

Six Book Challenge Impact Report 2015



Photo : Justin Sutcliffe

A report by Tom Holman for
The Reading Agency

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**SIX BOOK
CHALLENGE**



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Foreword

As we launch Reading Ahead, it is a good moment to reflect on what has been achieved through the Six Book Challenge. The scheme was pioneered by Hull Libraries in 2006 as an adaptation of our Summer Reading Challenge in order to reach adult learners with the first Quick Read titles. The Reading Agency developed it into a national programme in 2008 with the agreement of Hull Libraries, initially working with public libraries who linked with local learning providers to engage around 7000 participants.

Since then the Six Book Challenge has gone from strength to strength, reaching approximately 194,000 people over eight years. It has grown almost seven-fold, with at least 48,000 participants registering in 2015. Public libraries continue to deliver it with local partners including adult community learning, family learning, children's centres and mental health groups. Over 100 further education and sixth form colleges now take part regularly with their library staff supporting students on courses ranging from foundation learning and ESOL¹ to GCSE English. The programme is available through prison libraries in most prisons and young offender institutions (YOIs) across the UK. And trade unions, in particular UNISON and Usdaw, have supported its use in workplaces as varied as hospitals, logistics depots, travel companies and supermarkets. Completion rates have increased too, with almost 100 organisations achieving 50 or more completers in 2015 and 25 of these recording 150 completers or more.

We collect quantitative and qualitative data to monitor and evaluate the programme every year and in 2015 we are publishing our results. I am delighted to introduce this short report by Tom Holman who has analysed our annual data from the start and watched the progress of the Six Book Challenge since 2008. It demonstrates the impact the Six Book Challenge has on participants and the organisations that deliver the programme

Partnership working has been at the heart of the growth and impact of the Six Book Challenge, with experienced practitioners sharing their expertise to engage and support participants. On behalf of The Reading Agency, I would like to thank all those who have used the Six Book Challenge to make such a difference to so many people's lives. We now look forward to working with you to promote reading for pleasure to even more people through Reading Ahead.

Genevieve Clarke
Programme Manager, The Reading Agency

September 2015

¹ English for Speakers of Other Languages

Executive Summary

The Reading Agency has been running the Six Book Challenge through public libraries, colleges, prisons and workplaces across the UK since 2008. The programme is designed to build the confidence, skills and motivation of young people and adults who find reading difficult by inviting them to pick six reads of their choice and record their reading in a diary in order to get a certificate.

“The Six Book Challenge helps not only my reading and writing skills but also improves my social life. I can talk to people about books I have read and shared with them.” Participant

Over eight years the Challenge has grown seven-fold, reaching at least 48,000 people in 2015, up from 7000 in its first year in 2008. There has been particular success in further education colleges and prisons. From September 2015 it will be known as Reading Ahead.

The 2015 evaluation of the Six Book Challenge involved participants and delivery partners completing surveys about their experience. Participants completed a survey before and after the Challenge, with 1344 responses to the ‘before’ survey and 308 to the ‘after’ survey. The participant impact results reported in this report are mainly based on analysis of the responses to the ‘after’ survey.

Delivery partners completed an online survey in June and July 2015. Response rates from participating organisations were as follows: 44% of public library authorities who took part (47 responses); 50% learning providers (60 responses); 38% prisons and YOIs (46 responses); and 23% of workplaces (16 responses). The organisational impact results in this report are based on an analysis of these survey responses.

Impact on participants

The evaluation of the Six Book Challenge in 2015 identified a wide range of benefits to participants from taking part. These were evident both in the statistical analysis and in quotes from participants such as this one:

“It’s making me more confident with my reading. Before I would never read because I am dyslexic and it made it hard.” Participant

The key areas of impact for participants were as follows:

- **Taking part raises people’s confidence about reading, especially for young people.** More than nine in ten (92%) respondents to the ‘after’ survey said they were more confident about reading after taking part in the Six Book Challenge in 2015. This increase in confidence was even higher among 16 to 19 year olds (93%) and 20 to 24 year olds (96%).
- **The Six Book Challenge increases the enjoyment of reading.** Before starting the 2015 Challenge, four in five (82%) respondents said they enjoyed reading

and after completing it the proportion in the same sample had risen to well over nine in ten (95%)².

- **Taking part in the Challenge increases skills.** Nearly half (49%) of respondents reported that they gained better reading skills from the Challenge.
- **Reading broadens horizons.** Nearly a third (31%) of respondents said the reading they had done as part of the Challenge had given them greater knowledge about different subjects.
- **Participants often borrow and buy more books after taking part.** Three quarters of respondents said they would either definitely (54%) or probably (24%) use a library to borrow books more often having completed the Challenge. About half said they would definitely (31%) or probably (23%) buy more books.
- **The Challenge gets people talking about books.** Two thirds of respondents said they would definitely (41%) or probably (25%) talk about reading with others more after completing the Challenge.
- **For many participants, six books is just the start.** More than half (54%) of respondents said they had read more than the suggested target of six books since taking up the Challenge. This suggests that the impact on reading habits goes well beyond the formal completion of the Challenge.

One respondent summed up their view of the Challenge as follows:

“A great idea to get people reading more and broaden their horizons.”
Participant

Impact on organisations

As well as this important impact on participants, the 2015 evaluation found that the Challenge has become increasingly valued by those working to deliver the programme. Again, this was reflected both in the quantitative data and in comments from those delivering the programme, such as this one:

“The Challenge has been instrumental in delivering a service of increasing literacy and reading enjoyment in those who struggle with this.” Librarian

The key areas of impact for organisations were as follows:

- **The Challenge is embedded in delivery plans.** Nine in ten (89%) of the public library authorities delivering the Challenge in 2015 that responded to our survey now include it in their action or delivery plans. Half (51%) of learning providers and two in five (42%) prisons and YOIs also include the Challenge in their plans.

² For this question, only the responses to the survey where we were able to match responses to the ‘before’ survey with the ‘after’ survey were used, which resulted in 126 responses being analysed.

- **The Challenge enables libraries to offer more for adult learners.** More than nine in ten public libraries thought the 2015 Challenge had contributed to their service to adult learners, either a lot (55%) or a little (38%).
- **The Challenge enriches learning providers' services.** More than nine in ten learning providers said the Challenge had enabled them to encourage more adult literacy learners to do more reading, either a lot (44%) or a little (48%).
- **The Challenge has become a fixed and valued event.** The vast majority of public libraries (96%), learning providers (91%), prisons and YOIs (97%) and workplaces (94%) anticipate running the Challenge again in 2016.

One respondent summed up the reasons for their commitment to the Challenge as follows:

“It is of great value. Prisoners have the chance to take responsibility for it – something that doesn’t happen much in prison.” Prison librarian

Conclusions

Overall, the results from this evaluation indicate that the Six Book Challenge has strong benefits to participants, and that these are clearly recognised by the public libraries, learning providers, prisons and workplaces that work to deliver the programme, as demonstrated in comments like this one:

“The Challenge enriches the learners' curriculum and provides them with a fantastic, proven activity to develop language comprehension, speaking and listening skills and confidence in reading.” Tutor

The key benefits of the Challenge relate to encouraging reading for pleasure, increasing reading confidence and skills, broadening horizons and increasing book borrowing, buying and talking about books. The results indicate that taking part in and completing the Challenge is just the start for many readers, leading them on to increased opportunities for further learning, employment and a reading habit that will sustain them for life.

Introduction

The Six Book Challenge was launched by The Reading Agency in 2008 to encourage those who find reading difficult to explore reading for pleasure and improve their skills at the same time. The Challenge invites participants to pick six reads of their choice and record, review and rate them in a diary. Those completing the Challenge receive a certificate and the opportunity to enter prize draws at local and national level. The Challenge is delivered with the support of The Reading Agency by public libraries, learning providers, prisons, young offender institutions (YOIs) and workplaces, mainly through trade unions.

In its first year the Six Book Challenge reached approximately 7000 people, largely through public libraries working with local partners. Eight years later it has grown seven-fold, reaching at least 48,000 people in 2015, with particular success in further education colleges and prisons.

From September 2015, the Six Book Challenge will be known as Reading Ahead. For more information, visit www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-ahead. The name change emphasises the fact that participants can read print and digital text other than books to take part in the programme. Reading Ahead will retain the Challenge model but the new name promotes the idea that this is the start of a reading journey for many people as they begin to build their identity as a reader.

Methodology

This report summarises the findings from the 2015 evaluation of the Six Book Challenge. Figures in the report are based on The Reading Agency's surveys of individuals and organisations involved in the Six Book Challenge.

Participants completed a survey before and after the Challenge, with 1,344 completing the 'before' survey and 308 people completing the 'after' survey. Respondents were from a mix of settings but included significant numbers from two colleges and two prisons.

A total of 126 people completed *both* the 'before' and 'after' surveys. The analysis in this report includes the full data set, but specific analysis is undertaken on the enjoyment of reading using the matched data set.

Surveys were also conducted in June and July 2015 with responses from 47 public library authorities involved in delivering the Challenge (44% of the total of 107 authorities taking part across the UK); 60 learning providers (50% of the total of 120 learning providers taking part); 46 prisons and Young Offender Institutions (38% of the 120 prisons and YOIs taking part); and 16 workplaces (23% of the 70 workplaces taking part). Caution is needed with some findings because of low sample sizes.

This report summarises the key findings across these surveys. It firstly outlines the impact of the programme on participants, and then moves on to look at the impact on organisations.

Impact on participants

Confidence and enjoyment

The Six Book Challenge has had a substantial impact on participants' confidence in their reading abilities. Respondents were asked if they felt more confident about reading after the Challenge and more than nine in ten (92%) reported that their confidence about reading had increased.

The effect on the confidence of younger people is particularly notable. Among 16 to 19 year olds, the number claiming to be more confident about reading after taking part in the Challenge is above the all-participant average at 93%. Among those aged 20 to 24, it is higher still at 96%.

Respondents were asked about their enjoyment of reading before starting the Challenge, and again after they had completed the programme³. In the initial survey, four in five (82%) said they either enjoyed it a little or enjoyed it a lot. After participation, the numbers who said they either enjoyed reading a little or enjoyed it a lot had risen to well over nine in ten (95%).

Those either not liking reading very much or actively disliking it plummeted—from 17% before the Challenge started to just 6% after they had completed it. This is clear evidence of the Challenge helping people to appreciate reading for pleasure.

Table 1: How do you feel about reading?

	Pre-Challenge	Post-Challenge
I enjoy it a lot	42%	45%
I enjoy it a little	40%	50%
I don't like it very much	15%	4%
I actively dislike it	2%	2%

"Before the Challenge I didn't like to read, but now it's changed."
Participant

"It's making me more confident with my reading. Before I would never read because I am dyslexic and it made it hard." Participant

Reading habits

As well as increasing participants' enjoyment of reading and confidence in their reading ability, the results indicate that the Challenge impacts on participants' reading habits and that this goes beyond the formal Challenge. More than half (54%) of respondents said they had read more than the suggested target of six books since taking up the Challenge.

"I feel like I want to read more books." Participant

³ For this question, only the responses to the survey where we were able to match responses to the 'before' survey with the 'after' survey were used, which resulted in 126 responses being analysed.

It is interesting to note that participants are more likely to turn to print books than to ebooks for their future reading. More than two thirds of respondents said they would either definitely (48%) or probably (22%) read more fiction having completed the Challenge. But only a third said they would definitely (19%) or probably (17%) read more ebooks in future.

The Six Book Challenge seems to impact on a number of aspects of participants' behaviour around books. Three quarters of respondents said they would either definitely (54%) or probably (24%) use a library to borrow books more often having completed the Challenge. As public libraries seek to pull in new users, the Challenge has become a very important advocacy tool.

“It was very helpful and encouraged me to read books at home more. I will use the library in the summer to borrow books when my class is not on.” Participant

Six Book Challenge participants are also likely to become heavier buyers of books: about half of those completing the survey said they would definitely (31%) or probably (23%) buy more books in future. As publishers, booksellers, authors and others seek to expand the base of book buyers in the UK, the Challenge is proving to be a useful catalyst to sales.

One of the Challenge's greatest strengths has been its ability to stimulate more conversation about books and reading. Survey responses indicate that this may extend beyond the life of the Challenge. Two thirds of respondents said they would definitely (41%) or probably (25%) talk about reading with others more after completing the Challenge.

In particular, the Challenge seems to prompt a greater connection between parents, children and books. After completing it, half of respondents said they would definitely (34%) or probably (16%) read more books with children.

Skills development

The Challenge impacts on participants' skills: nearly half (49%) of respondents said they had gained better reading skills from the Challenge. Many people reported reading authors, subjects and genres they had never encountered before while taking part in the Challenge. Nearly a third (31%) of respondents said their reading during the Challenge had given them greater knowledge about different subjects.

The Challenge has also prompted some participants to pursue further learning opportunities. One in eight (13%) respondents said that having completed the Challenge they were more interested in signing up for a course of some kind.

“I have improved my reading skills and writing skills after doing the Six Book Challenge.” Participant

“A great idea to get people to read more and broaden their horizons.” Participant

These benefits for participants have been commented on extensively by teaching and library staff as in this example:

“I’m amazed at the difference running the Challenge has made for so many students; differences that we can see: increased literacy skills, communication and self-confidence.” Achievement and Learning Support Team Leader

Demographics of participants⁴

The age range of participants varies across the different routes to taking part in the Six Book Challenge. The most common age bracket for participants in libraries was 25 to 44, from which more than two in five (44%) were drawn. One in four (25%) was aged 45 to 64. Learning providers tend to reach a younger demographic, with 47% of participants in the 16-19 age bracket.

The Challenge has proved very effective as a way for organisations to engage with people from a range of ethnic backgrounds: just over half of participants (53%) in public libraries, 57% in colleges and other learning organisations, 37% in prisons and 17% in workplaces were from backgrounds other than white British. Other backgrounds recorded by public libraries were Asian or British Asian (18%), other white (14%), black or British black (12%), mixed or dual heritage (4%), Chinese (1%) and other (6%). To put this in context, the 2011 census in England and Wales found that 20% of the population of England and Wales is not white British. The broad reach of the Challenge is likely because it is used extensively by ESOL⁵ programmes.

Organisations report that their participants ranged across the full spectrum of literacy and language ability. However the majority recruited for the Challenge have low literacy (eg Entry Level) and thus will benefit most from practising their skills through engagement in reading for pleasure.

Since the Six Book Challenge began in 2008 the gender balance among participants has been tilted towards women. In 2015, two thirds (67%) of participants in public libraries and well over half (57%) of those in learning providers were female. The exception is in prisons and Young Offender Institutions, where nearly nine in ten (86%) participants in 2015 were male, reflecting the fact that men make up 95% of the prison population.

The Reading Agency’s post-survey research consistently shows that in all settings women are slightly more likely to complete the Challenge than men.

Men are also slightly less likely to gain in confidence from the Challenge. The vast majority (97%) of female participants said they were more confident about reading after taking part in the Challenge in 2015—but the figure for male participants, while still strong, was below nine in ten (88%). More could be done to investigate why this is the case and to extend the Challenge’s appeal to men, encouraging them to complete it and continue reading.

⁴ To note; the data reported in this section is drawn from the surveys completed by organisations delivering the Six Book Challenge, rather than from the participants’ survey.

⁵ English for Speakers of Other Languages

Impact on organisations

In addition to the impact that has been identified for participants, the Six Book Challenge has been found to have positive benefits for the organisations that run the Challenge. This section of the report highlights the key findings from the surveys completed by delivery partners.

Impact on public library services

The eight years of the Six Book Challenge have coincided with an extended period of cuts in public library resources, placing severe pressure on the time and resources of staff to deliver a programme that depends upon successful partnership working with local organisations. In this context, the initial growth and now fairly consistent participation in the Challenge achieved by more than half of public library services across the UK has been impressive. It is also notable that the number of participants joining their local library in order to take part has more than doubled since 2008.

“The Challenge is a way of engaging with communities who may find the library a daunting place or see it as having nothing to offer them.”
Librarian

“A wonderful platform to promote literacy and adult learning.” Librarian

The Six Book Challenge has become a valued and formally recognised part of public libraries’ activities. Nine in ten (89%) of the library authorities that took part in 2015 and completed the survey now include it in their action or delivery plans. This figure has risen steadily since the first Challenge in 2008, after which two thirds (66%) included it in their plans.

Running the Challenge is a particularly good way for public libraries to enhance their provision for adult learners. More than nine in ten respondents thought the 2015 Challenge had contributed either a lot (55%) or a little (38%) to their service to adult learners.

“It is the focus of action plans around literacy and wellbeing. As well as the council plan it is included in the library action plan and the Learning and Skills plan.” Librarian

“The Challenge has been instrumental in delivering a service of increasing literacy and reading enjoyment in those who struggle with this.” Librarian

More than four in five public library authorities that completed the survey said the Challenge had enabled them either a lot (57%) or a little (26%) to establish more partnerships with learning providers and other local organisations. Adult education services (linked with by 77%), ESOL providers (49%) and family learning teams (32%) were among the common partners. Libraries reported connecting the Challenge to a huge range of other bodies including children’s centres, mental health and disabled groups, schools, colleges, workplaces, housing groups, sports clubs, charities, adult social care teams, hospitals, migrant centres, old people’s homes and various community hubs.

“It helps us to create links with groups in the community that might otherwise not engage with library services. It’s a non-threatening route into reading for adults and gives people positive associations with the library.” Librarian

Impact on learning providers

The growth of participation by learning providers in the Challenge has increased dramatically as they have become directly involved with The Reading Agency rather than through partnership with public libraries. In the main these are further education colleges but a number of sixth form colleges and a few local authority adult education services also purchase materials directly from The Reading Agency.

The Challenge has become increasingly valued by learning providers. In 2008 just under a third (31%) of those taking part and responding to the survey included it in their action or delivery plans. But by 2015, half (51%) did so.

“A great way to promote reading for pleasure and to encourage learners to develop their skills in different ways.” ESOL lecturer

“It helps raise the library's profile within the college, and underpins the library's role in learning and helping students develop their skills and confidence.” College librarian

The effect of the Challenge on learning providers’ services is tangible. More than nine in ten learning providers responding to the survey said the Challenge had enabled them to encourage more adult literacy learners to do more reading, either a lot (44%) or a little (48%).

“The Challenge enriches the learners' curriculum and provides them with a fantastic, proven activity to develop language comprehension, speaking and listening skills and confidence in reading.” Tutor

Impact on Prisons and YOIs

Prisons and YOIs have also been a big growth sector for the Six Book Challenge, partly as a result of targeted external funding for this area of work and support from the National Offender Management Service.

The Challenge is now well established in the services of prisons and YOIs. Two in five of those responding to the survey (42%) now include it in their overall delivery or action plans. The vast majority of prisons and YOIs said the 2015 Challenge had contributed either a lot (65%) or a little (32%) to their libraries’ offer to offenders.

“The Six Book Challenge generates a real buzz and enthusiasm for reading.” Prison librarian

“It gives them [prisoners] purposeful activity, opportunities to discuss books with library staff, broadens their knowledge of books, increases their confidence, improves communication skills. Prisoners who

completed all spoke very positively about the Challenge and the effect it had had on them.” Information and library advisor

Library staff in prisons and YOIs have linked the Challenge effectively with internal partners including education departments, workshops and healthcare teams; and to various other initiatives, including the Shannon Trust’s reading programme. Some have reported prison and YOI staff taking part in the Challenge too as a way of encouraging a broader reading culture.

Delivery partners from a prison context were very clear about the unique opportunity that the Six Book Challenge gives to prisoners, and the impact that participation can have, as illustrated in these two quotes:

“It is of great value. Prisoners have the chance to take on a challenge for themselves and are able to take responsibility for it—something that doesn’t happen much in prison.” Prison librarian

“It motivates prisoners to read and reflect on their reading and promotes conversation about all kinds of different issues.” Prison librarian

Impact on workplaces

The involvement of workplaces in the Challenge has fluctuated over the years but shown significant growth in 2015 thanks to the increased support of two major unions, UNISON and Usdaw. Workplaces running the Challenge include hospitals, travel companies, logistics depots, supermarkets and council workforces.

More and more workplaces are rooting the Challenge in their action or delivery plans - nearly two thirds of workplace survey respondents (63%) in 2015. Nearly nine in ten workplaces said the Challenge had contributed either a lot (31%) or a little (56%) to their offer to adult learners.

“The Six Book Challenge is now playing a big part within our organisation.” Trade union learning rep

“It has helped people to learn and relax, which has side-effects at home and in work for the better.” Trade union learning rep

Delivering the Challenge

Delivery partners are required to purchase reading diaries, certificates and publicity materials from The Reading Agency in order to take part and also have the option to buy branded incentives such as pens, mugs and cotton bags. These have been consistently well received, although budgetary constraints inevitably impact on the ability to purchase them in large quantities.

The Reading Agency also provides guidance and information updates and offers training and opportunities to share good practice. Participating organisations’ rating of support from The Reading Agency has remained consistently high over the eight years of the Challenge. Nearly nine in ten library authorities responding to the survey rated The

Reading Agency's ongoing support as either very good (33%) or good (53%) in 2015; and similar numbers of learning providers thought it either very good (39%) or good (48%).

Individual choice of reading materials is a key feature of the Six Book Challenge. Participants are encouraged to select texts that appeal to them at a level that will stretch but not daunt them. Most organisations completing the survey reported having invested in the Quick Reads⁶ to support the Challenge: 96% of public libraries, 81% of workplaces, 74% of learning providers and 47% of prisons and YOIs. In addition to titles from several other specialist publishers they also mentioned the use of a number of other formats including audio books, magazines, newspapers, graphic novels and ebooks.

Libraries, learning providers, prisons, YOIs and workplaces all reported a wide range of successful events around the Challenge in 2015, with outreach activities to recruit participants consistently identified as the most successful. Launch events, library tours, author events, reading group sessions and celebration events were also popular, and in many organisations there is a close correlation between the number and quality of events and the success of the Challenge.

Future delivery

The Challenge has become a fixed and valued event in the calendar for public libraries, learning providers, prisons, YOIs and workplaces and they are keen to continue their involvement. The vast majority of survey respondents from public libraries (96%), learning providers (91%), prisons and YOIs (97%) and workplaces (94%) anticipate running the programme again in 2015/16.

"The Challenge is embedded into the curriculum and most tutors are now on board." College library co-ordinator

"We have taken part in the Challenge for a good few years, and every year we see the enthusiasm for reading it promotes. I can't imagine a year without the Challenge!" Prison library manager

⁶ Quick Reads are short books by big name authors that are specifically designed to be easy to read. They are the same as mainstream books in every respect but are simply shorter and easier to tackle for adults who are less confident in their reading skills.

Conclusions

This report has summarised the key findings from the evaluation of the Six Book Challenge in 2015 with some reference to findings from previous years.

It spans survey results from participants and the different partners who deliver the programme, focusing on quantitative data about the impact of the programme illustrated by verbatim quotes.

Overall, the results from this evaluation show that the Challenge has strong benefits for participants and that these are clearly recognised by the libraries, learning providers, prisons and workplaces that work to deliver it.

The Challenge is embedded in the delivery plans of the organisations that run it and it enriches their offer. It has become a fixed and valued event for delivery partners because of the real value they can see for their respective audiences. As one college librarian said:

“It helps to show the students that reading can be fun and enjoyable. It also enables the library staff to engage with students, and helps them feel comfortable using the library. It enhances their skills through reading, discussion, research, decision-making, gaining knowledge and understanding and improves their communication and social skills.”

College librarian

The key areas of impact that the Challenge has on participants are encouraging reading for pleasure, increasing reading confidence and skills, broadening horizons and increasing book borrowing, buying and talking about books. The results indicate that taking part in and completing the Challenge is just the start for many readers, leading them on to increased opportunities for further learning, employment and a reading habit that will sustain them for life.

To conclude with the words of one participant:

“I have to say big thanks to The Reading Agency for the Six Book Challenge project, which helps me a lot. It is not only on my reading and writing skills but also on my social life. I can talk to people about books I have read.” Participant