Newcastle Libraries' Reading for Wellbeing Project

First Year Report and Interim Evaluation

May 2025

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Newcastle Libraries

Reading for Wellbeing

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Introduction and background

Reading for Wellbeing is a Community Hubs and Libraries initiative launched in February 2024 to promote reading for pleasure as a way to improve and maintain wellbeing. The project engages individuals through library-based and community outreach activities, supporting people to (re)discover the joy of reading and share this with others.

Funded by Newcastle City Council (NCC)'s Public Health team through to March 2026, the initiative is delivered by Newcastle Library Services (City, Operations and Neighbourhood Services) with strategic support from Public Health.

Reading for Wellbeing Team

Three **Reading for Wellbeing Officers** lead the project:

- **Chris Wilcock (Full time)**
  Social Worker specializing in adult mental health
- **Charlotte Isherwood (Part time, 0.5 FTE)**
  Teacher with a background primary education both in UK and internationally
- **Helen Parker (Part time, 0.5 FTE)**
  Occupational Therapist with experience in mental health and learning disabilities

Staffing costs

Salary costs are 2x FTE @ N5 = 2 x £39,260 = £78,560 (based on pay scales as of April 2024)

This includes all on-costs, and for budgeting purposes is always calculated at the top of the pay grade (to factor in the annual incremental rises).

Regional Context

The project is part of a wider regional project inspired by author Ann Cleeves, who spoke at the 2020 North East Public Health England Conference about the healing power of stories. She pledged match funding to local authorities willing to employ Community Reading Workers. By 2025 this initiative had expanded to ten local authorities with 15 Community Reading Workers supporting wellbeing through reading across the North East.

Project development

We started by learning and familiarising ourselves with the library service, existing groups resources that would be available for the project to use. We also researched Library Universal Offers as outlined by Libraries Connected and reflected on how our project would align with these.

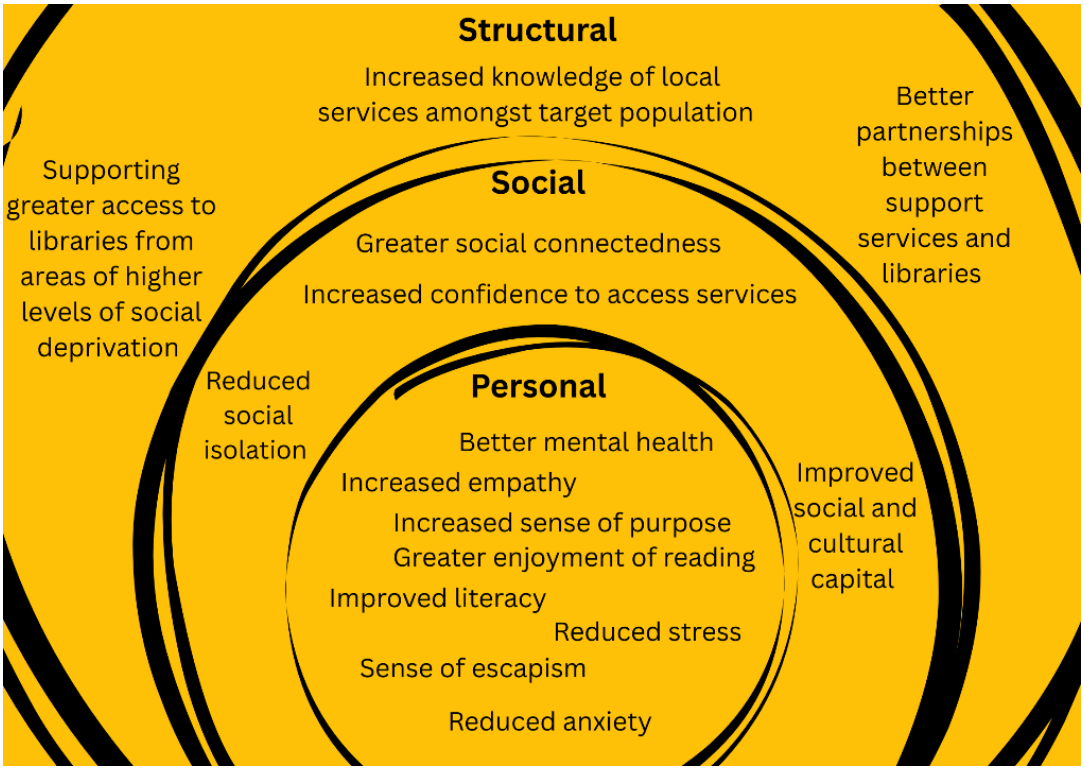
We met with all the other existing projects at that time (Gateshead, North Tyneside, Northumberland and Teesside) to explore their experiences and learnt from how their projects had developed over the past two years.

In addition, we completed the Opening the Book training, which was designed specifically for the induction of Reading for Wellbeing Officers and explores how to encourage and support someone to read for pleasure.

Identifying the Goals of the Project:

To help us develop our project we began by breaking down the goals of the project into three categories.

- Personal Outcomes
- Social Outcomes
- Structural Outcomes



This gave us the foundation from which to think how the project could support people using the service, whilst increasing social connectedness and promoting the library as whole to groups and individuals who have not been using the library.

Identifying services

Having decided on our goals, we began a process of developing a network of community organisations who support individuals who may being experiencing barriers to reading and access to the library. Drawing on council resources such as Information Now, knowledge of colleagues from Newcastle Libraries and Public Health teams, and our own experience from working within education, health and social care, we collated a list of contact details and description of relevant services.

Such as:

- Physical health services (GP practices, Health Watch)
- Mental health services (community mental health teams, psychiatric wards, mental health charities)
- Recovery services (Newcastle Treatment and Recovery, Changing Lives, PROPS, Recovery Trust)
- Learning Disabilities services
- Older Person Services (Search)
- Social isolation (Social Prescribing Services)

Initial Outreach

Having identified services that may be relevant we began a process of contacting and reaching out to these services, meeting with those using the service and staff. The goal was to let people know about the project but also to develop a greater understanding of some of barriers that people experience around reading for pleasure or accessing the library.

In particular, the following:

- Physical Barriers
    - Eye problems – trouble seeing words clearly.
    - Hard-to-read text – small letters, poor lighting, or messy layouts.
    - Tiredness or pain – health issues like headaches, arthritis, or other long-term pain making it hard to focus.
    - Movement difficulties – trouble holding books, turning pages, or using digital devices.
- Mental Health Barriers:
    - Anxiety or depression – feeling low, tired, or struggling to concentrate.

    - Difficult memories – some books may remind people of past trauma.
    - Other mental health conditions – some symptoms can make reading harder.
    - Neurodivergence – Autism or ADHD can make it hard to focus for a long time.
- Environmental and Accessibility Barriers
    - Feeling unwelcome in the library – some people feel libraries are not for them.
    - Not feeling included – thinking books and reading do not fit into their life.
- Learning and Confidence Barriers
    - Fear of reading mistakes – feeling nervous about getting words wrong.
    - Low confidence – thinking they are not good at reading.
    - Dyslexia or learning difficulties – trouble understanding letters and words.
    - Struggling with words – finding grammar and vocabulary hard to understand.

These visits were also an opportunity to identify the existing services in the community who were interested in working together to form groups and partnerships. As a completely new service this was very beneficial.

Structure of Newcastle Libraries' Reading for Wellbeing

Using the information gathered during this initial outreach, we developed a structure for the service as below:

One to one support (2 or 3 meet ups at a local library or somewhere near to you):

- We get to know you and chat about how reading might help you
- We find out what type of books you might like to read
- We show you how to find and borrow books from the library

Group activities:

- We set up groups where people can get together to talk about books and stories
- We listen to what people are interested in and how they would like groups to run

A link to what's going on at your local library:

- Somewhere warm to go and have a free hot drink
- Borrow books or audiobooks
- Use computers/printers/photocopiers
- Research your family history
- Join in with other groups and events

Reading for Wellbeing team

Helen (East Newcastle)

Charlotte (North Newcastle)

Chris (West Newcastle)

How to refer

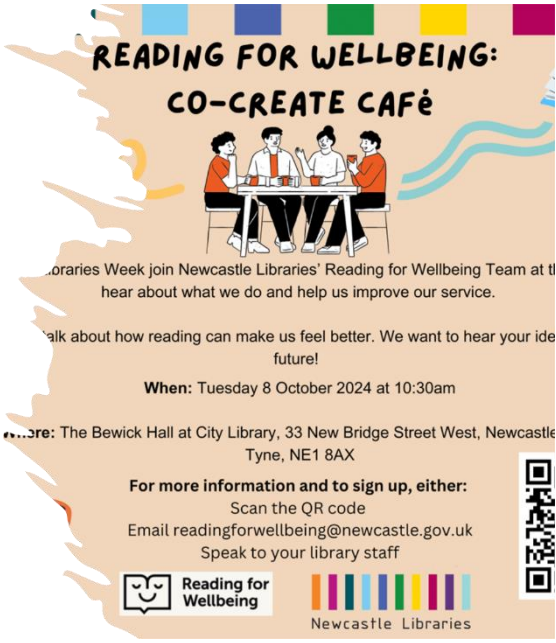
Email: readingforwellbeing@newcastle.gov.uk

You will receive an automatic reply with details of the basic information we need

Newcastle Libraries

Community engagement and Co-production

Co-Create Cafe event



After having established some of our initial service offer and group programme, we were keen to broaden our outreach work so in October 2024 we held our Co-Create Cafe event. Reading for Wellbeing staff facilitated an interactive event to hear the thoughts, opinions and ideas about what barriers people experience to read for pleasure and how Reading for Wellbeing could overcome those barriers.

Ann Cleeves attended and spoke at the event about the founding of Reading for Wellbeing.

The event brought together:

- Reading for Wellbeing Participants
- Support organisations along with people they support.
- Library staff
- NCC Public Health
- Members of the public who were interested in the project.

Following the session, we gathered the thoughts and feedback from participants and distilled in the following summary:

1. **Why Do People Read?**

    - **Escapism and Well-being**: Reading helps people escape daily stress and improve mental health.
    - **Learning and Self-improvement**: Reading builds knowledge, vocabulary, and skills.
    - **Personal Enjoyment**: People read for fun, relaxation, and better sleep.
    - **Social Connection**: Reading encourages bonding through shared experiences or popular discussions.

2. **What Helps People Read?**

    - **Accessible Formats**: Audiobooks and short stories make reading easier for multitaskers or those short on time.
    - **Supportive Reading**: Shared reading with children and user-friendly editions enhances enjoyment.

- **Library Support**: Guidance from libraries improves the reading experience.

3. **Barriers to Reading**

    - **Time and Focus**: Lack of time and difficulties with concentration which make reading difficult, for example due to ADHD. This includes having to re-read sections or hyper-fixating on a single topic, which can lead to mental exhaustion.
    - **Motivation**: to read for pleasure, especially if reading is already required for work or study. This leads to burnout in their relationship with books. Non-relatable stories also act as a barrier. If readers can’t connect with a story, they’re less likely to continue reading.
    - **Library Perceptions**: Not knowing where to start can be overwhelming, access poses physical barriers for some, and misconceptions about libraries being overly quiet, with strict fines or expectations, may deter potential readers.

4. **Library Access Barriers and Solutions**

    - **Access Issues**: Limited hours, digital skill gaps, and language barriers hinder library use.
    - **Solutions**: Expand mobile libraries, extend weekend hours, offer services in diverse locations, and form partnerships with workplaces.
    - **Inclusion**: More diverse books, formats, and languages foster greater inclusivity in libraries.

5. **Reading Groups**

    - **Benefits**: Groups reduce loneliness, provide structure, and encourage personal growth.
    - **Barriers**: Fear of judgment, self-esteem issues, and scheduling conflicts limit participation.
    - **Facilitators**: Personal outreach, taster sessions, and drop-in events help ease anxiety and encourage joining.

6. **"Reading for Wellbeing" Program**

    - **Communication**: Word of mouth, partnerships, and social media effectively promote the program.
    - **Evaluation**: Personal testimonials, forums, and case studies provide valuable feedback on the program's impact.

Steering group

As the feedback from the Co-Create Cafe event was so valuable, we decided to invite participants to join a more regular session to form a steering group for the project. This is a small bi-monthly group regularly attended by two participants and occasionally representatives from the Public Health team to report back about changes and developments in the project and gather further feedback and ideas.

Community Mapping

Over the winter of 2024 we completed a renewed effort of mapping local community resources. We have identified wide range of services and spaces, from leisure and cultural spaces, health services, care services and places of worship. We underwent a process of contacting all the services we had identified, sending them information about our service and encouraging them to get in touch with any questions or to see if there is an opportunity to work together.

Community Trees

As a part of Newcastle Libraries' Warm Welcome events, which were opportunities for people to come and check out their local library, the Reading for Wellbeing Team set up 'Community Trees,' where people could write down places that make them feel supported and place the leaf on the tree. The process helped show where people find support and helped us decide where to visit to share information about Reading for Wellbeing and the library.

Current Reading for Wellbeing programme

One to One Support:

We offer one to one support to get up and running with reading and provide tailored advice about overcoming individual barriers. People can self-refer or be referred by a support agency, and we have made sought to make strong links with social prescribers from GP services to promote this offer.

This is a smaller part of our work but has a big impact. This is often with people who do read or have read in the past but are experiencing social isolation and want to connect with others but don't feel ready for a group setting. Following one to one sessions we have supported and encouraged people to attend our groups as means of social connection to continue their reading journey.

Reading for Wellbeing Groups:

Library Book Pick 'n' Mix

This is a drop-in session exploring a weekly selection of ten different types of books from the library with a different topical theme each week.

The group is aimed for people who want to read but don't know where to start, or people who just need some fresh ideas and/or those who want to connect with others over stories and books.

We have found these sessions have brought together an array of individuals; some people who have attended the library regularly but by themselves and have joined the group to meet with others, some who had felt social isolated and anxious about attending a group to do with reading. Members have used this group to build their confidence to then join one of the libraries existing and more structured reading groups.

- Who: Open to anyone
- When: Weekly
- Where: City Library

Steps and Stories Audiobook Walks

These are guided audiobook walks in Newcastle's parks and green spaces. The group provides a chance for people to try reading and access stories in a different way while getting some fresh air and exercise.

At the sessions, we can promote the library's online BorrowBox offer and show people how to sign up after the session.

Through the support of the Digital Inclusion Team in the library the project has been provided with 10 tablets which means the group is open and accessible to those who do not have such or device, or not sure how to use BorrowBox.

- Who: Open to anyone (10 places available)
- When: Monthly
- Where: Leazes Park, Heaton Park, Tyne Riverside Country Park

Open Book Club (soon to be relaunched as Farmyard Fables)

This group is an accessible space for people with learning disabilities and/or autism to listen to stories and poetry on a range of topics. Books Beyond Words offered training and free resources on using word-free picture books with adults with learning disabilities to ignite a love of stories. Following group feedback we have broadened this into using a shared reading approach (stories read aloud by a group facilitator) and integrating creative writing and craft activities to respond to what we have read.

This group is delivered in partnership with Friends Action North East, who support people with learning disabilities. It has been held at East End Library but in order to engage a new audience and boost attendance we are trialling a further collaboration with Ouseburn Farm over the Spring/Summer and relaunching as Farmyard Fables. These interactive sessions will run at the city farm setting, and draw inspiration from nature.

- Who: open to all, but specifically accessible for people with learning disabilities/autism
- Where: New for Spring/Summer: Ouseburn Farm
- When: Monthly

Tales Across Time: Intergenerational storytimes

This is an intergenerational project designed to link young people and older people for shared story times. Through the process of reaching out to schools and care homes we were able to pair up a care home with a school.

The sessions involve the school bringing along a year group and the students bring along a selection of books they enjoy. We then pair the children with a resident, and they will read the books and stories together.

After pilots across two different settings - Addison Court (Assisted Living flats, Scotswood) and Kirkwood Court (Care Home, Kenton) - we identified that the sessions were much more effective and better attended in the care home setting so are focusing on building upon this model, and are hoping to expand to other sites. We also have a new volunteer joining us on this project and hope that this too will grow to give us further capacity to grow this across the city.

- Who: school age children and care home residents
- Where: Kirkwood Court, Kenton
- When: Around twice per half term

Groups for older adults:

Culture Fridays is a group open to over 55s to come together and talk all things culture, whether that's books and stories, films, music, or history.

The group was initially set up in partnership with Search and therefore co-facilitated. However, due to changes within Search the group is now fully run by Reading for Wellbeing.

We respond to people's interests and try to bring along resources around topics in which people have expressed an interest. For example, making use of the library's local heritage collections, playing board games and crafts such as print making. We also bring along items from the library that the group may not be aware that we have. For one session we brought along a collection of graphic novels, which led to one member taking one out on loan which they reflected they wouldn't have usually done so.

- Who: Over 55s
- When: Fortnightly
- Where: Fenham Library

Through linking in with council colleagues in Adult Social Care we have formed a partnership with the **Connie Lewcock Resource Centre**. The centre is a physical rehabilitation centre, often for people who are being discharged from hospital. The aim of the session is to meet with residents to talk to them about the Reading for Wellbeing project, their own personal reading and what the library has to offer. Given the context of the sessions, there is a particular focus on showing residents large print items, bringing along tablets for them to try audiobooks and ebooks. There has often been a change in a person's mobility therefore we promote the library's Home Delivery Service.

- Who: Connie Lewcock Residents
- Where: Connie Lewcock Centre
- When: every 6-8 weeks

Work with Recovery Community:

As Reading for Wellbeing in Newcastle has been in receipt of the Treatment and Recovery Grant we had a particular focus on trying to find ways of working with those who are in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions.

We began this process by getting a sense of the services that were operating in this space.

Therefore, we identified services such as:

- Newcastle Treatment and Recovery service
- Changing Lives (both their community services and Oaktrees community rehab service)
- The Road to Recovery Trust
- PROPS (carers support service)
- NECA – Gambling service
- Newcastle City Council Public Health Team
- Newcastle City Council Social Work Teams
- The Service User Forum
- Recovery College
- Revival Newcastle

We visited each service and talked about the goals of the project to get a sense from people what may or may not work. In addition, we attended Newcastle Service User and Carer Forums to discuss the projects and its goals, particularly working with those in recovery and those caring for people in recovery.

Following the above sessions, we set up a bi-weekly group called 'The Brave Tales Collective' which aimed to create a space for those in recovery services to come together to talk about the books, the stories, that they enjoy and would include some shared reading. It was hoped this could also provide a space for people to reflect about themes and stories that relate to their recovery. Unfortunately, despite interest and a few people attending, the group struggled to build beyond a couple of participants. Therefore, it was felt that we needed to revisit our approach. We decided to move away from organised groups within library settings towards a more outreach model based on developing presence, trust and building relationships in settings that are familiar and regularly visited by those in recovery.

As a result, we met with The Road to Recovery Trust at George Street Social and have established a 'Pop Up' library. The idea being that we can offer the space to chat about books, stories, answer questions about the library, sign people up, can also promote the upcoming library events/initiative, such as the upcoming Reading Ahead by the Reading Agency.

This group started following George Street re-opening in January 2025. We have established and promoted our presence. At the drop ins we have been able to sign people up to the library, promote Reading for Wellbeing and wider Library resources, particularly resources that people are not aware of (easy read books, dyslexic editions, audiobooks). It has also an opportunity for us to gather feedback about people's relationship with reading and what might help. It has also been an opportunity for us to bust some of the myths people have about libraries (for example letting people know there are no longer fines for late returns) that deter them from using the service.

We were also keen to support those who are caring for someone who is experiencing addictions and therefore collaborated with PROPS and now attend their carers' wellbeing group once a month to facilitate an informal and relaxed chat about stories and books. This has also served as way to promote the work, such as the 'Pop Up' library at George Street Social to carers who can pass this information onto those they support.

We have also worked with services who operate in the wider recovery space, such as:

- A fortnightly reading group at ReCoCo (Recovery College Collective), which is 'a radical mental health recovery college based in Newcastle upon Tyne, set up

to provide support for and by those with experiences of mental health and addictions.' The group is called 'Novel Notions' and is a space for people to chat about the stories and books they like.

- Regular sessions at Scrogg Road (a collection of 12 dedicated mental health rehabilitation flats) around reading and creative writing. We are also hoping to support residents to volunteer at Byker Lodge rehabilitation centre to deliver creative writing sessions there too

We have also developed bespoke groups for other services within the recovery community. For example, we have worked with Changing Lives Oaktrees and Willow View mental health rehab ward at St Nicholas Hospital, offering visits to City Library and audiobooks walk sessions created specifically for members of their services. Staff and those using Oaktrees also attended our 'Co-Create Café' event.

At the time of writing our data shows 27% of sessions have been supporting those experiencing addiction, representing 141 attendances in total. Please note, when we register people at groups we do not expressly ask about addiction, therefore these figures are based on the sessions that are taking place in a recovery setting (such as with Changing Lives, George Street Social, PROPS etc.) It does not capture if people attending the sessions at ReCoCo, Willow View and Scrogg Road, or any of our many other groups have experienced addictions, unless they state this.

Work with wider Library Services

From the outset of the project, we have worked towards integrating with and complementing the work of the other library services:

- Reading Well project:
    - Worked together on partnership with Elswick GP practice. Monthly drop ins to promote both Reading Well Collection and Reading for Wellbeing Project.
- Adult Reading Team:
    - Supported the Reading Team to organise Reading Ahead launch event for at ReCoCo. We have also promoted the initiative across groups and organisations
    - Through outreach work we promote the whole library offer. Particularly things people are less familiar with e.g. Borrowbox, Home Delivery Service, myth-busting.
- Digital Inclusion Team:
    - We have formed digital reading groups that lead on from the 'Get Online' tablet courses.

    - This has provided an opportunity for people to maintain the social connection, encourage their use of services such as Borrowbox and offer some ongoing support.
- Home Delivery Service:
    - During their placement, two Occupational Therapy students shadowed the Home Delivery Team and produced a report about the ways they could support people with additional needs, for example using reading aids.
    - The Home Delivery Service is being redeveloped and as part of this relaunch we are looking to implement these ideas, and support the library team to develop the offer to make reading more inclusive for a range of audiences

Our Impact so far: Interim Evaluation

Evaluation approach and methods:

It was identified that as engagement in the programme is very varied (some participants coming to regular sessions every week, some only attending once or twice, and some engaging more broadly with the wider outreach offer) that a flexible approach was required as opposed to traditional 'pre-post' style evaluative measurements. The project also brings together a wide range of partners and organisations, with individual actors having many different and equally valued perspectives on the project delivery. It was therefore identified that soft-systems methodology as described by Augustsson (2019) would be an appropriate overall methodological approach. This is based on an epistemological stance that systems are made up of various interrelated components that interact dynamically over time, often in unpredictable and unforeseeable ways. Therefore, viewing the programme as an open and dynamic system was deemed an appropriate framework for evaluation.

Sources of evaluation data for interim evaluation:

- Monitoring data
- Participant survey
- Professionals and partners survey
- Insights from flash focus groups and informal feedback

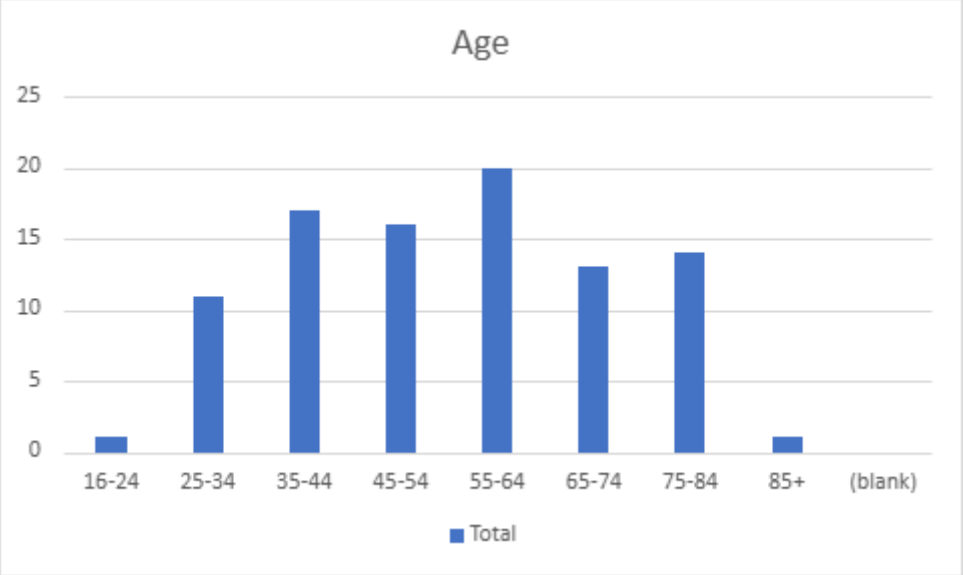
Monitoring data

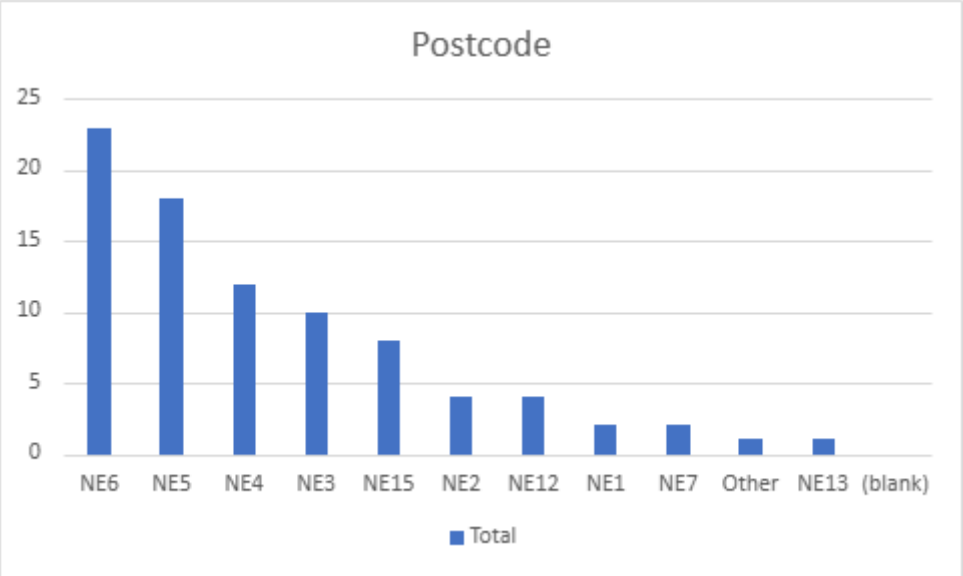
We collect monitoring data about who is engaging with the service via two channels: participant registration when someone first interacts with the project, and recording of each contact (one-to-one, group, or outreach session). Together these form a picture of the day to day activity of the project and its reach.

Participant registration data

In total we have 98 registered participants who have taken part in the project by attending a session or event. This does not include people who we have had more fleeting contact with at outreach visits, promotional events, and within sessions where gathering registration information would be impractical. For example, during the intergenerational storytime sessions with school children we do not register each child individually as a participant due to time constraints and data sensitivity. Therefore,

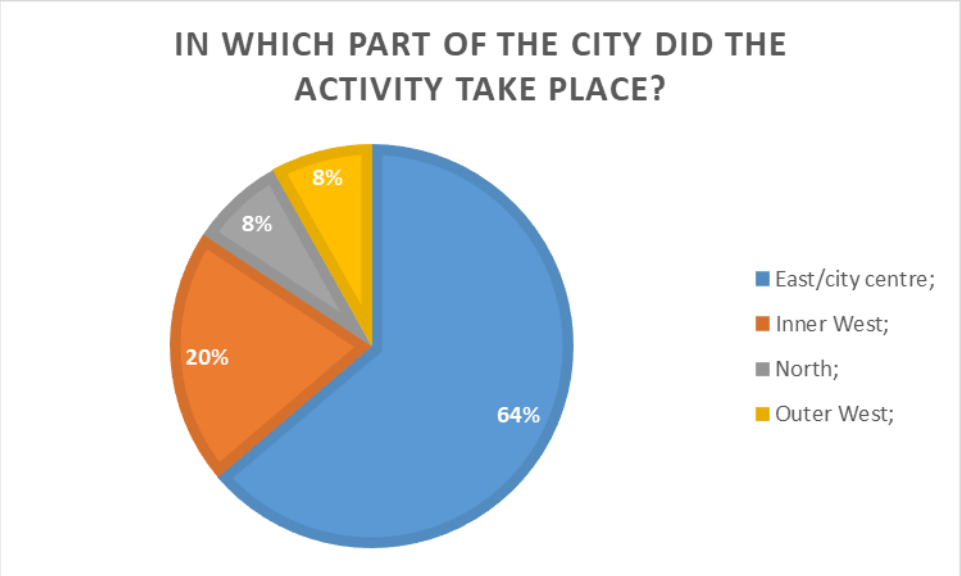
while the actual number of people reached is much higher, the charts below describe the nature of our core attendees.

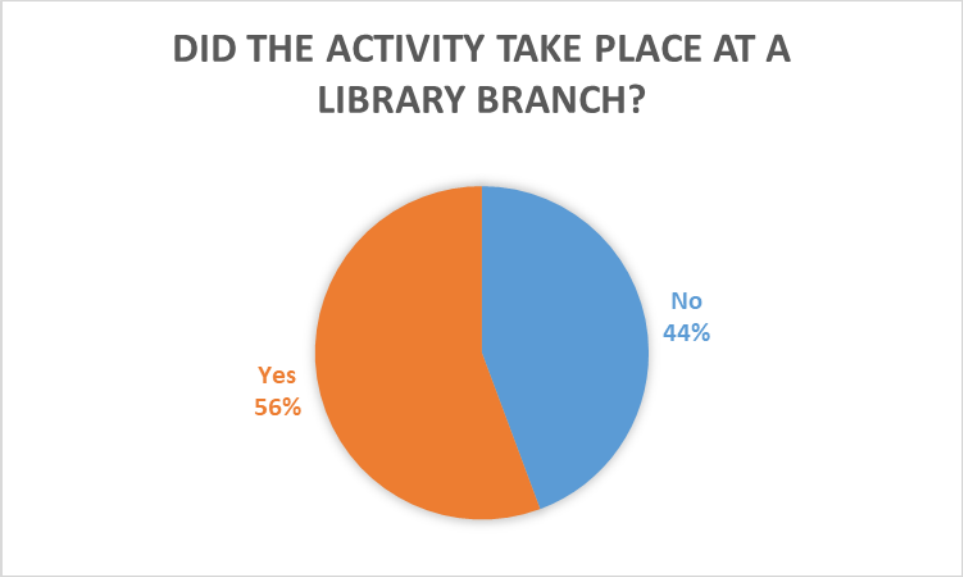




Activity monitoring data

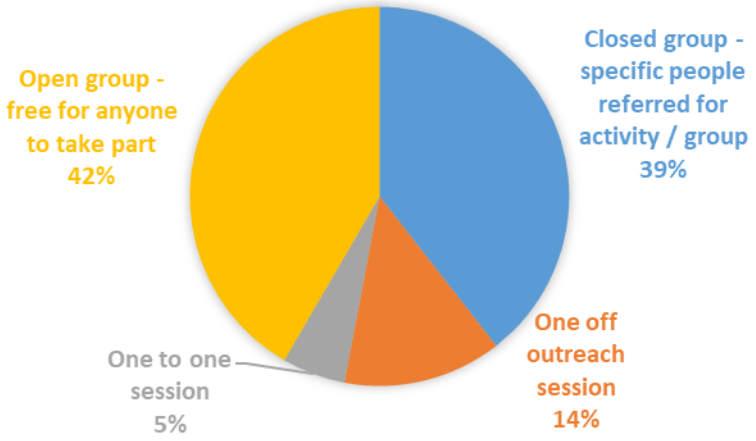
We have registered 186 project activities with a total of 842 attendances in total. 102 new or renewed library memberships have been processed as a direct result of Reading for Wellbeing activities.



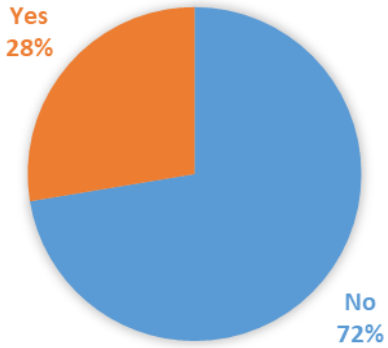

DID THE ACTIVITY TAKE PLACE AT A LIBRARY BRANCH?
No
44%
Yes
56%

If not at a branch, where did the activity take place?
West End Women and Girls
ReCoCo Recovery College
Cornerstone Community Centre, Benwell
Tree Top Village housing
Heaton Community Centre
Leazes Park (Steps and Stories)
Byker Sands
Changing Lives at Recoco
Skills for People
Walker Riverside Park
Over the phone (one to one)
Teams discussion
Tyne Riverside Country Park
Havannah Nature Reserve
Scrogg Road mental health rehabilitation flats, Walker
Connie Lewcock Resource Centre, Lemmington
Church of the Holy Nativity
Willow View ward St Nicholas Hospital
Addison Court residential flats
Kirkwood Court Residential home
Jesmond Community library
George Street Social
Westgate College
St Oswald's Hospice
People's Kitchen
Ouseburn Farm
Crisis Skylight

WHAT TYPE OF ACTIVITY WAS THIS?



WAS THIS ACTIVITY SUPPORTING A PERSON RECOVERING FROM ADDICTION?

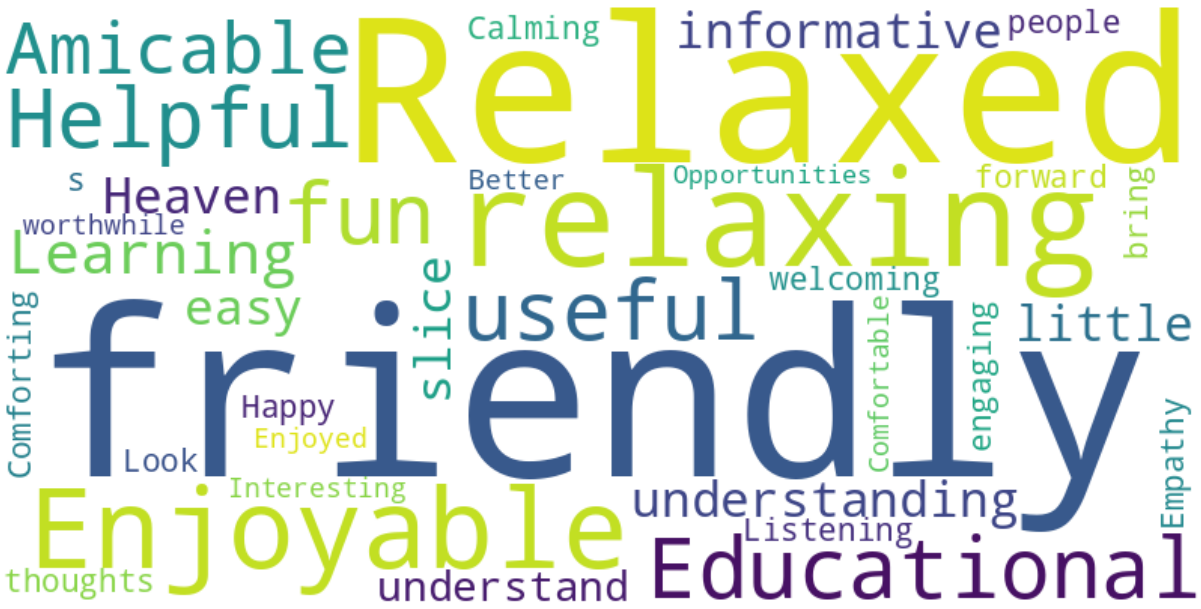


Participant survey

In April 2025, a brief evaluation survey was designed on Microsoft Forms to gather insights from anyone who had participated in Reading for Wellbeing project activities. Participants were invited to complete the survey via email, and printed versions were available to others in person as an alternative method, alongside support offered from staff for those who needed assistance. Given the nature of the groups and communities we are trying to engage on the programme and the commonly low completion rate of survey-based evaluations we anticipated that the reach of this may be limited, and this was indeed small with 16 responses in total.

Key insights

What three words would you use to describe your experience of Reading for Wellbeing?



Tell us in your own words what impact Reading for Wellbeing has had on you.

Themes:

Rediscovering the Joy of Reading

"I have resumed reading after a long period of time following health issues."
"I was struggling to read for months but I'm now beginning to read again."
"I was a good reader but past 2 years I was not good as earlier, after joining sessions I encourage myself to reading."

Social Connection and Wellbeing

“It has made me get out more and mix with other people.”
“Nice meeting people who also enjoy reading a good book.”
“It is really helping my mental health having a reason to leave the house.”
“Nice to talk.”

New Discoveries and Learning

“I have found out so much information on how the libraries have moved forward and enjoy downloading books to read.”
“It makes me understand the library more.”
“Interesting experience to try.”
“I enjoyed trying something new that I have never done before.”

Professionals/partners survey

Alongside the participant survey, a further questionnaire was designed to gather perspectives from professionals and partners we have worked with as part of the project. This was intended to gather wider insights and give a rounded approach the to evaluation strategy. With four responses in total again the reach was limited, but initial data was used to inform the evaluation.

Key insights

All of the professionals who responded reported that as a result of their involvement with the project they know more about library services, know more about other services in the community and are more likely to ask the people they work with about reading as a leisure activity.

- Interestingly, this impact expands to their own reading habits and behaviours, with all indicating that they themselves have started to read and use library services more, and feel more connected to their community and other services.
- Professionals noticed that participants appear more confident when talking about reading, and even if not reading more they feel more engaged with reading and see the benefits as a distraction technique for their mental health and wellbeing
- Observations were noted about reduced social isolation, positive impact on emotional wellbeing, encouraged conversation and shared experiences about personal challenges
- Outreach to isolated communities with accessible transport would help further engage other groups

Insights from flash focus groups and informal feedback

While the survey data provided us with some initial insight into the impact of the project so far, their limited response rates required us to adopt a more creative approach to evaluation. Using the soft systems methodology as described above, we engaged in some more informal discussions and gathered anecdotal feedback from a range of sources to provide deeper qualitative information. This also provided a more equitable approach as those who felt unable to complete the survey had opportunity to have their voices heard.

Flash focus groups:

Within group sessions themselves, we opened up discussion about how people were finding the sessions, what they felt they were getting out of it, and their thoughts about how reading helps their/other people's wellbeing

Library Book Pick n Mix - reading group

"I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation – attending the group is the highlight of my time at the library"

"I like that everybody gets their say"

"There are limitations to solitary reading. In the group you can bounce ideas off each other."

"It is inspirational. It gives me new ideas and shows me new books. I wouldn't do it on my own it gives me new motivation."

"It has a sense of belonging. I appreciate this as I haven't always found that in other settings Here it is very accepting and inclusive."

"I have experienced the deprivation of loneliness growing up, so I value coming to this group."

Steps and Stories – audiobook walking group

"I was getting right into it"

"At first when I was listening I thought this is a bit boring but by the end I didn't want to end as I was just getting into it!"

"It was canny actually - I might have to look up the book myself and finish listening to it"

“I've never been to the library in years”

“I didn't know you could get audiobooks for free”

“I wouldn't have come to this park before so it's good to try something new”

“It has encouraged me to continuing listening - I'm hooked!”

“It was a good way to switch off and relax”

“Not something I would have thought of doing. I could listen to audiobooks when doing other things”

“Would have liked some more lighthearted books - something to match my mood”

“Would be interesting to listen to the same book as each other and then chat about it at the end”

“I used to come to the Park with my Mam. It was a while ago!”

Tales Across Time – Intergenerational Storytime group

Feedback from children (Year 5 – age 9-10):

“I enjoyed meeting older people and coming to see people I wouldn’t usually see”

“It was nice to read to them”

“Something different”

Feedback from residents:

“They were great readers – they should be on stage!”
“Lovely to hear them reading”
“I feel like I’ve had a re-education from them!”
“It was a bit loud and difficult to hear”

Feedback from volunteer:

“It was lovely to see little moments of connection – there was one girl who was really reluctant and shy at the beginning, and with a bit of encouragement and attentiveness she was reading with confidence and pride by the end! One of the residents in particular had a lovely rapport with her. The teacher said she can really struggle with this usually, so it's really brought her out of her shell and helped her enjoy reading.”

Informal ad-hoc feedback:

People would often make comments to us or other colleagues about their experiences of the group, so we kept a record of more informal feedback to give a wider picture of the impact we are having:

"This group is great for me as I've always been put off more formal book groups because i worry that I won't like the book or that other people will have different opinions. Or I won't finish reading the book and then not feel like going back. This group is more relaxed as I can just try out different things that I wouldn't have read before, and just chat about stories in the session. I am trying to get my friend to come too as he would love it."

"Even though I am a reader I would never have picked up that kind of book - so this group helps me discover new things."

"I have been shown books I wouldn't usually have ever read (eg different formats/topics), I hadn't been to the library for years before coming, used to go to a writing group at the library before covid but hadn't been back, I don't get out as much as i used to and my family are always trying to get me to do more out and about. It has become more of a routine for me now to come here on a Friday."

"I can't come to the group so much as I'm back at work now, but coming really helped me at a very low point for me when I had depression. It was just what I needed. It helped me to meet with other people and I enjoyed it."

"I've really enjoyed coming along to the group, and met some nice people, Helen is great and not just smart, and scholarly but a wonderful person too."

"I look after the This Girl Can Newcastle social media and we would like to promote the Reading for Wellbeing walks that are happening over the coming weeks. It's great to see the libraries taking such an innovative approach to the Walk Leader training they received from colleagues."

"The audiobook walk was enjoyed by all of us, I can see how it could be beneficial to a variety of groups."

Library staff fed back that following our Co Create café people had signed up to the library and expressed that they would not have thought they would ever joined the library until coming to the event.

Feedback from one-to-one participant after being supported to attend a regular reading group at the library: "I've liked the groups I find it helps my mental health a lot"

Towards a Theory of Change

This interim evaluation has enabled us to gather insights from a range of sources and begin to sketch out a Theory of Change. This is a unifying idea of how context, inputs and activities combine to produce immediate and longer-term impacts.

Initial sketch of Reading for Wellbeing Newcastle's Theory of Change:

Reflections and next steps

What has worked

Building partnerships and relationships: Working alongside other community organisations and building a network amongst existing provision has been invaluable to project development.

Outreach-style programming: Taking books and reading activities out into community settings and developing a presence has been more effective than remaining solely in library buildings.

An agile approach flexible to change: Actively seeking feedback and acting on it, changing the time/location/focus of provision to meet community need.

Challenges and limitations

Connecting with communities most isolated from library services: Engaging those with negative perceptions and experiences with libraries/reading/services.

Adapting to changing staff capacity: Maintaining project output when a member of the staff had some extended medical leave.

Capturing impact within outreach model: Gathering information about our reach and impact where much of our work adopts an outreach style.

What next?

Consolidating existing programme by focusing on what we know works.

Strengthening partnerships with core organisations.

Maximising impact by extending promotional activities and refreshing contacts with networks.

Deeper evaluations via in depth case studies.

Future planning for programme sustainability to explore options for future funding and service delivery models.