

**THE
READING
AGENCY**

**OUR STRATEGY
2023 - 26**



EVERYTHING CHANGES WHEN YOU READ



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1 • WHY WE MATTER

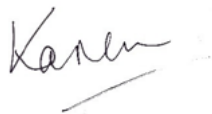
AN INTRODUCTION FROM OUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The Reading Agency is a UK charity with a mission to get people of all ages to read. Evidence shows that reading improves health and wellbeing, life chances and social connections. We know that not everyone has an equal start in life, so we champion the proven power of reading by providing activities, working with public libraries, schools, prisons and other community settings. We support readers of all abilities, with a focus on those that need the benefits of reading the most, connect people in reading groups, and help people manage their health and wellbeing through reading.

We recognise reading for pleasure and empowerment as a creative act, which expands how people think and opens new worlds and perspectives. Reading makes us more aware and informed. It helps us grow our imaginations. It makes us more empathetic and understanding of other people and cultures. It supports our health and wellbeing. It increases our ability to learn new skills. It helps us communicate our ideas more effectively. It opens doors and increases life choices. It brings joy.

Our profile means that we can advocate for those who need support and make this change happen. Our research approach means we can evidence how our programmes aid the development of individual skills and confidence, reduce loneliness, support physical and mental health and wellbeing and help to build and strengthen social ties. Last year our wide range of activities and partnerships touched the lives of two million people, but with a UK population of over 67 million that's not nearly enough. With this in mind, we have developed a business plan that aims to increase our reach and impact, transforming the lives of more people across the UK.

We want to get more people fired up about reading because everything changes when we read.



Karen Napier MBE
Chief Executive



READING OPENS DOORS.

READING GROWS YOUR IMAGINATION.

READING MAKES YOU AWARE.

READING HELPS YOU EMPATHISE.

READING MAKES LIFE MORE INTERESTING.

READING BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER.

READING MOVES MOUNTAINS.

READING IS POWER.

2 • OUR VALUES, MISSION AND VISION



THE **READING** AGENCY

OUR PURPOSE (Our mission in the world)

Empowering people to read

WHY (What we believe)

Everything changes when you read

HOW

Programmes & Events

Awareness & Campaigns

Partnerships & Promotions

PERSONALITY

Positive

Confident, upbeat,
motivating

Bold

Straight up, direct,
pragmatic

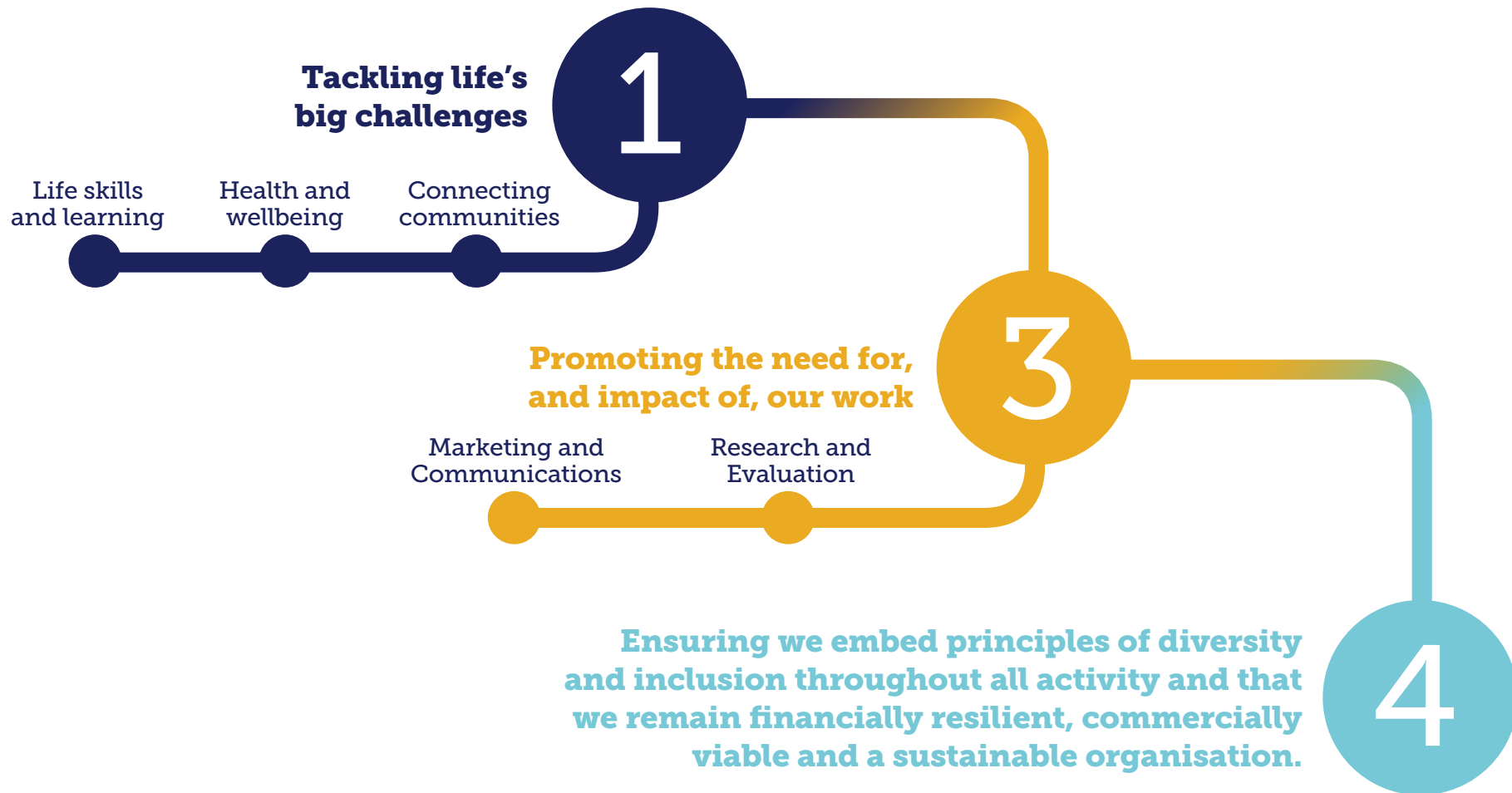
Human

Inclusive, welcoming,
trustworthy

WHAT

A UK charity that champions reading

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES



3 • WHY WE ARE NEEDED

Life's challenges are different for everyone. We're on a mission to promote reading as a powerful tool to transform lives across the UK.

Reading develops life skills and learning:

The need

1 in 4 children cannot read well by 11, and more than 1 in 6 still do not have a minimum level of proficiency by the age of 15.

Almost 2 in 5 children have so few books in the home that it fills less than one bookshelf. This has an impact on not just reading skills, but also children's motivation to read and reading confidence.

Less than 1 in 3 10-year-olds say they enjoy reading, and about half of 15-year-olds do not read for enjoyment.

Regardless of age, children living with disadvantage are more likely to have lower reading levels and less positive attitudes towards reading than their peers and have only fallen further behind since the onset of the pandemic. Low reading confidence and skills has an impact on children's wider education, making them less able to succeed in other subjects.

The power of reading

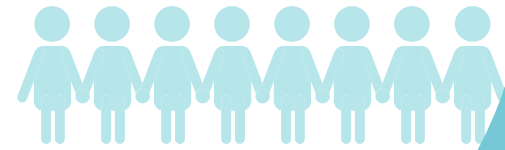
Research shows that the longer children can sustain a love of reading, the greater the benefits: 10-year-olds who enjoy reading have a reading age 1.3 years above their peers who don't enjoy reading. This rises to 2.1 years for 12-year-olds and 3.3 years for 14-year-olds.

Talking to peers and family about books and reading develops children's speech and language skills, understanding and reflection, and builds confidence.

Reading more regularly over the summer has been found to increase children's reading confidence, as they are able to develop their vocabulary and practice reading aloud.

Building a reading habit has lifelong benefits – children who read books often at age 10 and more than once a week at age 16 gain higher results in maths, vocabulary and spelling tests at age 16 than those who read less regularly.

Simply having access to books in the home helps with educational attainment, especially for families living with disadvantage. In fact, reading for pleasure is the most important factor in a child's life chances and future success – even more so than their socioeconomic background.



3 • WHY WE ARE NEEDED

The need

1 in 6 adults struggles to read, with the same proportion saying they read less than once a year, which means 7.1 million people or 16% of the population don't have easy access to the benefits reading.

Adults with poor literacy face disadvantage and so do their children – unable to complete job or benefit applications or read letters from the doctor or information from their child's school, leads to lost opportunities, lower wages and poorer health.

Low levels of literacy cost the UK an estimated £81 billion a year in lost earnings and increased welfare spending.

The stigma surrounding low literacy means that many adults who struggle to read are reluctant to talk about it. Additionally, adults who can't read, or don't enjoy reading, are less likely to read to, and with, their children thus creating an intergenerational cycle of poor literacy.

The power of reading

Increasing confidence and opening a space to ask for and receive help in a supportive environment is an important first step on the reading journey.

For less confident readers, providing a targeted route into reading for pleasure – using short, accessible and adult-focused texts – has a positive impact on reading habits and helps to develop skills and confidence over time. In fact, evidence shows that reading for pleasure can foster the development of stronger reading habits and increase reading skills at a greater rate than through formal literacy lessons.

The benefit of reading are widespread adults with higher reading skills and confidence are more than twice as likely to be employed than those with low skills and earn on average 12% more. In addition, parents and caregivers act as children's first and primary teachers and reading role models, making reading at home and reading together essential to children's development.





Reading supports mental health and wellbeing:

The need

The long-term impacts of the pandemic have led to damaging effects on children and young people's mental health, with 4 in 5 young people saying the pandemic made their mental health worse. While many policy discussions have centred on the need for children to 'catch up' on learning, the British Psychological Society has warned of the dangers of putting 'huge' pressures on children to catch up and advised government and schools to focus on methods of increasing children's wellbeing and connections with others.

1 in 10 children experience mental illness, and in 2022, 400,000 children and young people were being treated or waiting to be treated for mental health problems in England – the highest number on record. Children with reading difficulties are at greater risk of developing mental health problems later in life, including depression, anxiety, behavioural problems, anger and aggression.

The power of reading

Children who enjoy reading and do so regularly are three times more likely to have high levels of mental wellbeing than children who are less engaged with reading and writing.

Children who continued reading during the summer holidays as part of the Summer Reading Challenge reported positive impacts on their wellbeing, including reduced feelings of stress and an increased sense of calmness.

Reading helped children to feel 'braver' and improved their capacity to manage challenging emotions.

Reading also sparks children's imagination, develops creativity, and builds empathy and understanding. Access to a diverse and representative range of materials enables a sense of connection and happiness, by seeing themselves and their families reflected in their reading.

3 • WHY WE ARE NEEDED



Reading supports mental health and wellbeing:

The need

Approximately 15 million people in England have a physical health condition, and each week about 1 in 4 adults in the UK are affected by a common mental health disorder.

Non-readers are 28% more likely to report feelings of depression. These figures rise dramatically for those living with disadvantage – up to 90% of prisoners in the UK have some form of mental health problem, and over 3 in 5 asylum seekers in the UK (61%) experience serious mental distress.

Low literacy is also a determinant of higher mortality rates, and people with poor literacy skills are 1.5-3 times more likely to have adverse health outcomes.

The power of reading

Reading has a hugely positive impact upon mental health conditions and general wellbeing. An Arts Council England report estimated that the beneficial impact of libraries and books upon people's wellbeing saves the NHS £27.5 million a year.

Reading as an activity has been linked to increased life satisfaction, social connectedness, and helping to protect against life's difficulties, with readers being 18% more likely to have higher self-esteem than non-readers. Reading, through individual reading, reading groups, and bibliotherapy, is shown to be an effective and meaningful activity to help those living with poor mental health mitigate their symptoms.

Evidence shows the role reading can play in reducing the risk of new diagnoses of dementia, and on improving the severity of some common symptoms of dementia.

3 • WHY WE ARE NEEDED

Reading connects people and communities:

The need

Feelings of loneliness cut across all age groups, from childhood through to older age. The Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have both worsened loneliness levels across the UK due to lack of meaningful social contact, reduction in support and increased anxiety. These effects are ongoing, and in 2022, 31% of adults – or about 20.7 million people – reported that they were lonelier than before the pandemic. About 6% of all adults experience chronic loneliness, with the proportion rising to 10% for 16-24-year-olds. Research shows that some people are disproportionately affected by loneliness, including young people, people living alone, disabled people and people who are LGBTQ+, with people living in rural or deprived areas experiencing additional barriers to accessing support.

The power of reading

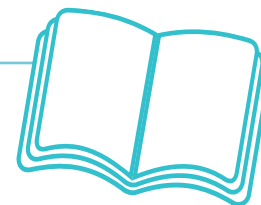
Reading alone and interacting with others to talk about books has been shown to combat loneliness and social isolation across all ages. For children, connecting through reading builds relationships and social-emotional skills. Reading together with parents, caregivers and siblings increases family bonding, making it easier to start conversations and approach difficult topics. And talking about books and reading and sharing recommendations with friends and classmates, helps them feel more connected to others and can even inspire them to create their own stories together. Although some people find reading difficult, it is nevertheless an accessible and widespread cultural pastime, with 2 in 3 adults reading at least once a week.

Adults who read regularly report feeling closer to those around them, including friends, their community and even strangers, than lapsed and non-readers do. Those who read for just 30 minutes a week are 27% more likely to find it easy to start a conversation with a stranger and 50% more likely to enjoy it; they are also 72% more likely to have greater community spirit and to engage in political processes. In fact, 1 in 5 readers say that reading stops them from feeling lonely.

Reading in a social context, such as in reading groups and through reading befriending initiatives, fosters community and builds friendships. Reading together with others provides additional benefits, and is linked to enhanced relaxation, as well as feelings of shared community and common purpose.

For more on the need for our work and the difference reading makes, and to find reference for the research above, please visit the [Reading Facts](#) page on our website.





Life skills and learning

By taking part in our reading challenges, approximately **3 in 4 children, young people and adults** increased their enjoyment of reading (**77%**) and their reading confidence (**71%**). As part of these programmes, more than **1 in 6 libraries (16%)** provided targeted activities to support people with additional learning or physical needs.

Health and Wellbeing

More than **9 in 10 (92%)** adults found their Reading Well book helpful and **9 in 10 (95%)** World Book Night book recipients said that reading their book had helped boost their mood. More than **2 in 5 libraries** and other delivery partners (**41%**) helped us gift books to people with mental health needs.

Connected Communities

66% of our audiences report talking more about reading with others as a result of participating in our programmes and **87% of Reading Friends participants** say they now feel more connected to other people. More than **1 in 4 isolated or vulnerable older people (26%)** took part in our shared reading programmes.

'I have fallen in love with reading. In a time when screen time dominates much of my work and free time, I've found a magical release through the pages of books. I can't wait to read more books and develop my skills.'
– Reading Ahead participant

'Such a boost [...] The book has touched a lot people with such a heartfelt story.' – World Book Night reader

'It does help readers feel confident that they can finish a book and also it can get someone started after a big reading break. Thank you!'
– Quick Reads reader



'To hear my 4 and 8 year old retell stories they had read over the summer filled me (and them) with pride. There was no rush, [the librarian] was so patient. It was wonderful!' – Summer Reading Challenge participant

'It gave me the tools to handle my anxiety. It provided me with better coping strategies.'
– Reading Well reader

'Being vulnerable [...] and living in a rural setting, shared reading has helped me with my feelings of isolation. [...] This service is invaluable to the community.' – Reading Friends participant



2.17 million

We reached over **2.17 million** people, including over **1.12 million children** and over **1.05 million young people and adults**



CONNECTIONS

We hosted **7,873** reading groups across the UK



READING

As part of our campaigns and programmes: People read and used over **13.5m** books, eBooks, and audio titles

People borrowed over **12.9 million** books from libraries

People bought **307,926** books

We gifted **256,825** books, eBooks, audio titles and reading resources or activity packs including:

85,280 World Book Night books, including **48,000** Quick Reads to ensure we provided reluctant and lapsed readers with the opportunity to engage in and celebrate reading

25,000 Quick Reads to people experiencing homelessness as part of the Read On, Big Give campaign

37,029 Reading Partner giveaways, resources and book downloads

NEW LIBRARY MEMBERS
139,863

EVENTS

Over **940,000** children, young people and adults attended events and activities run by us and our partners

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CAMPAIGNS

People engaged over **1.9 million** times with our national and regional reading campaigns

PARTNERS

We worked with over **30,000** partners and organisations including: **public libraries, publishers, universities, schools, colleges, care homes, prisons and YOIs, hospitals and other health venues, foodbanks, community centres, sports clubs, and more!**

9 million people

engaged in reading and writing through our partnerships with



VOLUNTEERS

6,350 volunteers supported our programmes



PROMOTION

The public engaged with our social media accounts over **170,971** times

and made over **4.5 million** visits to our websites

DIGITAL PARTICIPANTS

54,410

digital participants took part in our programmes online

We welcomed **1,116,516** new users to our websites

78,883 people subscribed to our newsletters



5 • ORGANISATIONAL KPIS

By 2026 we will have changed 5 million lives for the better through reading, working hard to engage those who need the benefits of reading the most.

We will enable people of all ages to read for pleasure and empowerment, giving them the knowledge and tools to increase life choices and life chances.

We are committed to:

- **Every primary-aged child having universal access to the Summer Reading Challenge and library membership**
- **Helping the 1 in 6 adults who struggle with reading confidence to get started or restart their reading journey, working with communities where the need is greatest including prisons**
- **Developing a quality mark in adult reading to support employers and individuals across the UK**
- **Being a diverse and inclusive workforce that support the diverse needs of people across the UK**
- **Supporting children and adults to understand and manage their health and wellbeing better**
- **Working with isolated communities using our Reading Friends Programme to help reduce loneliness**
- **Publishing our research on reading need and impact to increase access and engagement, deliver key priorities and support our partners social justice aims**
- **Building an offer to support partners and communities in pro environmental and sustainable activities through reading activism**



6 • KEY OUTCOMES: 2023-26 PLAN

- We will build on our national reach, deepening engagement in priority areas by co-producing with communities to shape and deliver authentic reading activity that meets local needs and delivers measurable impact and sharing our learning nationally.
- We will maintain programme reach to 95% of local authorities whilst also exploring new models to extend engagement of flagship programmes in priority areas.
- We will adapt content and delivery based on evaluation evidence and work with stakeholders and communities on the ground to understand need, barriers to engagement and gaps in support. We will focus on supporting engagement in priority places and with priority audiences.
- We will continue to embrace new technologies and innovation to be agile, anticipate change and understand trends, while addressing digital poverty and exclusion through libraries. Using rigorous research to understand need and impact and embrace an entrepreneurial approach to diversify income through new business models.
- We will continue to extend specialist partnerships to ensure fairer representation in underserved communities and extend reach and engagement so that our programmes meet diverse needs, interests and passions. Our commitment is to inclusive co-production and co-creation through our library partnerships with a truly national reach.
- We will build awareness of environmental issues via reading engagement programmes with partnerships like WWF to address key issues such as environmental anxiety. We will promote and encourage access to reading via environmentally friendly book borrowing and library use as part of the Green Libraries Agenda.
- We will continually improve our processes to ensure everything we do is as green as possible and will communicate this to all our stakeholders including our delivery partners.
- Continue to build the evidence base for our work to extend learning, improve practice and support investment in reading activity as a tool for social and personal change.
- Continue to develop new business and funding models, sustainable approaches and opportunities, both physical and digital to underpin the delivery of our mission.
- Ensure a diverse and inclusive approach that connects with those that will benefit the most; whether that is because they are living with disadvantage in learning, skills and social mobility, health and wellbeing or social isolation.
- Continue to build and develop our core and greatly valued partnership with public libraries as community anchor organisations and democratic access points for reading.
- Work with new partners and create new influencer and stakeholder networks to extend our reach and impact.

Build on our national reach

Maintain programme reach of 95%

Work with stakeholders and communities on the ground

Ensure a diverse and inclusive approach that connects with those that will benefit the most.

Extend specialist partnerships to ensure fairer representation in underserved communities

Build awareness of environmental issues

Continue to develop new business and funding models, sustainable approaches and opportunities

Continue to build the evidence base for our work

Continue to build and develop our core partnership with public libraries as community anchor organisations

7 • PRIORITY ACTIVITIES

These are the core interconnected principal activities we will apply to deliver our vision and mission.

Scaling up of flagship programmes

- Build on our national reach, returning to pre-pandemic levels of participation across all of our programmes and especially in settings such as prisons.
- Support the health and wellbeing of the growing number of people of all ages living with loneliness and poor health and wellbeing.
- Undertake rigorous, original research to understand need and impact, sharing learnings nationally and with a variety of stakeholders.
- Continuously adapt content and delivery based on evaluation evidence, ensuring improvements in reach and impact.
- Place-based learning to deepen engagement in priority places.
- Make new relationships and deepen well-established key relationships at the local level to ensure that all our programmes are authentically co-created and relevant to local communities.
- Identify key relationships across various sectors through stakeholder mapping and research into audience insights, building our understanding of barriers to reading.
- Establish place-based model with bespoke programmes and opportunities developed and delivered to identify and effectively meet local needs and objectives.
- Peer-support models in place to underpin the expansion of our work within existing and new communities.

Adapting existing tools to reach new audiences

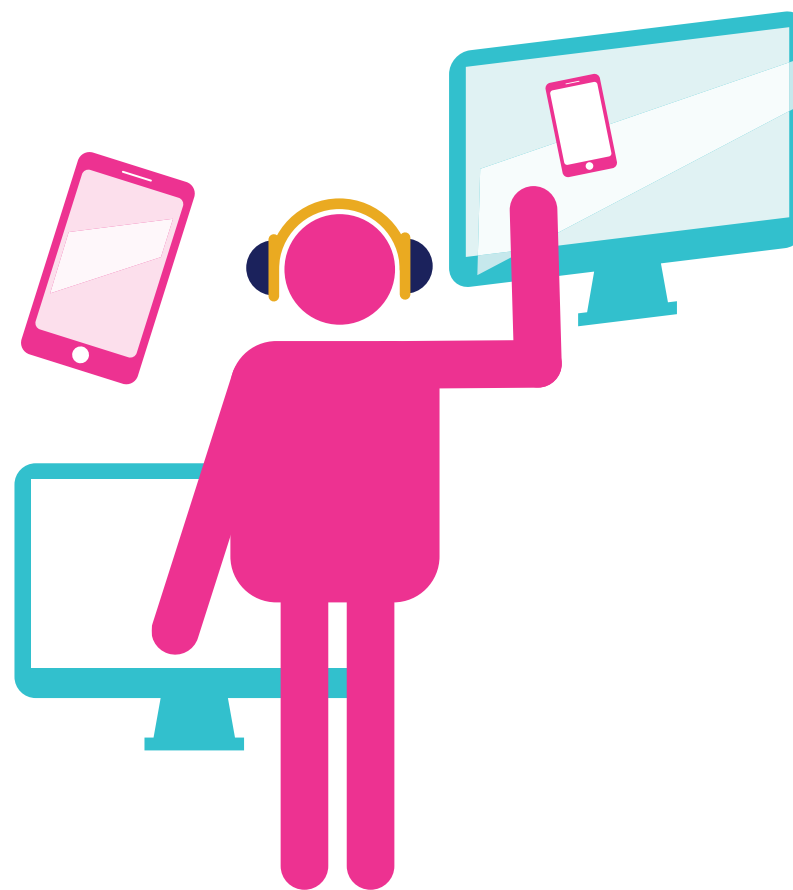
- Embed inclusive co-production and co-creation to shape and deliver reading activity, working with stakeholders and communities to understand need, barriers to engagement and gaps in support.
- Extend specialist partnerships to ensure fairer representation in underserved communities so that our programmes meet diverse needs, interests and passions.
- Test, evaluate and establish new and adapted offers, including:
 - Commercial, mission-driven campaign strategy
 - Relaunch of our Adult reading offer for emergent readers including a refreshed programme approach and extended Quick Reads offer
 - Expansion of Family Reading pilot across prisons and the community
 - Development of a workplace reading offer
 - Activation of our Reading Well programme to extend reach through new community, health and publishing partnerships
 - Targeting of Reading Friends to support social connectivity for priority audiences
 - Reading programme development relevant to Higher Education
 - Development of new reading strategies to raise environmental awareness
 - Development of reading and STEM resources, events and training for Reading Sparks phase 2
 - Development of Chatterbooks children's reading groups offer

6 • PRIORITY ACTIVITIES

- Reach new audiences using data and technology to anticipate change and understand trends, through an active, audience-facing website and collaboration with partners in technology and media.
- Build on our knowledge and evidence of the value of interest pathways into reading using it to inform programme and campaign delivery
- Consolidate our partnership working and programme delivery in Wales, with resourcing to deliver and develop further strategic opportunities and funding

Sustainability

- Embrace an entrepreneurial and agile approach to diversify income streams and remain financially sustainable.
- Explore new business models that respond better to place and audience need and ensure engagement of priority groups.
- Extend our commitment to environmental responsibility.
- Enable independent, creative thinking from across the charity to contribute to the development of new opportunities, that will benefit our financial resilience.
- Increase understanding of the benefits of reading by broadening public awareness and awareness across priority stakeholder groups with influence.
- Diversity and Inclusion remains at the heart of the charity's culture and decision making, with actions underway and reviewed with clear progress against targets.





To support our work to get more people fired up about reading visit:

www.readingagency.org.uk



[@readingagency](https://twitter.com/readingagency)



facebook.com/readingagency



instagram.com/readingagency/



EVERYTHING CHANGES WHEN YOU READ

