

Written evidence submitted by The Reading Agency

Closing the Learning Gap – Opening Up Opportunities for Adults

I am responding on behalf of **The Reading Agency**, an independent charity whose pioneering work brings the joy of reading to the widest possible audiences across the UK, in partnership with the public library service and others. The charity's mission is to create and deliver innovative opportunities to read that inspire more people to read more, encourage them to share their enjoyment of reading with others and celebrate the difference that reading makes to all our lives. The Reading Agency is funded by the Arts Council. Please see www.readingagency.org.uk for more information or contact genevieve.clarke@readingagency.org.uk

We are submitting evidence because our programmes include several specifically geared to disadvantaged adults, helping them to build their confidence and skills through an enjoyment of reading which in turns motivates them to continue learning. We know how important this issue is: 16.4% of adults in England “score at the lowest level of proficiency in literacy (at or below Level 1)”,¹ costing the UK “£81 billion a year in lost earnings and increased welfare spending”² and impacting on “the success of the economy as a whole”.³

We also know that 36% of the adult population don't read for pleasure⁴ and that adults who can't read, or don't enjoy reading, are less likely to read with their children, thus creating a cycle of poor literacy with all the associated problems for society as a whole.⁵

Our programmes for adults reach over a quarter a million people every year:

- **Reading Ahead** (formerly the Six Book Challenge) engaged more than 48,000 less confident readers in 2015 through public libraries, adult community learning, colleges, prisons and workplaces with a beneficial impact on their confidence, motivation and literacy skills.
- Our annual celebration of reading, **World Book Night**, this year involved 9000 volunteers in giving 185,000 books to people who don't read regularly in locations including food banks and homeless hostels.
- Our **Reading Groups for Everyone** database includes at least 4000 groups many of which cater for those with basic skills and other needs.
- We commission six **Quick Reads** titles each year designed for emergent and lapsed readers to add to the strong back list of titles created over ten years, with the books available in libraries and through major retail outlets.
- We also have a programme aimed at reading for health and wellbeing. Developed with public libraries and medical practitioners, **Reading Well Books on Prescription** creates clinically approved book lists on a wide range of health issues, many of which such as depression and anxiety affect disadvantaged adults.

¹ <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20United%20Kingdom.pdf>

² <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp.../WLF-FINAL-ECONOMIC-REPORT.pdf>

³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmbis/557/557.pdf>

⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/476095/Taking_Part_201415_Focus_on_Free_time_activities.pdf

⁵ <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/usr/library/documents/main/1576-booktrust-reading-habits-report-final.pdf>

Executive summary

Our main points are as follows:

- Enjoyment, relevance and recognition are key motivational triggers for anyone to engage in learning, but even more so for those who have previously had a bad experience of formal classroom-based education.
- Best practice has consistently shown that better outcomes are achieved when adult learners are involved in shaping and managing their own learning.
- Peer-to-peer support and role models can change attitudes and inspire engagement.
- Successful learning activity must influence everyday practices beyond the classroom such as reading in the home.
- Learning provision needs to be geared to outcomes that include personal and social development and health and well-being as well as skills attainment.
- Public libraries continue to have a key role to play as trusted, safe and neutral locations for all kinds of learning in the heart of communities.
- Digital tools are an essential part of adult learning delivery if it is to be relevant to people's daily lives.

Looking ahead we make the following three recommendations:

- Integrate digital technology into the teaching and learning process in formal and informal settings so that it becomes a familiar tool to engage and sustain learners alongside face-to-face support.
- Embed adult education into the devolution agenda so that it is valued as a contributor to successful policies for health, education and social care at local level.
- Take account of demographic and economic changes in designing policy and practice so that there is accessible formal and informal provision in a range of settings including public libraries across the whole life course from those leaving education and training at 18 to the over-75s.

We have chosen to focus mainly on one question - What policies and/or practices best motivate disadvantaged adults to engage in adult learning? – and to suggest three priorities for the future of adult education.

1. Our own programmes at The Reading Agency tell us that enjoyment, relevance and recognition are huge motivators for people who have a negative view of learning based on past experience. **Reading Ahead** (formerly the Six Book Challenge) has been designed specifically to incentivise those who may never have completed a book before. It challenges them to start and keep reading their own choice of texts at a level that suits them. There are rewards along the way and a certificate (in some cases their first) at the end, often presented by the mayor or a local celebrity. In a custodial setting they also receive a pocket dictionary, sometimes awarded by the prison governor.

2. Through this process we see people have their eyes opened to a world they thought they could never enter. Held back by fear, learning difficulties or an assumption that learning or reading were only for 'other people', it's taken a tutor, librarian, trade union learning rep or fellow learner to help them take the next step. Classic comments include: "I never thought I could read one book, let alone six. I'm so proud of myself. I feel I can do anything now." Others talk of getting hooked on books, being able to support their children or grandchildren, moving on at work or being motivated to take on further learning. 92% of survey respondents in 2015 said it made them feel more confident about reading rising to 93% among 16-19 year olds and 96% among 20-24 year olds.⁶
3. Access to the right books and materials is crucial to engage less confident readers. Our **Quick Reads** initiative ensures that adult learners get attractive books written specially for them by top authors who make them appropriate for Level 1 learners but also as gripping as any other of their books. The latest research (due to be published in June 2016⁷) shows that 95% of respondents think that Quick Reads have been effective in improving their learners' attitudes towards reading for pleasure, 86% that their personal confidence has been increased and 58% that at least half of their learners enrol on other courses after reading Quick Reads.
4. User-led learning is also crucial for adults. It has to be relevant to their lives or they will walk away or experience yet more failure. We know the power of this through reading groups where less confident readers are able to share their views, decide what they want to read and recommend books to others – in many cases for the first time ever. Offenders in particular talk about the novelty of being asked for an opinion ("I did it to give my views on the books I'd read. I'd never written any thoughts down before, never thought of doing so.") or of working in a group to run an event or promote books in the prison library.
5. This can involve peer-to-peer support as exemplified by trade union learning reps or mentors in a prison setting where both parties benefit from the experience. Our new programme for young people, **Reading Hack**, is starting to build a powerful body of evidence around the impact that volunteering to support others has on people's own skills development as well as those they are working with.⁸ Encouragement from someone who has conquered similar fears about learning can help a hesitant learner take the first step and keep going. The zeal of the convert to learning is evident when our Reading Ahead completers encourage others to 'have a go' or dare to talk about their positive experience in front of their colleagues, invariably commenting that they would never previously have dreamt of doing such a thing.⁹

⁶ https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/Six_Book_Challenge_evaluation_Full_Report_FINAL.pdf

⁷ <https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/quick-reads/>

⁸ <https://readingagency.org.uk/young-people/004-get-involved/volunteer-as-an-activist-for-the-summer-reading-challenge.html>

⁹ <https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/impact/reading-ahead-case-studies/nick-completer-supported-by-emmaus.html>

6. Similarly role models known not just for their writing such as former soldier Andy McNab, yachtswoman Tracy Edwards or sportsman Colin Jackson can inspire with authentic tales of their own learning journeys. As one learner said of Andy McNab: “I remember thinking ‘Well he did it – he’s a writer now, so maybe I can do it too.’”
7. The impact of informal advocacy is also evident in our annual **World Book Night** programme which involves book gifting by volunteers to people who don’t read regularly. Research published in April 2016¹⁰ indicates a change of behaviour on the part of the recipient: 80% of survey respondents who read less than once a month or never read stated that they had read more since been given a World Book Night title.
8. This change in everyday practice around reading in particular has been shown to have a greater longer-term impact on improved skills than participation in adult education.¹¹ This means that future approaches to adult learning need to reach beyond the classroom to changes in behaviours in the home and community. It’s unlikely that a weekly two-hour class will transform someone’s skills and knowledge without supplementary activity to reinforce their learning.
9. Policy and practice in adult education should also take account of the wider impact of learning on personal and social development and health and well-being as well as skills attainment, as is also the case for reading for pleasure. Our own literature review in this area¹² showed positive benefits for adults that could include improvements in symptoms of depression and dementia.
10. We are currently working in partnership with other reading and learning organisations in the UK and Europe to create an evaluation framework which will help us all to measure the impact of our programmes more systematically and use this to shape their future development and make the case for investment of people’s time in reading. We will continue to target disadvantaged adults because research tells us the benefits this brings to them, their families and the wider community.
11. The environment for adult learning provision is also a key factor in its success or otherwise for people who would not cross the threshold of a school or college. We have a partnership with the public library service across the UK and so are convinced of the crucial role of local libraries in supporting all kinds of learning from self-organised informal groups to more formal provision. This role is now officially recognised through the Universal Learning Offer,¹³ the latest in a suite of offers from the Society of Chief Librarians which was launched in November 2015 and supported by 100% of library services in England.

¹⁰ https://tra-resources.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/entries/document/1530/World_Book_Night_Final_Evaluation_Report.pdf

¹¹ Chapter by JD Carpentieri in Literacy as Numbers, Cambridge University Press, 2015

¹² Literature Review: the impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment, BOP Consulting for The Reading Agency, June 2015

¹³ <http://goscl.com/universal-offers/learning-offer/>

This commits them to providing free and creative resources to support learning, spaces for individual and communal (including family) learning and signposting to other local learning opportunities.

12. Public libraries are also ideal partners to support adult learners to improve their digital skills. The Tinder Foundation's digital inclusion project with libraries has supported disadvantaged adults to get to grips with the digital skills vital for everyday life both within the library space and in outreach locations including people's homes.¹⁴
13. But we know from our work with adults with low literacy or poor English language skills that it can be a challenge to get them into a library. This is why we and our library partners are looking at ways of using programmes designed for children (eg our **Summer Reading Challenge**) and families (eg storytimes for toddlers) as a way of enticing adults into the library and getting them thinking about their own learning.
14. Looking ahead we have identified three key priorities. The first is that digital technology should be viewed as an essential tool to enhance and enliven adult education in the same way as earlier technologies such as broadcast media. It is unlikely to replace face-to-face support, especially with the most vulnerable learners, but it can introduce accessible resources of high quality produced with economies of scale. It can also reduce the digital divide by involving adult learners in a technology now essential for everyday life in our society. This can only be achieved however if the adult education workforce is itself confident to use the range of technologies on offer.
15. The second is that adult learning needs to be embedded within the Government's devolution agenda so that it is considered as a contributor to successful policies for health, education and social care at local level. Within this, public libraries need to be part of the local infrastructure to deliver and support adult learning with a voice at the decision-making and funding table.
16. The third is that policy and practice in adult learning should look across the whole life course with particular attention on people entering adulthood and those in old age. The proposals made by Tom Schuller and David Watson in 2009¹⁵ still hold good in terms of redressing educational inequalities and stressing the urgency of meeting the needs of growing millions of people in the fourth quartile of life. Funding should reflect this spread and the needs of people to take up further formal and informal learning opportunities at any stage of their life in a range of settings to enhance their mental and physical health as well as their skills and life chances.

¹⁴ <http://www.tinderfoundation.org/what-we-do/libraries-digital-inclusion-fund-project>

¹⁵ Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning, NIACE, 2009