



Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Project: The Reader at Home

Organisation: The Reader

Region: National (UK)

Introduction

As the pandemic unfolded, we recognised that amongst the needs in our communities was that of wellbeing support and social connection. We rapidly transformed our services to meet those needs, delivering Shared Reading wherever and however possible by phone or online – to maintain that vital lifeline for our group members, our volunteers, our partners and the wider community.

‘...we met up online to read a short poem together, and we ended up reading and talking for over an hour ...many of the group hadn’t been in touch with each other since lockdown began. [One participant] phoned her son the following day to say how wonderful it had been: “as good as going out”.’

Our wide-ranging programme of activity for volunteers and group members during this time, promoted under the banner of ‘The Reader at Home’ has included Shared Reading sessions or pairs run online or by phone open to all (groups that give people a chance to connect with each other over a great story or poem), and our Lifeline activity packs (handpicked texts and guides for partner organisations to run reading related activities with those who cannot engage online). Volunteers have also benefitted from bi-weekly support sessions to connect, share their ideas and experiences, and maintain their own wellbeing, and have received regularly updated resources and materials for their groups.

At a time when many people are looking for wellbeing support, distraction and meaning, we’ve also been working to provide a regular programme of video readings, online events, and specially curated lockdown reading resources for everyone to enjoy at leisure.

These new services are bringing the comfort, escapism and connection of literature to existing and new beneficiaries and we continue to receive demand for more.

Funders

The Reader is supported by Arts Council England, People’s Postcode Lottery and National Lottery Community Fund. We are grateful to a range of Trusts and Foundations and commissioners who have either funded this work for the first time during lockdown, or given us flexibility over their funding for us to find new ways to support people.

Who is it for?

Our projects across the UK aim to support the most vulnerable in our communities; from those with long term mental and physical health issues and refugees, to older people based in areas of disadvantage and individuals recovering from addiction.

‘The Reader at Home’ aimed to reach those most in need of social connection, comfort and meaning during this difficult time of isolation.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

Shared Reading brings people together. It connects people to literature and each other, and substantially increases their wellbeing and mental health. Outcomes include improved confidence, increased social activity and improved mood and outlook. Our activities, for many, provide a lifeline in their week, the social connection they look forward to. For those in care homes and hospitals they provide relaxation, stimulation and a change from routine. Through 'The Reader at Home', we aimed to reduce isolation, and improve wellbeing and social connection for our beneficiaries and volunteers alike.

Where is it happening?

Nationwide, with larger hubs of activity centred around the North-West, South-West and London.

Are you working in partnership? Our work has always been co-delivered with a range of partners across the voluntary and public sector (including CCGs, NHS Trusts, local authorities, care homes, hospitals and prisons) who in normal times would refer to, run, host and commission Shared Reading activities. We kept in close contact with our partners and commissioners as we explored how best to evolve our services as lockdown hit and so we've been able to continue to support beneficiaries in new ways as well as extending to new communities in some places.

Under the banner of 'The Reader at Home', we are delivering the comfort and connection of Shared Reading in new ways. By supporting our dedicated volunteers and partner staff to keep Shared Reading groups running online and by telephone, and through providing specially curated digital reading resources and activity packs, we've been able to maintain a vital lifeline for our group members, partners and wider community.

'Life Lines', our weekly DIY Shared Reading activity packs, has been particularly successful, and used by a range of partner organisations including charities, health providers, care homes and prisons to run reading-related activities for those without internet access. By making this resource free for organisations, we've also been able to support several new partners across the voluntary and healthcare sectors.

A partnership with National Prison Radio also enabled us to develop a six-week programme of reading and reflections, extending the reach of our work in the prison estate and bring the comfort and escapism of Shared Reading to listeners in 120 prisons in the UK.

How many people took/are taking part?

We estimate that our alternative provision has reached around 7,000 beneficiaries (roughly half of our existing audience in 2019/20).

For how long has it been happening?

'The Reader at Home' was launched shortly after lockdown, and is still ongoing. We anticipate that we will continue to deliver blended services indefinitely, even as our in-person groups can start reopening. We will be monitoring the take up and effectiveness of our new evolved services, to take a view on what is incorporated for longer term.

What were/are the main outputs?

Practical outputs have included online Shared Reading groups via Zoom, Shared Reading sessions over the phone, and bi-weekly online support sessions for volunteers, all of which have kept the Shared Reading community across the UK, and beyond, connected. Outputs have also included specially curated lockdown reading resources, digital anthologies and live readings on social media, including a weekly schedule of events aimed at young children and their families. We've also produced weekly 'Life Line' packs; read-aloud activity packs, including texts and prompts, for charities, prisons, NHS partners and community organisations who want to bring the comfort and connection of reading to the people that they support.

Feedback:

Shropshire GP, Helen Willows, leads a Shared Reading group that normally meets in a community centre every Monday. The group is made up of 8 people of different ages, the oldest member being 93. Helen said: "Last week, having waited for the 93 year-old to be set up with a laptop, we met up online to read a short poem together, and we ended up reading and talking for over an hour. There was great excitement at being able to speak to each other 'in person' as many of the group hadn't been in touch with each other since lockdown began. The 93 year-old phoned her son the following day to say how wonderful it had been: 'as good as going out'."

Another volunteer, Dirk Uitterdijk, who runs a Shared Reading group on the Wirral has been reading with his group members over the phone during lockdown. He said: "Doing Shared Reading over the phone has meant that the group has actually grown over the last few weeks and there are now 16 of us. For people who found it difficult to get to our regular sessions, reading together over the phone is the perfect solution. Shared Reading has given all of us a reason to be in regular contact while also enquiring about each other's wellbeing during this challenging and often isolating time. There is still life with a capital 'L' to be found during these coronavirus days."

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

Our dedicated volunteers have astounded us with their commitment and creativity in finding alternative ways to continue reading with their group members, learning to use new technology when required. Several volunteers have been keeping in touch with their group members by post, or calling individual group members by phone to share literature and stay connected. The regular and well-attended online support sessions we have provided for volunteers have been a particularly successful element of our provision, and have enabled many volunteers to swiftly adapt.

The need to respond quickly during this period has given us an opportunity to develop and test new products, such as our 'Life Lines' activity packs and National Prison Radio show. Their success has allowed us to reach new audiences, build new partnerships, and introduce the joy of Shared Reading to people in a different way.

New ways of working have also presented challenges; whilst many of our volunteers and group members have adapted well during the rapid move from in-person to digital delivery, it hasn't worked for others. We're continuing to work on finding the right balance for keeping in touch with volunteers and group members who aren't able to continue reading or engaging with us at the moment.

After developing a large and varied digital offer over lockdown, we are now faced with the challenge of streamlining these services, and integrating them into our normal service delivery. As the world returns to its new normal, we're challenged with finding ours - establishing how much activity will continue to stay online, and how and when we might be able to resume our in-person activities. A key challenge we're faced with is understanding more about our new digital audience and how best to serve them moving forward.

Further information

<https://www.thereader.org.uk/get-involved/the-reader-at-home/>

The Reader is a national charity that wants to bring about a Reading Revolution, so that everyone can experience and enjoy great literature, which we believe helps humans live well. Through a growing movement of 1,000 volunteers and partners, we bring over 4,000 people together weekly to share and discuss great novels, plays and poems. We call this Shared Reading.

Before coronavirus emerged, The Reader was delivering 500+ weekly Shared Reading sessions in hospitals, prisons, libraries, care homes, and community spaces across the UK, helping to improve wellbeing, reduce isolation and build stronger communities.

The Reader is a charity and CIC employing 145 people.