Quick Reads was a partnership initiative begun in 2000 by Essex Libraries and Adult Education, continued as part of the national project, The Vital Link, 2001–2, and then funded by the Learning and Skills Council Essex, 2002–4. The overall objectives were to promote the pleasure of reading to emergent readers and to provide a new resource for engaging and motivating learners. It gives learners the opportunity to select, read and review books from a specially targeted collection entitled Quick Reads. These are mainstream books selected as being accessible for emergent readers using criteria drawn up with Mid Essex Adult Community College.**

**Some students enjoyed the reading and group discussion experience so much that they choose to hold their own regular Booktalk groups. Some meet at lunchtimes at their colleges, others in their local libraries, while a few groups opted for tutor-led class reading and discussion of a particular title. All the groups became increasingly vocal in their discussions, and adventurous in their reading, moving on from the Quick Reads titles to the wider library shelves. The increased confidence of all of these students has been commented on by the tutors. One Basic Skills coordinator tutor commented: *'Our learners now have encouraged the tutors to set up reading groups in the library ... the learners have taken a bit of control there, haven't they.*<sup>77</sup>**

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<sup>76</sup> Extract from reading group entry to Penguin Orange Reading Group Prize.

<sup>77</sup> Case Study provided by Essex Library Service.

### **Lifelong Learning/Library Partnership Reading Groups, Blackburn with Darwen**

A network of adult reading groups within the community set up by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council Lifelong Learning Team in partnership with the library service and with one-off support from Blackburn with Darwen Primary Care Trust. The project uses the reading group model to widen participation in learning and make it more inclusive and also builds on the value of reading as a means of working through trauma, providing space for reflection and building self-esteem. The first group was established in 2000/01 and continues to meet, along with other groups established since.<sup>78</sup>

### **Life Situation/Purpose**

There are also groups for readers with specific needs linked to their life situation including teenagers at risk, young carers, young offenders, looked-after children and home-educated children. There are also bibliotherapy groups that read to heal and reading groups that link reading with health information and well-being.

### **YouthBOOX Moving On**

#### **Cramlington Community High School**

The Cramlington project is based in a purpose-built youth centre and is working with young people who are particularly at risk of dropping out on transfer to the high school owing to a reluctance to read, lack of support and academic underachievement. Currently 9 girls are involved aged between 13 and 16. The group has reading ages ranging from 6–12 years. The school is linked with the youth project through a community education youth worker based at the school and the school librarian who works with the youth worker and the young people at the youth centre.

The project is running weekly evening sessions, the emphasis of which has been to create a positive environment in which young people can feel confident in talking about themselves, their reading and their learning needs and comfortable with the written word. The type of text used within the project includes cookery books, horoscope and spell books, teen magazines and anything by Jacqueline Wilson.

Getting out and about has also been important, in fact *one of the most effective literacy activities around – improving life coping skills ... and making reading relevant – bus trips are also good for word games and for flicking through magazines to show reading as a free-time activity, not just school.* The school librarian and YouthBOOX Moving On Project worker also notes that *four of the group now help regularly in the learning resource centre and count themselves as part of the reading group – although they still find it difficult to choose books at an accessible level for themselves. Youth workers too are quite shocked by the enthusiasm for books and the general stickability of the young people – and seem to be realising the depth and relevance of the issues tackled in fiction.*<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Reading and Health Mapping Research Project*, Arts Council England and The Reading Agency, 2003.

<sup>79</sup> *YouthBOOX Moving On*, Paul Hamlyn Interim Report, The Reading Agency, 2003.

## **Reading and You Scheme, Kirklees/Calderdale**

**The RAYS project is a library-led initiative supported by a partnership with local Primary Care Trusts. It uses books, the social interaction of reading groups and one-to-one dialogue to encourage those suffering from mild to moderate stress, depression, anxiety and social isolation to discover alternative coping mechanisms.<sup>80</sup>**

### **Specialist Interest**

Some reading groups can be characterised by the reading interests of their members. There are groups that read mainly science fiction, poetry, crime, sea stories and romance. There are groups that concentrate on prize winners, groups that read Black and Asian literature and groups that read gay and lesbian literature. There are also groups that read non-fiction in general and others that concentrate on history, travel books and popular science in particular.

### **Other Characteristics**

In addition, some reading groups operate closed membership. This means there are restrictions in place governing who can join. Membership in these types of group is often by invitation and shaped by friends' networks. Open groups operate no restrictions on membership other than numbers. Most library groups are open.

Some are also time limited, linked to a specific promotion such as The Big Read or a programme such as Chatterbooks. Having said this, many such groups retain their momentum and continue to meet after the original promotion has ended.

### **Key Characteristics of Reading Groups**

Existing evidence enables us to identify some common key characteristics shared by these different reading group models.

#### **Book Choice**

The demographics or specialist interests of a reading group will clearly have an impact on the types of book read. Specialist groups will focus on reading in their area of interest and children's groups will read material relevant to their age and reading level.

Research indicates that adult groups tend to read contemporary fiction most often by women writers.<sup>81</sup> The classics, crime, mystery and thriller fiction is also popular. Non-library groups are more likely than library groups to read poetry and plays but library groups are more likely to chose sci-fi, fantasy, horror, romance and historical romance. Biography tends to be the most popular form of non-fiction read by both types of group.

Reading groups do, however, have broad and eclectic reading tastes so there are always surprises.

*In each list we try to include a classic, a modern novel, an autobiography or biography, a foreign writer and a detective novel (just for fun!).*

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<sup>80</sup> *Reading and Health Mapping Research Project.*

<sup>81</sup> This section draws on the findings of *Reading Groups and Public Library Research.*

*Birdsong was definitely one of the most popular; Madame Bovary too and A History of Insects. We didn't care for Chocolat, most liked Captain Corelli's Mandolin (though I hated it – unconvincing characters, chunky prose); most liked The Shipping News – Guy didn't, he reckoned nothing happened... We had divided opinions on some – like The Blind Assassin.*<sup>82</sup>

Librarians are also playing an important role in broadening the reading appetite of groups through recommendations, advice and work with specific partners. The British Centre for Literary Translation has, for example, worked with a number of library authorities to introduce reading groups to literature in translation. The Director notes that *with initial barriers overcome, readers began to explore books that would normally have been left languishing on library shelves, and challenged their own preconceptions as readers, both culturally in their approach to the act of reading and their approach to language.*<sup>83</sup>

## **How Books are Chosen**

Reading groups use a variety of methods to select books. Often members make suggestions from which the group as a whole then choose a selection using discussion or voting. In some groups, members take turns to choose the book to be read rather than holding a discussion to reach a consensus.

Library groups often read books recommended by library staff, are guided by what is available in the library or select titles from suggestions made by the group organiser.

Although many groups all read the same book, there are a number of groups who come together to share a range of different types of reading often linked by theme. Groups for children and young people generally seem to adopt this approach, finding it more effective in keeping children involved and interested.

*Suggestions are made. Discussion follows. Consensus reached. Occasionally resort to a vote.*

*Librarian asks reading group for suggestions, but has some recommendations available if no ideas.*<sup>84</sup>

## **Meeting Structure**

Some reading groups adopt a formal structure to their meetings. This may mean that members are given the opportunity to give their reactions to a book before a general discussion or that there is an introduction by the group leader or from a group member. Informal discussions with no fixed structure are also common but are more characteristic of private groups or groups without a leader/coordinator.

Many children's and teenage reading groups are radically changing this approach by using a wide range of activities to provide an accessible way into reading. This means that meetings can be very different to traditional reading group sessions involving participants in active, hands-on activity that may include music, photography, cartooning, crafts, film-making, performance, storytelling and trips out to events, bookshops and a range of other venues. Some children's groups add incentives to support participation e.g. free video or CD loans.

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<sup>82</sup> Reading group members quoted in Orange Penguin Reading Group Prize.

<sup>83</sup> Catherine Fuller, Director, The British Centre for Literary Translation, UEA.

<sup>84</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Library Research*.

Refreshments are important to the social/fun element so characteristic of the reading group experience.

## **Group Size**

An average reading group will have 10 members. It is generally accepted that membership should not exceed 15. The majority of groups operate some form of restriction on membership usually linked to numbers. Library groups tend to operate open recruitment.

## **Demographics**

Library-led partnerships targeting specific groups such as teenagers, children, families and specific cultural groups are significantly evolving the traditional demographic profile of the white, well-educated, retired and female reading group member to give the reading group model a broader application. Specialist groups are being created to cater for the needs of emergent readers and readers who are visually impaired. Libraries are also actively supporting groups for children and teenagers and groups that meet off site in hospitals, youth and community centres and the work place.

Libraries work with external partners to establish groups, promote their existence and to target specific communities is bringing new readers to reading groups and the experience of talking to others about books.

Libraries should not, however, undervalue the traditional stereotype of the elderly female reading group member.<sup>85</sup> In this context, reading groups have an important social implication for a neglected group, the elderly who live alone.<sup>86</sup>

## **Why Readers Join Groups**

Recent research indicates that three-quarters of adult library group members surveyed joined a reading group because they heard about it in the library, often seeing it advertised there. One in six heard about it from a friend/relative.

Over half of private group members heard about the group from word of mouth, with 12 per cent finding out about it from the library and a quarter seeing the group advertised elsewhere (bookshops, educational institutions, etc.)

The most common reason given for adults joining a group is the desire to talk about books and exchange opinions about them, followed by the desire to broaden reading habits. Other common reasons include joining to meet people/for social reasons, to read more, to get more out of books and to improve knowledge.

*For the pleasure of discussing books with others.*<sup>87</sup>

These reasons have implications for the marketing of groups.<sup>88</sup> Many library authorities are using the fun/social aspect of reading group activity to hook people in. The leisure link also provides a useful framework for widening the net in terms of marketing to include other leisure venues.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The typical profile of a library reading group member is a white, well-educated female, aged 45+ and probably retired. *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>86</sup> Conclusions drawn from a recent survey of public library reading groups in North Lancashire.

<sup>87</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>88</sup> *Reading Groups and Public Library Research*.

<sup>89</sup> ASCEL reading groups survey.

More research is needed into why children and young people join reading groups but we can infer from existing experience that young readers are also looking for an opportunity to talk about their reading with others and have some fun.

*A chance to meet other people interested in books and to find out more about different types of books.*<sup>90</sup>

*I get to do lots of fun activities and they let us have the first look at new books.*<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Reading group member quoted in *Reading Groups and Public Libraries Research*.

<sup>91</sup> Chatterbooks members quoted in *Chatterbooks Report*.

# Meeting the Challenge of Public Library Reading Group Provision

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There are a number of challenges to the implementation of a national public library development programme for reading groups, particularly in the context of local support and provision. Identifying these barriers is an important first step to overcoming them. Also, while local authorities encounter different pressures according to local circumstances, practical models are emerging to help libraries overcome some of the challenges.

## Lack of Strategic Profile

In some library services the support of reading groups may be seen as a low priority. This might be because of a lack of awareness of the benefits to the individual and the local authority or the prevalence of inaccurate perceptions of what reading groups are and who they serve. There is also the very real pressure caused by limited capacity within an authority often compounded by ad hoc provision outside of strategic thinking.

The local authority will ultimately decide the level of library service support for reading groups, but it is important that this is a considered approach within wider strategies for reader development and the service as a whole. Some services choose not to engage in direct provision but focus on creating a supportive framework for independent groups. Others will provide for target groups in the community, while giving a lower level of support for independent groups.

## Perceptions

Stereotypes are widespread about both libraries and reading groups and can prevent some individuals from joining a group or some groups from engaging with a library. Many people are also unaware of reading groups and their potential to meet their needs.

Some library services are working to raise awareness, correct false perceptions and explain clearly how people can join in the reading group movement.

## Meeting the Need

Although many library authorities are actively developing reading groups, there is every reason to believe that demand, both potential and real, exceeds existing provision. Some groups have waiting lists; others have too many members.<sup>92</sup>

*Interest in joining or setting up groups continues, enquiries received almost every week.*<sup>93</sup>

Evidence clearly suggests the extent to which people enjoy talking about books.<sup>94</sup> Many people are, however, unaware of the existence of reading groups and of how much they might enjoy being a member. There is an important role here for libraries to market reading groups actively to the wider community. Many potential reading group members are not current library users but can be introduced to the reading group experience through the

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<sup>92</sup> *Reading Groups and Public Library Research.*

<sup>93</sup> Cheshire librarian quoted in a recent survey of readers groups in the North West.

<sup>94</sup> *Reading the Situation, Book Reading, Buying and Borrowing Habits in Britain.*

targeted partnership outreach work made possible by public library reading group development.

Libraries must also not assume a lack of demand for library-run groups because users have not asked for them. Libraries, rather than the general public, have initiated most reading group development. Once the offer has been made the response is usually enthusiastic. This is clearly reinforced by Learndirect's feedback on The Big Read.

*More book clubs! The initial response from members of the public was more successful and inspiring than imagined so more book clubs on the database would have been useful. Given the profile was so high, people expect book clubs on their doorstep and so more provision would have been well received. However, in the absence of a local book club, callers were motivated to set up their own, although the preference was to join one immediately.<sup>95</sup>*

The library experience reinforces this observation by an external agency.

*The demand generated by The BBC's Big Read was so much that I had to 'close the books' on the current two groups, but as a result, I'm starting up a brand new group ... I shall look into expanding yet further.<sup>96</sup>*

Neither should library authorities assume that private groups meet the needs of library users. Many library users prefer the approach of a library group in terms of location, range/type of membership and access to free books and they may not necessarily come into contact with private groups.

There is, therefore, a substantial challenge for libraries in responding to and developing the demand for reading group provision.

## **Servicing Groups**

There are also demands to be met in the servicing of groups. Free book supply is an important benefit to being in a library reading group. This means an investment of time and resources in developing guidelines on loans, support services such as free reservations and working with groups to plan stock provision, to develop effective systems of book supply and to explore different models for reading and discussing books. Reading groups also value support from libraries in the form of staff advice and expertise, direct input into running groups, activities and events, book lists, reviews, information about promotions and support for networking with other groups.

The development, support and servicing role places considerable pressure on the capacity of the library service in terms of staff time and skills and physical resources such as book stock. In the long term, the implementation of a national public library development programme for reading groups will ease some of this pressure through the provision of national strands of virtual and real reading group activity, the creation of generic resources and support materials and the dissemination of good practice models.

In the short term, lessons can be learnt from the way in which some authorities are tackling the issue of capacity to reap the benefits of reading group development. A number of clear local and regional strategies are beginning to emerge.

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<sup>95</sup> Learndirect's feedback on The BBC Big Read.

<sup>96</sup> Respondent to The Reading Agency's first-stage public library reading group mapping survey.

## Emerging Strategies

These can be summarised as:

- Partnership building to support development and delivery.
- The use of emerging national programmes e.g. Chatterbooks and The Vital Link.
- The development of effective structures, systems and services combined with new and different models of book use.
- Building capacity through staff training and development.
- Building capacity in groups to underpin sustainability and independence.
- Targeting resources to priority areas/communities of greatest need.
- Providing virtual provision.
- Using the investment in reading group provision for the wider benefit and support of the service. Building on:
  - the positive impact on library audience and membership
  - the positive impact on issues
  - the positive impact on staff development
  - the audience potential for events and promotions
  - the stimulation provided for other readers through reading group reviews and reader feedback
  - the opportunity to consult and develop a closer relationship with users
  - the development of a creative force in the community.

The following case studies provide a range of useful models for how public libraries have effectively delivered reading group provision by matching capacity with approach. They also prove that growth and development is possible within existing resources as long as it is strategic, planned and properly managed.

*It is important to build the work into your business planning process. It is a key point in ours.<sup>97</sup>*

*We've grown a lot ... I put three library groups on the Big Read web site – now we have seven and another two in the pipeline. Also projects such as the Great Reading Adventures and a Penguin Readers' Day have brought us into contact with another 20 independent groups. And the really good news is that reader development is now seen as a core part of service delivery. I am no longer solo but have a team working with me so we are able to be a lot more ambitious. I have already started a reading groups' newsletter.<sup>98</sup>*

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<sup>97</sup> Stockport librarian quoted in a survey of reading groups in the North West.

<sup>98</sup> Respondent to The Reading Agency's first-stage public library reading group mapping survey.

# Case Study One – Essex Libraries

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In 1999, reader development became a key part of the service plan for Essex Libraries. One of the first targets was to have a reading group or chain at all of Essex's 74 libraries. This seemed a very ambitious target at the time but was in fact quickly met and Essex now supports over 240 groups. The groups meet in a variety of venues from libraries to pubs, residential homes and private homes, but all receive books and support in reading choices from the library service.

## Key Factors

### Identify Key Staff

In Essex there was a newly created reader development post supported by a new reader development team, a network of librarians across the county who had reader development as one of their responsibilities.

### Develop Policy and Practice

Issues to be decided on included:

- Borrowing privileges of reading groups  
Groups in Essex can borrow multiple copies of any paperback titles but not the latest hardback bestseller. Alternative formats can also be borrowed when available. It has not been necessary to establish reading group collections because of the size of the stock of Essex Libraries and the fact that groups differ widely in their choice of reading.
- Staff involvement  
Library staff facilitate the setting up of groups but are expected to withdraw once the group is self-reliant. On-going contact is maintained but in a less intensive way.
- Establishing a contact point/s for enquiries about reading groups  
The central reader development number is always given to the media and on printed publicity but enquiries are often dealt with by reference to local library staff. Essex readers' web site [www.essexcc.gov.uk/askchris](http://www.essexcc.gov.uk/askchris) now includes a searchable database of reading groups, but in the early days when groups were setting up information was changing all the time. At local level, staff would be key contact for groups and would keep a list of interested people in the run up to a group being established.

### Involve a Wider Number of Staff

All library managers also had a target of achieving a reading group/activity at their library. They were supported in doing this by the reader development team.

- Staff training  
A training course was developed which was then delivered across the county by the reader development team. Training covered both the why and how of reading groups and book chains.

## **Publicity Campaign**

The publicity campaign was a combination of press, printed publicity and word of mouth. Word of mouth was extremely effective with library staff targeting keen readers whom themselves would spread the word. Some reading groups meet while libraries are open and provide a very visible advert for the pleasures of being in a group.

- Connecting with independent reading groups  
There had been a number of independent reading groups with no connections with the library service. Once the publicity about the service for reading groups began, many groups came forward to take advantage of the real benefits the library service could provide.

## **Keeping the Momentum Going**

In Essex there is a continual programme of events for readers, a readers' web site and quarterly Booktalk newsletter, all of which generate further enquiries from readers who want to get involved. Very simple advertising at local level was also found to be extremely effective. Each library has a Booktalk board where reading group meetings are advertised and reading group comments are used to encourage other readers.

## **Responding to the Different Needs of Readers**

The focus now is on supporting specific groups of readers. For example, out of the work in promoting reading to basic skills learners, there has evolved five reading groups for emergent readers. Working in partnership with the Rural Community Council, there are now a number of rural reading groups served by mobile libraries.

## **Maximising the Benefits of Reading Groups**

- Attracts support from publishers  
The network of reading groups across Essex has attracted widespread interest and support from publishers, e.g. Readers' Days with Penguin and Time Warner. There has also been widespread support for Essex Book Festival including Penguin sponsoring the opening event.
- Identified support for library events  
It is now possible to programme with confidence more challenging reader events such as new writers and writers in translation.
- Invaluable source of reviews which can benefit many other readers and supports best use of stock  
Reading group reviews are actively used to encourage other readers to try something different. They are used with stock displays, published in review leaflets and provide content for Essex Libraries' readers' web site [www.essexcc.gov.uk/askchris](http://www.essexcc.gov.uk/askchris)
- Supports audience development for new writers  
Reading groups make a contribution to local and regional cultural strategies through the support for new writers.

- Development of creative forces in the community

A number of reading groups are now organising events themselves or taking part in partnering events as part of the Essex Book Festival. Members are often active in encouraging other readers to get involved or to attend reader events. A striking example is a member of an emergent reader Booktalk group who has gone on to set up reading groups for children and teachers at her children's school and has also established a monthly Book Club slot with BBC Essex.

# Case Study Two – Lincolnshire Libraries

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About four years ago we became aware that there were a growing number of readers' groups in existence throughout the county. Some were well established and organised themselves in a variety of ways, with or without any input from local library staff. However, interest was undoubtedly growing and library staff were receiving more and more requests for advice and practical help.

The question was how to deal with it and how to go on dealing with it effectively should the trend continue.

## Aims and Objectives

- To encourage groups to manage themselves without becoming dependent on the involvement of library staff.
- To discourage groups (for their own sake as well as ours!) from relying on the library request service (or the goodwill of local library staff) for the supply of their books. This was a particular problem in Lincolnshire due to the shortage of bookshops as an alternative source of supply.
- To provide a service that would be of continuing benefit to existing groups as well as to new ones.
- To provide a service that would be of equal benefit throughout our very big, and largely rural, county.

## Solution

- An introductory handout to create interest in the idea of readers' groups generally – one that 'sells the sizzle, not the sausage'. These are available in every library.
- An information pack – promoted in the handout and free on request. This is intended as a 'starter' pack with ideas and guidelines for starting and running a group. Initially it included contact details for existing groups but nowadays, in view of the number of groups, these are available only on 'TheZone'.
- A collection of books stored centrally to which readers' groups can subscribe. They are able to select titles up to six months in advance of their meeting and the books are delivered to the library or mobile library of their choice for them to collect. Details of the service are available in the information pack.
- An interactive web site called 'TheZone' [www.the-zone.org.uk](http://www.the-zone.org.uk), which groups can use for posting reviews and making contact with one another. The web site was part-funded by trAce and has two 'zones' – one for readers and another for writers. It also has links to other web sites of interest. All the information from the information pack is also available on the web site.
- 'Booklinc' is a variation on the reading chain idea but is, in effect, another form of reading group for those who don't want to meet or who are unable to – mobile-library and housebound readers.
- A quarterly newsletter sent free of charge to all groups who subscribe to the central collection. This includes reviews, details of projects, interesting web sites and news from local groups.

## **Challenges**

- Maintaining funding for the subscription collection which is now used by over 70 groups. Demand is continuing to rise and it is important to keep the collection fresh for the more established groups. We are currently spending between £5,000 and £10,000 per annum on the collection from our Reader Development Fund. Libraries benefit as copies are distributed throughout the system when they leave the collection.
- As intended, we have succeeded in shifting the burden of work relating to readers' groups away from local staff but have, to an extent, transferred it elsewhere in the form of managing the subscription collection, the web site and the newsletter.
- Our 'sizzling' information pack won the PPRG award for best publicity material in 2000 but now needs to be updated.
- Keeping contact details for local groups up to date and finding out about new ones. Even now we know that there are far more in existence than we have information on.
- Persuading groups to make contact with one another and use the web site as we originally intended.

## **Developments**

- In the last two years we have started 28 readers' groups for young people mostly in the 8–13 age group.
- We have established a reading group based at a Secure Unit for teenage young offenders and another group for young carers.
- We now have six family reading groups in the county.
- We are working in partnership with BBC Radio Lincolnshire on a 'Book of the Month' project. Library staff select the title, which is promoted in libraries and on the radio before being the subject of a live radio phone-in towards the end of the month. The phone-in is broadcast from the BBC Bus and members of local readers' groups are invited to take part.
- A session for readers' groups will feature in the Lincoln Book Festival in May 2004.

# Case Study Three – Bedfordshire Libraries

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A Senior Librarian, Reading Development was appointed in June 2002 and three Reader Outreach Workers were appointed in September 2002 following the success of a Reader in Residence post. The residency established a number of reading groups in the South Bedfordshire area, which continue to meet.

Extracts from the Reading Development Plan include the following:

‘To encourage readers of all ages, and social backgrounds, to widen their reading experience by increasing access to reading experiences.’

Objectives include:

- Encouraging the formation of new reading groups within the community.
- Encouraging existing reading groups to participate in library activities.
- Identifying private reading groups and encouraging them to make use of the services and facilities offered by Bedfordshire Libraries.
- Encouraging the use of the Virtual Library, especially the contribution of reviews.
- Publishing readers’ reviews on the web site to encourage and raise awareness of the diverse range of books available.
- To set up readers’ discussion groups by email and chat rooms with discussion forums.

## Development

A family reading group established at Toddington in the early 1970s is still meeting once a month in conjunction with Chatterbooks. Books are borrowed individually. Adult groups were meeting in Leighton Buzzard in the late 1980s when staff were alerted by multiple requests to the fact that there were reading groups in the area. An approach was made in 1995 to Shefford Library by the Adult Education tutor at Samuel Whitbread School about the possibility of starting a reading group. Posters and a newspaper article invited interested people to attend. Ten people attended the initial meeting and since then members have met monthly for an hour in the library. The group was keen not to all read the same title so therefore new books were perused which led to book-/author-related discussions and a selection taken home at the end of the evening for comments at the beginning of the next meeting. The group has produced a reading list, which is on the Bedfordshire Libraries web site.

Another early experiment was the formation of a staff book chain with the intention of rolling this out to the public, but the book chains did not take off in quite the same way. Most members of the Adult and Community Services Team attempted to set up book groups in their local library. For example, both Ampthill and Maulden reading groups have been established since 1999 and although they met initially in the library they now meet in each other’s homes.

The groups in Biggleswade and Potton were also initiated by library staff in 2000. An inaugural meeting was advertised and people were invited to attend. We had a selection of possible book titles in multiple copies for them to borrow. The purpose of the groups was explained, group behaviour, library rules and the first venue and book selected, and of course refreshments were provided. Two groups still meet in the afternoon and one in the evening.

After one year all the groups in one area were invited back to the library to meet – the start of tea- and then chocolate-tastings. I compiled a list of books with tea in the title from which the

groups selected and read in advance. At the meeting they had a joint book discussion and then I did a tea-tasting. The following year I did the same with chocolate.

With the increasing numbers of reading groups being established we developed some guidelines and definitions for reading groups. The use of the word reading was deliberate and was preferred to book clubs, although some groups still call themselves by this name.

We have established guidelines so that all reading groups can borrow multiple copies with free requests and no fines. There is a reading group request form. We list multiple copies of narrative non-fiction and fiction twice yearly. We also have regular reader liaison meetings twice a year, which give our readers the chance to ask questions and meet each other and the staff have a chance to learn about new initiatives in which they can take part. Attendance at these varies, although we try varying times of the day or evening in different venues. We have on occasion invited an author to address the audience or followed the business meeting with a showing of a film based on one of the big read titles. The latest meeting produced a request involved with discussing books with other groups. Several groups expressed an interest in shadowing this year's Orange Prize.

A Readers' Rag is produced twice yearly with contributions both from members of reading groups and with the Reader Outreach workers.

We have always encouraged reading groups to submit reviews of their reading and initially these were put on the web site as book of the month. Different groups were asked to submit a title each month. Now there are so many reviews submitted the review pages on the library web site are being put into a database.

We currently have 80 groups in Bedfordshire including one teenage group, which has a regular attendance at Dunstable Library of six teenagers. This is led alternately by the reader outreach worker and the Senior Librarian, Youth. Most groups meet in their own homes and several belong to other umbrella organisations such as U3A or NWR. At least one group is specifically concerned with the reading of Christian books. Several groups are based in villages outside of Bedfordshire. Several groups were in existence before making use of the library services. At least two groups have folded but members now belong to other groups. There is one group for the visually impaired and several groups were formed directly as a result of the BBC Big Read. Most groups chose to read the same title or at least the same author.

Issues for the period April 2003–September 2003 – 2,914 books were borrowed by reading groups. Titles included many from the Big Read – most surprising was 'Katherine' and 'I Capture the Castle'.

The reading groups do like to keep in touch with each other and one member of staff reports contact from France, which has both English and American readers. (No, we aren't sending them books!)

Further information is available is on the Bedfordshire Libraries web site [www.bedfordshire.gov.uk](http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk)

# Reading Group Tools and Resources

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There are a number of tools and a range of resources available to support the development of a public library reading group programme. Some of these are already developed and being used in reading group development, others exist independently of reading group activity but have a potential relationship to it. There are also new tools and resources emerging from *Framework for the Future* that have either a direct relationship to reading group development, such as the on-line reading group project, or a potential relationship that will become more concrete as strands of work relating to adult learners, young people and partnership development progress.

The first-stage mapping of existing tools and resources relevant to reading group development is an important first step to identifying strengths as well as gaps in provision. It also provides the basis on which to build a public library reading group tool kit. Evidence suggests that central planning support and 'transferable tool kits' are a significant resource for hard-pressed staff. The Orange Chatterbooks pack has been particularly important in this context.<sup>99</sup>

The public library reading group tool kit would underpin the baseline reading group offer in libraries, providing reader facing resources and generic marketing and support materials as well as guidelines, models, evidence and advocacy arguments for the profession. This new resource would be the result of a consolidation of existing provision supported by the generation of new material to fill the gaps.

It is anticipated that the building of such a tool kit will take place in the next phase of work.

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<sup>99</sup> ASCEL reading group survey.

## **On-Line Provision**

As part of the *Framework for the Future*, Opening the Book are developing a model for adult on-line reading group activity. This represents a key element of the national framework for public library reading development, underpinning the standard reading group offer that libraries can make to readers.

The on-line reading group development will enable all authorities to offer high-quality participation to users via a single point of entry and all readers to join an on-line reading group and make contact with other readers. It will also offer a networking facility for small and isolated groups and a route in to on-line activity for authorities with less developed web capacity while also acting as a portal to successful existing networks.

The initiative will be piloted with an on-line reading group in September 2004 with national roll out completed by September 2005. Library authorities will be kept informed of the development of this project by Opening the Book and via their web site. [www.openingthebook.com](http://www.openingthebook.com)

Other important on-line opportunities are also emerging from *Framework for the Future* including children's activity linked to the development of Chatterbooks.

## **Other On-Line Initiatives**

The British Council have also developed an on-line reading community project that libraries can tap into through a web site that enables UK reading groups to meet virtually with reading groups from around the world.

EnCompass has been designed to build virtual reading communities so that readers everywhere can share book talk on the web board, meet in the virtual chat room and post up reviews on the web site. EnCompass at [www.encompass.culture.com](http://www.encompass.culture.com) provides an on-line worldwide reading group for adults, teenagers (12–18) and children (3–12). It is supported by an on-line reader in residence who writes a monthly newsletter, organises activities and reviews books.

Juliet Wragge Morley at The British Council is keen to develop a link with the public library system in the context of on-line reading group development and to facilitate on-line meetings between UK library reading groups and groups in other parts of the world. There is clear potential here for greater collaboration around on-line reading group activity.

## **On-Line Training and Support**

Opening the Book is also leading on Branching Out 2, a three-year on-line training programme reaching all library authorities. This programme will cover training support for staff involved in developing on-line reader services and training in a range of areas linked to reading group support. [www.branching-out.net](http://www.branching-out.net)

Their Reading Futures also offers relevant training and support for libraries' work with young people. Much of this is also very relevant to reading group development. The Their Reading Futures web site provides an on-line support module for running reading groups for young people aged between 4 and 12. The module includes guidelines, advice and ideas as well as support with evaluation. Material relating to the running of teenage groups will be added to the module in the next phase of work after April 2004. The Building Skills sections on the web site also contain advice and support relevant to reading group activity. [www.theirreadingfutures.org.uk/newsite](http://www.theirreadingfutures.org.uk/newsite)

## Reading Group Related Web Sites

An initial search of reading group related web sites indicates a varied range of available resources. The following presents a representative sample only. An asterisk in the third column indicates a site that is regarded as accessible to visually impaired people by the National Library for the Blind. An asterisk with a question mark (?) indicates that the site is accessible but that it creates some significant problems for visually impaired people.

### Publishers

ORGANISATION	WEB ADDRESS	VIP
Bloomsbury	<a href="http://www.bloomsbury.com/readingclub">www.bloomsbury.com/readingclub</a>	
Penguin	<a href="http://www.penguin.co.uk/static/packages/uk/readers">www.penguin.co.uk/static/packages/uk/readers</a>	
Random House	<a href="http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/readersgroup">www.randomhouse.co.uk/readersgroup</a>	*
Harper Collins	<a href="http://www.readinggroups.co.uk">http://www.readinggroups.co.uk</a>	*
Transworld	<a href="http://www.booksatransworld.co.uk/feet/readGdsList">http://www.booksatransworld.co.uk/feet/readGdsList</a>	
Barrington Stoke	<a href="http://www.barringtonstoke.co.uk">www.barringtonstoke.co.uk</a>	*
Bedford St Martins	<a href="http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks">www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks</a>	*

### Public Libraries

ORGANISATION	WEB ADDRESS	VIP
Bedfordshire	<a href="http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk/webingres/bedfordshire/vlib/0.books_reading">www.bedfordshire.gov.uk/webingres/bedfordshire/vlib/0.books_reading</a>	*
Bexley	<a href="http://www.bexley.gov.uk/service/lib-readinggroups">www.bexley.gov.uk/service/lib-readinggroups</a>	*
Bradford	<a href="http://www.bradlibs.com/reader2reader">www.bradlibs.com/reader2reader</a>	* ?
Essex	<a href="http://www.essexcc.gov.uk/askchris">www.essexcc.gov.uk/askchris</a>	*
Derbyshire	<a href="http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/librar/readerdev1.htm">http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/librar/readerdev1.htm</a>	*
Gateshead	<a href="http://www.asaplive.com/iKnow/ReadingRoom.cfm">http://www.asaplive.com/iKnow/ReadingRoom.cfm</a>	*
Kensington and Chelsea	<a href="http://www.rbkc.gov.uk/libraries/readinggroups">www.rbkc.gov.uk/libraries/readinggroups</a>	*
Nottingham	<a href="http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/libraries/whatson/readinggroups">www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/libraries/whatson/readinggroups</a>	*
Shropshire	<a href="http://www.shropshireonline.gov.uk/libraries">www.shropshireonline.gov.uk/libraries</a>	*
Westminster	<a href="http://www.westminster.gov.uk/libraries/children/chatterbooks">www.westminster.gov.uk/libraries/children/chatterbooks</a>	*

### Agencies

ORGANISATION	WEB ADDRESS	VIP
BBC	<a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/bigread">www.bbc.co.uk/bigread</a>	*
Radio 4 Book Club	<a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/bookcase/bookclub">www.bbc.co.uk/education/bookcase/bookclub</a>	
The British Council	<a href="http://www.encompassculture.com">www.encompassculture.com</a>	
National Reading Campaign	<a href="http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/readinggroups">www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/readinggroups</a>	*
Book Trust	<a href="http://www.booktrust.org.uk/bookmates">www.booktrust.org.uk/bookmates</a>	* ?
Scottish Book Trust	<a href="http://www.scottishbooktrust.com">www.scottishbooktrust.com</a>	
Opening the Book	<a href="http://www.openingthebook.com">www.openingthebook.com</a>	* txt
The Reading Agency	<a href="http://www.readingagency.org">www.readingagency.org</a>	
ContinYou	<a href="http://www.readingclub.org.uk">www.readingclub.org.uk</a>	* ?

### Links Pages

ORGANISATION	WEB ADDRESS	VIP
Yahoo	<a href="http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/arts/Humanities/Literature/Organisations/Reading_Groups">http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/arts/Humanities/Literature/Organisations/Reading_Groups</a>	*
Splat Comic Links	<a href="http://www.splatcomic.com/links/artdir/literature/literature-reading-groups.asp">www.splatcomic.com/links/artdir/literature/literature-reading-groups.asp</a>	*
Books and Business	<a href="http://www.booksandbusiness.org.uk">www.booksandbusiness.org.uk</a>	

## Readers Groups/Support/Advice/Resources

ORGANISATION	WEB ADDRESS	VIP
The Guardian	<a href="http://www.booksunlimited.co.uk/reviews">www.booksunlimited.co.uk/reviews</a>	*
Daily Mail You Magazine	<a href="http://www.you-reading-group.co.uk">www.you-reading-group.co.uk</a>	
Church Times	<a href="http://www.chuchtimes.co.uk/templates/readgrouprunasp">www.chuchtimes.co.uk/templates/readgrouprunasp</a>	
Reading Group Guides	<a href="http://www.readinggroupguides.com">www.readinggroupguides.com</a>	
Bookbrowse	<a href="http://www.bookbrowse.com">www.bookbrowse.com</a>	*
Branching Out	<a href="http://www.branching-out.net">www.branching-out.net</a>	* txt
Whichbook.net	<a href="http://www.whichbook.net">www.whichbook.net</a>	* txt
The Observer Book Club	<a href="http://www.observer.guardian.co.uk">www.observer.guardian.co.uk</a>	*
Guardian	<a href="http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/books">www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/books</a>	*
Boox	<a href="http://www.boox.org.uk">www.boox.org.uk</a>	*
Cool Reads	<a href="http://www.cool-reads.co.uk">www.cool-reads.co.uk</a>	*
Book Group	<a href="http://www.bookgroup.info">www.bookgroup.info</a>	
Birkbeck College	<a href="http://www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/pg/emrg24.htm">www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/eng/pg/emrg24.htm</a>	*
BBC Big Read	<a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread">www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread</a>	*
East Midlands Public Libraries	<a href="http://www.whatareyouuptotnight.com">www.whatareyouuptotnight.com</a>	* txt
Their Reading Futures	<a href="http://www.theirreadingfutures.org.uk/newsite">www.theirreadingfutures.org.uk/newsite</a>	
Calibre Cassette Library	<a href="http://www.calibre.org.uk">www.calibre.org.uk</a>	*
NLB/RNIB	<a href="http://www.revealweb.org.uk">www.revealweb.org.uk</a>	*
Oprah Winfrey Book Club	<a href="http://www.oprah.com/books/books_landing.jhtml">www.oprah.com/books/books_landing.jhtml</a>	*?
Reading Group Choices	<a href="http://www.readinggroupchoices.com">www.readinggroupchoices.com</a>	
Reading Group Guides	<a href="http://www.readinggroupguides.com">www.readinggroupguides.com</a>	*?
Richard and Judy	<a href="http://www.channel4/richard&amp;judy">www.channel4/richard&amp;judy</a>	*
World Book Day	<a href="http://www.worldbookdayfestival.com">www.worldbookdayfestival.com</a>	*

## Research

ORGANISATION	WEB ADDRESS	VIP
CIRT	<a href="http://www.cie.uce.ac.uk/cirt/projects/past/promotion.htm">www.cie.uce.ac.uk/cirt/projects/past/promotion.htm</a>	*

## **Other Resources**

In addition to this on-line material, there are other resources, books and articles relevant to public library reading group development. The literature search included at the end of this document provides references to some of this material.

The Reading Group Toolbox produced by Opening the Book and funded by Waterstone's and The Arts Council has proved a valuable reading group resource for libraries. It was based on research and consultation with hundreds of reading groups and backed by regional training in every region. Toolboxes are no longer available to buy which means that many library authorities depend on shelf copies for reference or have adapted the contents to suit their particular needs.

The Orange Chatterbooks pack has also proved itself a significant resource much valued by library staff and children.

In addition to these national tools, many local authorities have produced their own resources for reading groups. These are varied in range and purpose and include information and start-up packs, reading guides, activity sheets, guidelines for using the library, contact mailing lists, web resources and newsletters.

There have also been some very good resources produced outside the library sector. The British Council EnCompass site includes guidelines for setting up and running a reading group, Orange produced a comprehensive reading group pack several years ago which is still being used and BookTrust put together *The Little Guide to Big Reading* to support reading group activity around The BBC Big Read.

A national approach to reading group development could result in the integration of some of this material into a set of generic resources available to reading groups everywhere. This would include good quality downloadable marketing resources as well as a range of generic support materials. Possible partnerships are emerging to support some of this work both with the commercial book sector and the educational sector.

## **An Evaluation Framework**

The development of an effective and coherent approach to the evaluation of reading group activity in libraries is an important first step to building a national picture of impact and level of activity. It is also vital to the success of a national public library development programme for reading groups.

There are a number of tools to be explored in this context.

## **Quantitative Data**

Initial mapping of the public library reading group map indicates a diverse and well populated landscape. This sort of hard evidence, if collected annually in a systematic and coherent way, could play an important role in raising the profile of public libraries' work with readers

While LISU collects some data on children's reading groups, they do not currently collect annual data on general reading group activity in libraries, although they have indicated that this is an area that they could potentially include in their annual statistics. This would provide a valuable resource for partnership building, help to identify growth and development in relation to reading group target setting, indicate gaps in provision and support any parallel

database developments. The collection of national reading group data is an area for further consideration in the development of a strategic framework for reading group development.

### **Qualitative Data**

Quantitative data does not, however, tell the full story in relation to the impact of public libraries' work with readers. In some respects, the collection of qualitative evidence in the context of reading group development would be even more powerful in both advocacy and policy terms, but up until now there has been no clear structure for collecting this data and systematically analysing its value.

### **Inspiring Learning for All**

The development of a national framework for measuring learning opportunities and impact in libraries, museums and archives may provide a way forward in this respect. Inspiring Learning For All developed by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council provides a framework for measuring impact in the context of learning outcomes. Learning in this context is interpreted in its broadest sense to mean:

'... a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.'<sup>100</sup>

This interpretation of learning is very relevant to reading group activity.

Inspiring Learning for All includes a Measuring Learning Tool Kit and a methodology for using what people say about their experiences to provide evidence of impact. The Generic Learning Outcomes aim to create a common language for talking about impact in five key areas relating to knowledge and understanding, skills, attitudes and values, enjoyment, inspiration and creativity and activity, behaviour and progression.

The development of a national framework for evaluating impact is an important step forward and further work now needs to be undertaken to explore how the GLOs could be used to provide a structure for the evaluation of national public library reading group provision. Other frameworks emerging from research into qualitative indicators commissioned by LASER and quality of life indicators developed by The Audit Commission may also need to be taken into account in this context. It is also important to agree how the evaluation of public library reading group provision relates to public library standards.

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<sup>100</sup> Inspiring Learning for All, [www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk)

# Literature Search

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## General Reference Sources

**Burns, Martha and Dillon, Alice (1999) *Reading Group Journal: Notes in the Margin*. New York: Abbeville Press**

A journal with 18 sections for books, with each section having space to take notes on the book and author, to compare the book under discussion with other books read, to note favourite quotations and possible questions for discussion. The journal also offers practical resource materials, including web sites for on-line booksellers, library resources, book lists and on-line reading groups. There are also readings lists, such as *The New York Times* Book Review list, a National Book Award list, and a selection by the authors. The book also offers suggestions on how to go about setting up and running a book group.

**Hartley, Jenny (2002) *The Reading Groups Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (OUP)**

An influential study of home-based and library-based groups. Dr Hartley is a Principal Lecturer at Roehampton University, Surrey and has undertaken extensive research into reading groups. This book describes the research, which is the first major study of reading groups. It describes a survey of approximately 350 groups, and gives an account of the rise of reading groups and information about the way they are organised. The book is an account of the nature of reading groups and does not specifically cover the setting up of a group, but it does include lists of resources and of books that groups are reading. Further details can be found on the OUP web site at

<http://www.oup.co.uk/academic/humanities/literature/news/thehistory/>.

**Jacobsohn, Rachel (1998) *The Reading Group Handbook*. New York: Hyperion**

A concise, step-by-step guide to forming a book group, which covers group dynamics, member selection, expenses, rules of order, refreshments and the art of discussion, and offers suggested reading lists. The author informs the reader of her recommendations and past experiences, and also provides options and ideas that might work for others.

**Laskin, David and Hughes, Holly (1995) *The Reading Group Book: The Complete Guide to Starting and Sustaining a Reading Group*. New York: Plume Books**

This guide has annotated lists of 250 titles for discussion and includes stories from individuals such as book group members, independent booksellers, and a sociologist.

**Osborne, Susan (2002) *Bloomsbury Essential Guide to Reading Groups*. London: Bloomsbury**

Covers how to go about finding a reading group in the local area, or for those involved in setting one up, how it should be run and which books should be selected. Includes readers' guides relating to 50 books (40 novels and 10 non-fiction), synopses to aid in the choice of a book for discussion, themes (each theme is accompanied by a brief introductory paragraph, followed by a simple list of titles, all of which are referenced back to the readers' guides), resources (an annotated list of useful magazines, books, web sites etc) and further reading (a list of 50 additional, highly recommended titles for discussion).

**Pearlman, Mickey (1999) *What to Read: The Essential Guide for Reading Group Members and Other Book Lovers* (revised edition). London: Perennial**

Built up from recommendations from academics and writers, book club members and leaders, this publication features 33 annotated lists that cover a wide range of reading categories (e.g. mystery, sci-fi, war, sports and biography). Also included is advice for those trying to start a book club, with suggestions from several real clubs: from very diverse groups that meet in libraries to more homogenous groups that gather in living rooms. Most of the groups described have been meeting for several years and most have a chosen leader who picks books and leads the discussion.

**Slezak, Ellen (editor) (2000) *The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group*. Chicago: Review Press**

A collection of essays on the subject of starting and running a book group, with various book lists. The first part of the book details a representative sampling of 25 book discussion groups across America in essays written by group members. The groups include a club originally organised 76 years ago, a poetry-reading group, a group that flourished after nearly floundering, and an African American 'sisterhood'. The essays cover issues such as book selection, discussion initiation, reasons for meeting, group 'rules' and membership. The second part consists of reading lists, some annotated, used by the book groups.

## **Readers' Guides**

***The 'Big Read': The Book of Books* (2003). London: Dorling Kindersley**

Including all top 100 books as voted by the public, this book considers the nation's favourite reads. The 'read behind the reads' includes author features, first manuscripts, original artworks, settings, celebrity favourites, fun facts and statistics. It also includes a feature for each of the nation's top 21 books.

**Huse, R. and Huse, J. (Eds) (2002). *Who Else writes like ... ? A readers' guide to fiction authors*. Loughborough: LISU.**

An established reference book and reading promotion tool. It is designed to help anyone who enjoys reading fiction to expand the number of authors they read. The fourth edition lists over 1,800 authors, and with each name suggests others who write in the same way. The guide also includes a list of genres, a list of prizewinners, an index to characters in fiction and a list of other recommended fiction guides for further reading.

**Irvin, Norah (Ed) (2003) *Who Next ...? A guide to children's authors*. Loughborough: LISU**

Companion volume to *Who Else ...?*, but concentrating on children's authors. Designed to enable children who have already enjoyed books by one author to find other authors that they will enjoy reading. Helps parents, teachers and librarians guide children of all ages to explore the world of reading. The guide also includes a list of picture books for older readers, an index of authors by genre, a list of children's series and a list of children's book prizes with recent winners.

**newBOOKSmag – published bi-monthly by guisemagazines, editor Sheila Ferguson**

A magazine describing itself as the 'magazine for readers and reading groups'. Includes extracts from books by featured authors, regular items (e.g. 'my job in the book trade', 'in search of an author' etc) and features. A small article on this magazine is included in *Update*, September 2002 (Vol 1, no 6) p 14.

**McLeish, K. (2001) *Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide*. London: Bloomsbury**

Contains articles on around 375 authors describing the type of books they write – listing over 3,500 individual books, suggesting alternative and ‘follow up’ authors and titles.

**Rogers, J. (Ed) (2001) *Good Fiction Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press**

Featuring over 1,000 fiction writers, each entry recommending authors and suggesting new areas of literature to explore.

## **Research/Scholarly Comment**

**Beckerman, Hannah (2003) ‘Britain – one big reading group’. *The Bookseller*, 11 July, no 5085, p 22**

Beckerman is the series producer for the BBC Big Read. This constitutes a short discussion about the BBC’s plans for the Big Read.

**Book Marketing Ltd & the Reading Agency (2002) *Reading Groups and Public Libraries*. London: LLDA.**

This research, commissioned by the London Libraries Development Agency and carried out in 2002 by Book Marketing Ltd and The Reading Agency, shows how and why libraries can use reading groups strategically. The research maps library-run and privately organised groups, their operation and membership and the attitudes and experiences of their members. It also identifies the benefits of reading groups to members and to libraries, suggests best practice for group organisation and management, and indicates opportunities for library partnership in developing reading group provision. A full report of the research findings is available from LLDA at £35 plus p&p. Contact: LLDA, 35 St Martin’s Street, London WC2H 7HP, tel: 020 7641 5266, email:contact@llda.org.uk.

**Brumwell, Jaci and Lynn Hodgkins (2003) ‘Reader development in the East Midlands’, *Update*, July, 2, 7, pp 42–44**

A report of the partnership working that has enabled the East Midlands to build up a noteworthy programme of reader development. The authors note that reader development opens up a wide range of opportunities for readers to talk about and share their experiences of books and reading, both inside and libraries and beyond library buildings.

**Fleming, Juliet (2004) ‘Bookshop group therapy’, *The Bookseller*, 16 January, no 5111, pp 26–27**

Juliet Fleming of Ottakar’s discusses how an instore reading group can offer added value to the community at the same time as boosting the bookshop’s profile within that community. She talked to a number of reading group coordinators across the country, some from established groups and others with more limited experience. She reports the main findings of her study, noting that, without exception, coordinators told her how much they enjoyed running a group, and spoke of the pleasure it gave them to discuss books and to meet and to get to know their customers.

**Hartley, Jenny (2002) ‘Maverick readers’, *The Bookseller*, 6 December, no 5055, pp 32–34**

Jenny Hartley describes her latest research on reading groups. She suggests that reading groups do not like to be told what to read, resist marketing and are fiercely independent. This article includes discussion of some of the main findings of Hartley’s research (surveys carried out in 1999 and 2001). It also lists the top 30 books read by groups in 2001.

**Hartley, Jenny (1999) 'Reading in groups', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 June, no 5020, p 18**

This article comprises a short history of reading groups and discusses the management of groups in general terms. It also discusses past research, referring to an article by Janice Radway<sup>101</sup> published in 1988 and one by Elizabeth Long<sup>102</sup> published in *Critical Studies* in 1987.

**Hicks, Debbie (2003) Library-based reading groups, letters page, *The Bookseller*, 3 January, no 5058, p 18**

Debbie Hicks compares and contrasts the research carried out by Hartley (see above) and that undertaken by Book Marketing Ltd and the Reading Agency (2002, see above). She notes that the latter indicates the central role of public libraries in supporting the reading group experience, whereas the former is more concerned with the part played by bookshops.

**Holman, Tom (2004) 'Publishers join library forum', *The Bookseller*, 23 January, no 5112, p 7**

Holman reports on the news that publishers and libraries are to work more closely together following the creation of a new cross-trade forum steered by the Reading Agency. Of importance here is the fact that publishers will be 'encouraged to support reading group activities'.

**Holman, Tom (2003) 'Building on the Big Read', *The Bookseller*, 23 May, no 5078, p 11**

The unveiling of the list of the nation's 100 favourite books as featured in the BBC Big Read leads Holman to discuss the use of the series of broadcasts as a wider outreach project to promote reading. He notes the part played in the scheme by reading groups.

**Kean, Danuta (2003) 'Big Read makes a big splash'. *The Bookseller*, 11 July, no 5085, pp 20-22**

With the BBC Big Read proving to be a big success for the book world, Kean reports on its impact up to the point of writing, and on how publishers, booksellers and libraries plan to make the initiative work even harder for them. Reading groups are significant in the process.

**Kendrick, S. (2001) 'A Librarian's Thoughts on Reading'. In Katz, B. (ed.) *Readers, Reading and Librarians* pp 81-89. New York: Haworth Information Press**

A librarian discusses her experiences of readers' advisory work, sharing 'the joys of reading' through the sponsorship of book groups at the library. Her view is that 'book groups provide information, fun and a sense of community. Libraries should sponsor as many book groups as possible to spread the fun of reading and the communal aspect of reading ...' (p 81).

**Palmer, Tom (2002) 'How to read the Beautiful Game', *The Bookseller*, 30 August, no 5041, p 14**

Reading promoter and author Tom Palmer is pioneering football reading schemes. He is attempting to use the interest generated by football autobiographies (e.g. those by Roy Keane and David O'Leary) to encourage new readers for life. One particular scheme is a football reading/writing group set up by Bradford Library. Meetings are held away from the library, in a pub – eight men gather once a fortnight to talk about football books.

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<sup>101</sup> Radway, Janice (1988) "The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of 'Serious' Fiction", *Critical Inquiry*, 14, 3, 515–538

<sup>102</sup> Long, Elizabeth (1987) "Reading Groups and the Postmodern Crisis of Cultural Authority", *Critical Studies*, 1, 3, 306–327

**The Bookseller Children's Book News (2003) 'Shadow scheme hits new high', *The Bookseller*, 16 May, no 5077, p 28**

Around 1,500 groups were expected to register with the 2003 Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals (CILIP) Carnegie and Greenaway Shadowing Scheme, with as many as 30,000 children taking part. It had become one of the largest reading schemes of its kind – the increase could reflect the growing number of reading groups being set up for young people.

**The Bookseller Opinion (2002) 'Resisting the hype', *The Bookseller*, 6 December, no 5055 p 26**

A short discussion of Jenny Hartley's article (same issue) providing evidence for the argument that there is a body of enthusiastic readers who are resistant to the marketing efforts of the publishing industry.

**Thebridge, S. (2001) Partnership in promotion: publishers, booksellers and libraries working together to promote reading. Birmingham: CIRT. (ISBN 0904354288, Library and Information Commission Research Report 110, British National Bibliography Research Fund Report 102).**

The report of a project studying the way in which libraries, publishers and booksellers are working together to promote reading. This includes an investigation of reading groups and some case study work with public libraries engaged in setting up groups. There is an extensive bibliography. The report is available (price £12) from CIRT. Full publication details and a brief summary are on the website at

[<http://www.cie.uce.ac.uk/cirt/projects/past/promotion.htm>]

**Train, B. (2003) 'Reader development'. In Elkin, J., Train, B. and Denham, D. *Reading and Reader Development* pp 30–58. London: Facet Publishing**

Chapter 2 of this book covers the subject of reader development, including sections on intervention in the act of reading, the reader-centred approach, the reading experience, collaborative working with other sectors and social inclusion. Pages 39–41 concentrate particularly on reading groups, and discuss both the various models and the benefits of participation.

**Update (2003) 'BBC Big Read is big publicity for libraries', *Update*, August, 2, 8, p 16**

This article includes information about registering reading groups on the BBC Big Read web site. The author notes that many services were using the Big Read with their reading groups, and to form new groups. Many were reporting a noticeable rise in general enquiries about groups as well as directly via the BBC web site. There is a summary of events/ideas that were taking place in public libraries across the UK.

# Appendix One: Steering Group Members

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The Steering Group for this project was assembled to give a broad representation of stakeholders and a wide geographical coverage. It met formally on three occasions and individuals provided further input in between meetings. Members provided an invaluable range of insights, advice and case study information on which this work has depended.

<b>NAME</b>	<b>POSITION</b>	<b>REPRESENTATION</b>
Brian Ashley (Chair)	Assistant Director (Libraries, Information and Communications), Nottingham City Council	Society of Chief Librarians
Debbie Hicks (Project Manager)	The Reading Agency	TRA
Pat Beech	Director of Libraries and Information National Library for the Blind	NLB
Ian Blackwell	Head of Learning and Access North-East Museums, Libraries and Archives Council	Regional Agencies
Rachel Boyd	Assistant County Librarian (Policy and Development) Somerset County Council	ASCEL
Steve Dearden	Coordinator National Association for Literature Development	NALD
Jonathan Douglas	Head of Learning and Access Museums, Libraries and Archives Council	MLA
Annie Everall	Derbyshire County Council	CILIP
Andrew Green	Head of Libraries and Information Coventry City Council	Society of Chief Librarians
Penny Shapland	Head of Resources, The Reading Agency	TRA (links with publishers etc)
Jane Stubbs	Literature Officer, Arts Council England (Yorkshire and Humberside)	Arts Council
Claire Styles	London Borough of Southwark	ASCEL
June Turner	Reader Development Coordinator Essex County Council	Reader Development Librarian
John Vincent	The Network	Social Inclusion