SHARED READING GROUPS

April 2018 - March 2020
with an extension until March 2021

A BAB-funded project delivered by The Reader

The Reader
CONNECT
REALISE
CHANGE

BRISTOL
AGEING
BETTER

COMMUNITY
FUND

JUNE 2021

Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) is a partnership of organisations working to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people and help them to live fulfilling lives. It is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the national Ageing Better: Fulfilling Lives programme.

This report provides an overview of the shared reading groups project led by The Reader. In line with BAB's 'test and learn' approach, this report will highlight key points of learning and recommendations which may be useful for other projects and services both within Bristol and nationally.

Project Overview

In 2016, BAB funded a series of short pilot projects exploring different methods of group work and peer support in Bristol. Learning from these pilots, BAB decided to commission a longer project focused on either art or literature as a basis for bringing people together. **The Reader were the successful bidder, and their BAB-funded project began in April 2018**. The learning from The Reader's pilot project (June 2016 – June 2017) is available <u>here</u>.

This project **set up and coordinated a series of shared reading groups** in a number of different locations in Bristol. These shared reading groups operated on a **drop-in basis** and were **facilitated by a trained volunteer Reader Leader.**

The Reader Leader, or the group members if they wished, **read a piece of text aloud and then the group talked about what they have read.** The groups were a **no-pressure environment;** anyone could join and group members did not need to read aloud or talk if they did not wish to do so.

<u>NB:</u> The original funding from Bristol Ageing Better ended in March 2020, however due to the inevitable impact of Covid-19 on social isolation and loneliness an extension period was agreed until March 2021 so that the project could adapt and continue to reach out to older people. This report mainly focuses on the initial funded period (April2018 - March 2020), but also includes learning and reflections from project delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participants

Between April 2018 and March 2020, **the project involved 965 people aged 50+; 561 of these were via regular shared reading groups and 404 via taster sessions.**

The project involved **55 volunteers, of which 32 were aged over 50.** It is estimated that together these volunteers gave **over 7,000 voluntary hours** in this period.

Of the 965 people involved in this project, 159 (16%) provided information about their demographic characteristics. Of these:

- ▶ **Age:** ranged from 48 – 103 years, with a mean age of 76 years old.

- ▶ **Gender:** 82% female, 14% male, 3% no response.

- ▶ **Ethnicity:** 89% White or White British, 3% Asian or Asian British, 2% Black or Black British, 1% mixed ethnic background, 6% no response or preferred not to say.

- ▶ **Religion:** 60% Christian, 26% no religion, 3% other religion, 1% Buddhist, 1% Sikh, 1% Muslim, 9% no response or preferred not to say.

- ▶ **Sexual orientation:** 82% heterosexual, 1% gay or lesbian, 18% no response or preferred not to say.

- ▶ **Disability:** 45% reported having a disability, 47% reported no disability, 9% no response or preferred not to say.

- ▶ **Living arrangements:** 49% lived alone, 27% lived with a spouse or partner, 9% lived with family, 8% lived in residential care, 8% no response or preferred not to say.

- ▶ **Caring responsibilities:** 13% had caring responsibilities, 77% did not have caring responsibilities, 9% no response or preferred not to say.

52 of these individuals also completed a wellbeing questionnaire at the start of their involvement with the project and then again a few months later, forming a 'matched pair'.

At the start of project involvement, participants had:

▶ **Low levels of membership in clubs, organisations and societies** – a score of 2.33 out of 8.

▶ **Slightly lower levels of mental wellbeing than the UK average for older people** – a SWEMWBS scale mean score of 22.61 (compared to mean scores of between 25.20 – 26.40 for people aged 55+ in the UK, ONS 2015/16).

▶ **Slightly poorer self-reported health than the UK average for older people** – an EQ-5D-3L index mean score of 0.76 (compared to mean scores of between 0.78 and 0.92 for people aged 55+ in the UK, Health Survey England 2012).

At follow-up approximately 3 months later, the project had a **statistically significant impact** (i.e. likely to be due to the project's intervention) on:

▶ **Social contact with non-family members in the local area (p=0.047).**

▶ **Health using the EQ-5D-3L index (p=0.025).**

▶ **Health using the EQVAS scale (p=0.049).**

However **findings should always be interpreted with caution** due to the relatively small sample size (between 41 and 50 matched pairs). More detail is provided on the following pages.

NB: The data in this report is based on those aged 50 or over, as this was the target age group for the BAB funding. Data was therefore not captured for participants aged under 50 and the analysis does not include this younger age range.

Loneliness: UCLA scale (based on 43 matched pairs)

At the start of their involvement in the project, **participants' mean score was 4.23, which indicates low levels of loneliness.**

Average levels of loneliness (UCLA scale)
Based on 43 matched pairs

PROJECT ENTRY
4.23

9
Most lonely
& isolated

3
Least lonely
& isolated
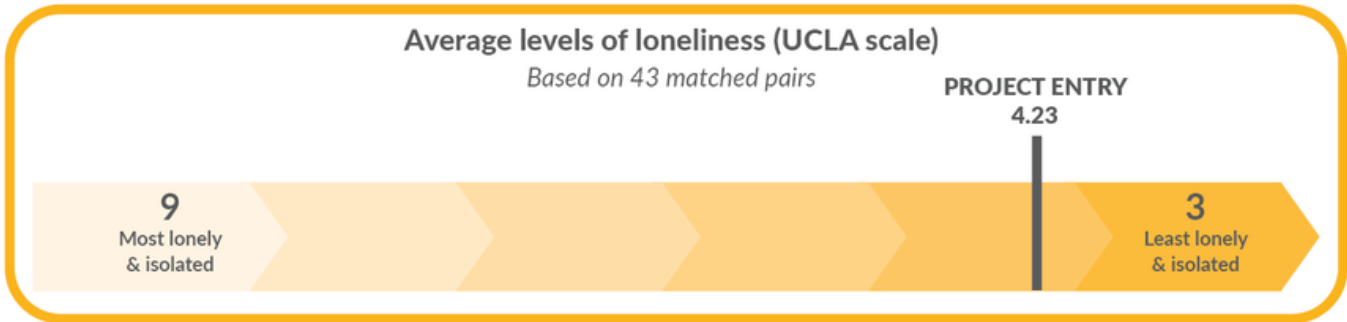
Social contact with children, family and friends (based on 41 matched pairs)

At the start of their involvement with the project, participants' mean score was 4.20, which indicates **relatively high levels of social contact with children, family and friends.**

Average levels of social contact with children, family or friends
Based on 41 matched pairs

PROJECT ENTRY
4.20

0
Least
social contact

5
Most
social contact

Social contact with non-family members in the local area (based on 50 matched pairs)
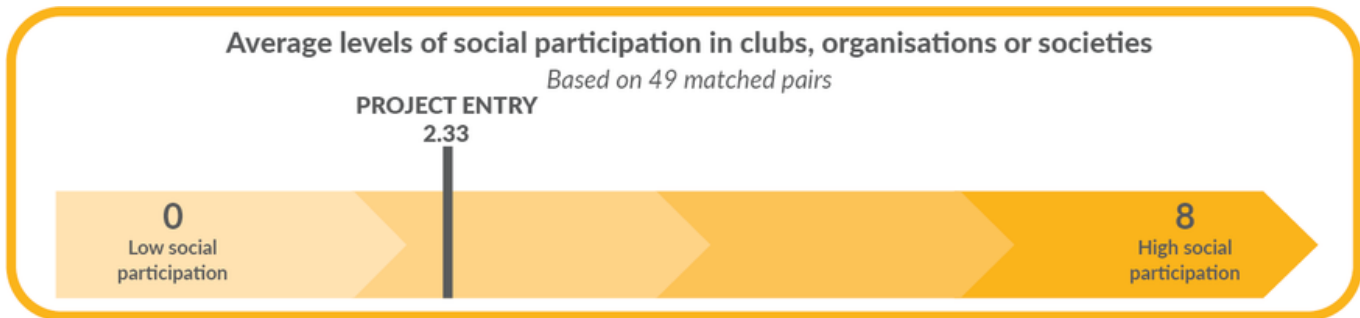
At the start of their involvement with the project, participants' mean score was 7.34, which indicates **high levels of social contact with non-family members in the local area.** As a comparison, the average score for people aged 63+ in the UK is 7.36 (TNS Omnibus, 2016).

There was a statistically significant change (i.e. likely to be due to the project's intervention) in this score when the wellbeing questionnaire was completed a few months later. **This score rose to 7.56, with a p value of 0.047.**

Average levels of social contact with non-family members
Based on 50 matched pairs

UK OLDER POPULATION
7.36

PROJECT
ENTRY
7.34

PROJECT
EXIT
7.56

0
Least
social
contact

8
Most
social
contact

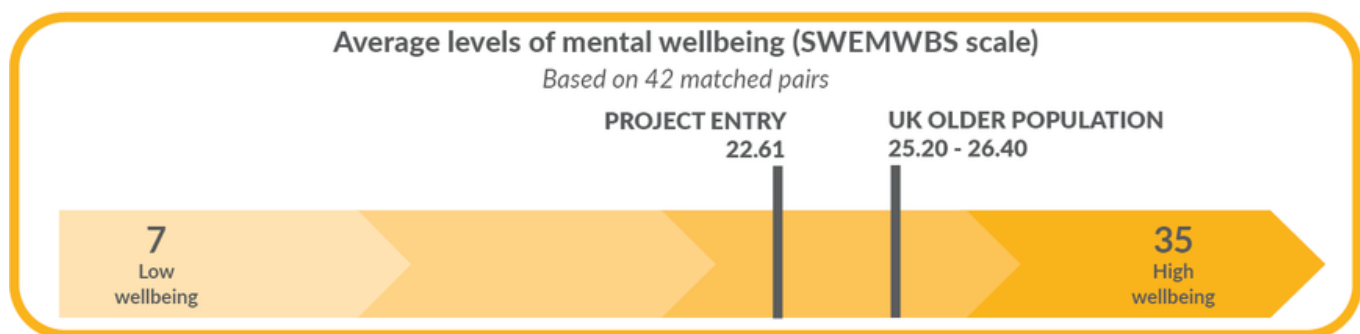## Membership of clubs, organisations and societies (based on 49 matched pairs)

At the start of their involvement with the project, participants' mean score was 2.33, which indicates **low levels of membership in clubs, organisations and societies.**

Average levels of social participation in clubs, organisations or societies
Based on 49 matched pairs

PROJECT ENTRY
2.33

0
Low social participation

8
High social participation

Mental wellbeing: SWEMWBS scale (based on 42 matched pairs)

At the start of their involvement with the project, participants' mean score was 22.61, which sits near to the **middle of the scale for mental wellbeing.**
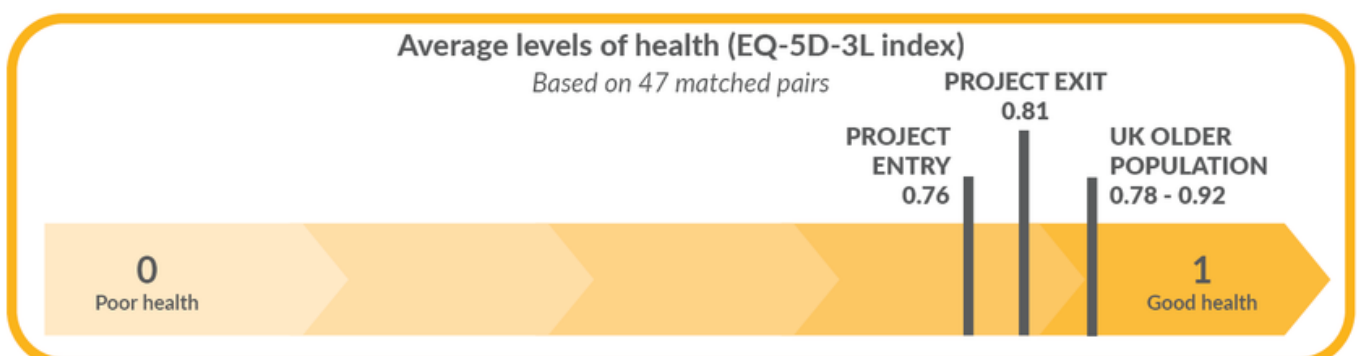
As a comparison, this score is **slightly lower than the UK average,** which is 25.20 for people aged 55-64, 26.40 for people aged 65-74 and 25.90 for people aged 75 and over (ONS, 2015/2016).

Average levels of mental wellbeing (SWEMWBS scale)
Based on 42 matched pairs

PROJECT ENTRY
22.61

UK OLDER POPULATION
25.20 - 26.40

7
Low wellbeing

35
High wellbeing

Health: EQ-5D-3L index (based on 47 matched pairs)

At the start of their involvement with the project, participants' mean score was 0.76. As a comparison, the UK average for people aged 55+ ranges between 0.78 and 0.92 (Health Survey England, 2012), indicating that the project **reached participants with slightly poorer health than average.**

There was a statistically significant change (i.e. likely to be due to the project's intervention) in this score when the wellbeing questionnaire was completed a few months later. **This score rose to 0.81 with a p value of 0.025.**
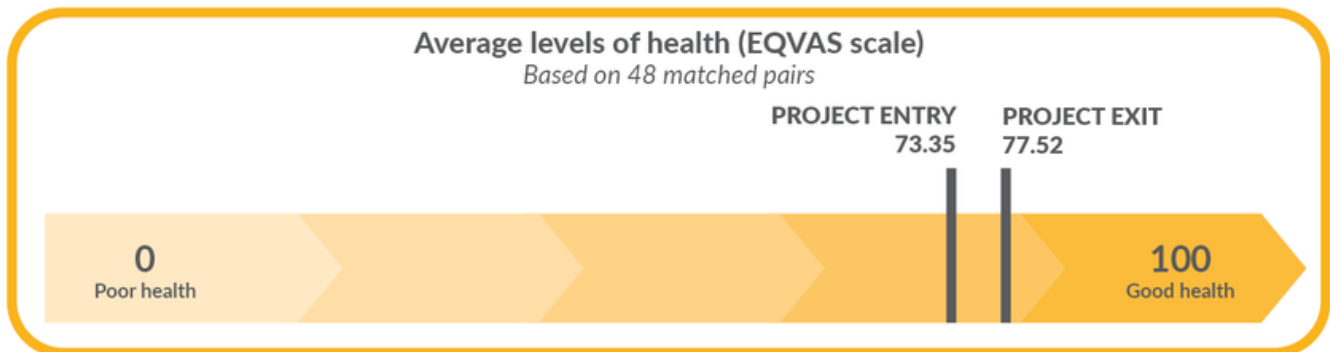
Average levels of health (EQ-5D-3L index)
Based on 47 matched pairs

PROJECT EXIT
0.81

PROJECT ENTRY
0.76

UK OLDER POPULATION
0.78 - 0.92

0
Poor health

1
Good health

Health: EQVAS scale (based on 48 matched pairs)

At the start of their involvement with the project, participants' mean score was 73.35.

As a comparison, this score is **in line with the UK average** which is between 71 and 80 for people aged 55-84, and is between 60 and 70 for people aged 85+ (Health Survey England, 2012).

There was a statistically significant change (i.e. likely to be due to the project's intervention) in this score when the wellbeing questionnaire was completed a few months later. **This score rose to 77.52 with a p value of 0.049.**

Average levels of health (EQVAS scale)
Based on 48 matched pairs

PROJECT ENTRY 73.35   PROJECT EXIT 77.52

0 Poor health   100 Good health

Working in a variety of settings

The project began with a number of shared reading groups in libraries, which were already established prior to the BAB funding. However over the course of the project, The Reader **successfully set up many new shared reading groups in a wide variety of settings.** Partnerships included care homes, sheltered housing, retirement flats, bookshop, hospitals and many other environments.

This enabled the project to **reach a broader range of people**, with a variety of life experiences, some of whom lived independently and others who received support. This also **gave the volunteers a wider range of opportunities for involvement,** meaning the project had a greater ability to meet their interests and preferences.

Securing and keeping volunteers

Over the course of the project, The Reader saw an **increase in volunteers and had low drop-out rates.** This is an important success as the shared reading groups were completely run by volunteers; **without volunteers, the project would not have been able to happen.**

The Project Coordinator believed this success at securing and keeping volunteers may have been due to a combination of factors, including:

- ▶ The Project Coordinator **dedicated time** to supporting the volunteers, ensuring **communication with them was clear.** He also tapped into **local knowledge** gained from working in Bristol prior to joining this project.

- ▶ Trying to **establish a sense of a community among the volunteers.** One volunteer was instrumental in starting a WhatsApp group as an additional means of creating a volunteer community.

- ▶ As a national organisation that has been running for many years, The Reader have learnt how to **clearly explain their project and their volunteering offer to potential volunteers.** This helped potential volunteers to understand whether they would enjoy this type of opportunity.

Involvement of volunteers aged 50+

Many of the project's volunteers were aged over 50. As the 'Reader Leader', volunteers had a key role in the project, which itself **challenged ageism and promoted positive images of older people.**

Volunteers were able to **shape their volunteering experience** and provided **input and ideas about the way the project and groups were run,** for example helping to identify appropriate venues for new shared reading groups, expanding their shared reading practice beyond the materials provided by The Reader and suggesting ideas that would improve the experience for participants.

As a 'Reader Leader', **volunteers had the autonomy to tweak the shared reading model to themselves and their group,** for example depending on the context of the group or the levels of English fluency.

The Project Coordinator organised volunteer meetings where **volunteers could suggest ideas for things to change.** For example, one volunteer suggested setting up a peer-support group for 'Reader Leader' volunteers working in care homes, as they were engaging with different types of people compared to groups run in other locations such as a library.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Project Coordinator carried out a programme of **consultation with volunteers which informed the project's plans** for alternative provision during the pandemic.

Shared reading as an activity

As an activity, shared reading was new to many of the people who joined the groups. As such, the **majority of participants tried out something new by attending.**

The volunteers and the Project Coordinator **witnessed individuals increase their contributions** during the shared reading groups, for example over time having the **confidence to speak more frequently** than when they first joined, or perhaps speaking the same amount but **sharing thoughts that were more personal.**

The activity of shared reading encourages people to share ideas and to talk about their thoughts and feelings. In this way, **the activity can facilitate a 'deeper' level of connection** than everyday conversation. It also **brings people together who would not otherwise meet** in other areas of their lives. It encourages internal reflection within the 'safety net' of the text, potentially **seeing things from a different perspective** without having to share anything they are not comfortable talking about.

BAB's collaborative model of partnership working

As The Reader is a national organisation, **the BAB partnership helped to ensure it had a strong local presence and good local knowledge.**

The BAB partnership model provided The Reader with **successful networking opportunities which helped the project to grow.** They were able to trial shared reading sessions with new partners that the Project Coordinator wouldn't have accessed otherwise (for example Bristol City Council's over 50's sheltered accommodation).

Having a range of partners and being part of the BAB network meant that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the project was able to easily connect into the Bristol Support Hub (a group of over 30 local organisations set up at the start of Covid-19). This **enabled the project to adapt its approach and continue delivering sessions throughout the pandemic.** This, in turn, raised the profile of the project and **improved relationships** with local social prescribing services and other organisations working directly with isolated older people.

Being part of the BAB network, and more recently the Bristol Support Hub, also had a positive impact on the Project Coordinator who was a home-based worker both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, because it meant that he was **supported by other network partners** and everyone shared similar goals.

Quantitative evaluation

Despite many other BAB-funded projects facing challenges with completing the BAB CMF (Common Measurement Framework) quantitative evaluation questionnaires, **The Reader was successful in getting a large number of participants (181 individuals) to complete these.**

The Project Coordinator **introduced the forms in a positive manner** and encouraged participants to complete them because of the importance of being part of a national evaluation exploring what works in combatting isolation and loneliness.

Local leader of a national organisation

As a national charity, having a local Project Coordinator with **knowledge of the local area and the community was vital for success.** The Project Coordinator could be flexible and tailor the project to the local area and local contacts.

Case Study: Nim's Story

"I started going to the reading group in the autumn last year after two friends suggested it. I have mild depression and anxiety and **it took me some time before I felt able to take the next steps and attend the group.**

I remember I arrived at the library and stood outside the room where the group takes place. I could see through the window that the table was full, the room looked packed and I was about to do a U-turn, but as I was thinking about it, Mina (the joint Volunteer Reader Leader of the group) opened the door, smiled and said, 'Hello, are you coming in?'. **So it was inviting; I felt like the door had been opened - literally!** If she hadn't done that, I wouldn't have gone in that day.

I went in and there were lots of smiles and everyone was saying 'Come and sit down, have a cup of tea and a biscuit'. **It was everything I love about kindness and hospitality.** What I also liked about it was that it was very quickly explained that **you can participate as much or as little as you want.** You can just be comfortable. That was the message I got. **No pressure just pleasure - I instantly relaxed.**

When you're already dealing with a lot - loss of financial status, health problems, your own sense of credibility - **it's great that you can go to the group and it's no questions asked**: you don't have to divulge what you've done in the week, it's not a continuum of "Are you 'better' yet?" and I love that. **I don't need to make small talk and it's not invasive.** No-one talks in depth about their ailments - it's quite upbeat. I really enjoy the lightness, warmth, laughter and ease of the sessions. **It's sort of like a family, without the headache!**

Recently, I volunteered to read. I feel like I'm trying to find my voice in a group environment and when I read a bit of the story aloud, butterflies erupted in my stomach. **But I did it and it felt...powerful actually.** That's what I mean about it not being about just reading, but about **being more active in the group and about my whole well-being.** It's not only about making a connection to the stories and the poems, it's also about **making a connection with each other.** It's about everything that surrounds it - the walk there, listening to other people's experiences, having a sit down and cup of tea.

What I see in the group is **people showing their worth.** People hit a certain age and sometimes illness comes into the picture - mental and physical - and you start to think 'What am I bringing to the table? What have I got to offer? Have I still got it in me to learn something new? Am I still useful?'. The group is about **wanting to still keep achieving and not wanting 'disabilities' of any kind to hold you back:** that one ailment, that one issue or diagnosis, that doesn't define you. There's still a brain in there, so don't judge me, give me an opportunity and recognise that my well-being matters. **I really look forward to the groups.** It's almost like a therapy - because I know what I need right now. **It's my weekly challenge and personal achievement."**

Loneliness and isolation

It was particularly **difficult to engage with older people experiencing high levels of loneliness and isolation,** despite these individuals potentially having the most to gain from shared reading.

Barriers included:

▶ Individuals with high levels of loneliness and isolation **do not necessarily have the confidence to join a group.**

▶ Those who are housebound are less likely to be aware of their local shared reading group, as **much of the physical promotion will not be visible to them.**

The project's adaptations during Covid-19 made the shared reading sessions **more accessible for those who were previously unable to attend a face-to-face group.** Perhaps for this reason, the project saw an **increase in the number of referrals from social prescribing** services during this time.

Sheltered accommodation

The project **tried hard to engage with people living in sheltered accommodation** specifically for residents aged 50+. The Project Coordinator worked directly with Bristol City Council to promote and set up groups. However, the success of these groups **depended on the individual enthusiasm of wardens and Bristol City Council staff to help** set up and promote the project to residents.

Even if staff were enthusiastic, it was still difficult to encourage all residents to get involved, as there was **no longer a culture of group activities within the accommodation.** In these circumstances, it **takes a while for residents to feel comfortable** going to a group.

Where the groups worked well (e.g. Stoke Gifford Retirement Village), **residents were used to regular activity and using the community space.** There were also **designated Activity Coordinators** to encourage residents to attend.

The culture of each venue, along with the staff time and enthusiasm, were also important when The Reader adapted their delivery as a result of Covid-19. For example, **groups successfully continued where there were staff who could set up the technology** for online shared reading groups.

Diversity

Many of the participants for the shared reading groups were **female, White and middle class.**

The project ran a number of taster sessions with a wide range of partner organisations; these were held in different parts of the city in order to reach a diverse range of potential participants. With more time, **the project would have liked to have focused on building relationships and partnerships with a more diverse range** of communities.

The nature of drop-in groups may mean that **those who take the opportunity to attend are those who have the experience and/or confidence to join.** This might not be the case if English isn't your first language, for example.

Nationally, The Reader is **looking at diversifying its reading materials, volunteers and structure of sessions** to be more inclusive to a wider audience.

Staff changes

During the two years of BAB funding, **this project experienced a number of staff changes** across the functions of Project Coordinator, Trainer and Project Manager. In total there were 3 Project Coordinators, changing once in August 2018 and then again in May 2019.

While staff changes can simply be part of the life cycle of a project, and cannot always be predicted or guarded against, The Reader enabled a smooth transition. It is valuable for projects to have **an initial risk assessment and contingency plan for possible vacancies in order to minimise any disruption that staff changes can cause.**

Volunteer training

The project found that volunteers were interested in attending training, however it was a **logistical challenge to fit training dates around volunteers' other commitments.** The 'Read to Lead' course, for example, had lots of interest but required a commitment of 3 days which was difficult for many to fit in. The length of the 'Read to Lead' course is important to providing high-quality shared reading, but it needs to have enough people booked onto the course in order to run it.

Importance of support from staff in partner organisations

The success and sustainability of the shared reading groups **depended on the support from staff in partner organisations.**

Some partners (e.g. Activity Coordinators, social prescribing services) had a **remit which included maintaining older people's social connections,** whereas other partners did not have this within their remit and therefore did not have the time to dedicate to this project on an ongoing basis.

Each organisation and venue had a different culture, which led to a different experience for the Project Coordinator in trying to set up a group.

Importance of having a strong network of organisations working towards the same goal

The **partnership structure** of BAB and, since Covid-19, the Bristol Support Hub, were essential to the project because this made it **easier to connect with organisations who support the project.** This gave the project a **strong local presence.**

The Reader will share this learning nationally to work towards a more joined-up approach in other areas of the country where The Reader operates, particularly the **importance of using networking and forums as tools for building and strengthening partnerships.** It is important to be an **equal part of these networks** and to contribute for others as well as asking for support.

Knowing when to persist with a group and when to stop

It takes time to set up a new group, and it **can take people a while to discover it and build up the confidence to attend.** It is very common for group numbers to be small for quite a while, and sometimes nobody will attend. When setting up a new group, it is important to **turn up each week and continue to be there for the drop-in slot,** until people discover the group for themselves. The project tried hard to **manage volunteers' expectations** when setting up a new group.

However there are also instances where, despite efforts, a group will have little or no take-up for some time. This can lead to volunteer dissatisfaction. In these cases, a decision needs to be made about **whether to stop continuing with that group and reallocate the volunteers elsewhere so that the project does not lose them.**

Mixed model of delivery

Key learning since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic is that **a mixed model of delivery (phone, online and face-to-face) is vital for reaching a wider audience.** This range of offers is **flexible to suit different people's needs and preferences.** The project has seen how this mixed model of delivery benefits those who were once able to visit face-to-face groups but now can only attend a phone group.

Reaching people with high levels of loneliness and isolation

The project **connected with new partner organisations** in order to try to engage people with high levels of loneliness and isolation. While this had a certain degree of success, it perhaps would have worked better to **partner with organisations who had direct connections with such individuals,** for example social prescribing services.

Welcoming for new participants

It is important for new participants to **feel welcomed and comfortable when they join a group for the first time.** This is largely dependent on the volunteer or staff member leading the group. It can work well when the person leading the group **acknowledges that the individual is new to the group,** offers a quick **explanation of how the group works** and reminds them that group members are welcome to sit and listen, and are **under no pressure to read aloud.** It can also help to **introduced** them to others and to offer them refreshments.

Pairing up volunteers

It is valuable to have **more than one volunteer** 'Reader Leader' for each shared reading group. Benefits include:

▶ **Peer support:** Having help to get the group conversation started, having the opportunity for an **informal debrief** after each session, and improving the management of any **challenging behaviour** from members of the public.

▶ **A more balanced workload for each volunteer,** making it easier for them to commit to the project for a longer period of time.

▶ Group numbers are more consistent because **sessions rarely have to be cancelled** due to volunteer illness or holidays.

▶ If a volunteer can no longer volunteer with The Reader, having a second volunteer means that **the group will not disappear entirely.** However, groups that drop from two volunteers to one may suffer, as the remaining volunteer can feel more pressure without their support system.

Case Study: Southmead Shared Reading Group

The Southmead shared reading group was set up by a volunteer called Thelma. Thelma is a mature student studying for a BA in English Literature and Community Engagement and as a part of her course she was instructed to set up a shared reading group in her area.

"At first I was **horrendously nervous about it** and thought I wouldn't be able to do it or that people wouldn't enjoy it but in actual fact it just took off and it's **gone from strength to strength**."

Once the compulsory part of her course ended, she decided to continue running the group because of how **important it had become to so many of the people who attended.** Thelma finds running the group to be a rewarding experience as she can see how different people become **more confident in their reading** and **interact more** with others in the group.

Thelma believes that the group is a success because it is unlike other reading groups or book groups. "It's very low commitment so **no pressure**" she says. "You don't have to read a whole novel to attend and people are free to talk about their memories." The group has a diverse mix of ages (over 50) and backgrounds. **"It doesn't matter where you come from; it's about the enjoyment of reading together."**

Participants had heard about this Southmead group in different ways, from traditional word of mouth to seeing it advertised on Facebook. One member of the group saw a notice about the group at the library and had spoken to the librarians about it.

Participants were drawn to the group for the **relaxed social element** and for the **opportunity to meet new people.** One participant described shared reading as being "the vehicle to get involved." Another participant said, "Many of the stories we read we can relate to and it brings back memories that we can talk about and **you learn how much in common you have with the rest of the group. That's what I like best, getting to know you all."**

Another participant said he had rarely read before attending the group. In one of the sessions they looked at poetry from the First Word War and a few weeks later when he saw another collection of war poetry in the charity shop he decided to **give it a go by himself.**

One woman who attends regularly has started giving the extracts they have read at the sessions to her daughter who works in a care home. **The extracts go even further this way** because the participant's daughter reads them out to residents in the homes she works at. She commented, "The reading isn't just helping us, **it's helping others too who can't get out as much."**

Adapting During Covid-19

The Reader was **quick to adapt its activity, both locally and nationally,** as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020.

In Bristol, the Project Coordinator initially **consulted with volunteers and partner organisations** and found that many were keen for the shared reading groups to continue using alternative methods. Nationally, The Reader established a **telephone hotline to give advice** to group members and volunteers, and made a **variety of resources available online.**

Between March 2020 and February 2021 the project involved:

- ▶ **10 online shared reading groups** via Zoom. **9** of these groups previously met face-to-face before the pandemic, while **1** new group was run by and for volunteers as a form of **peer-support.**

- ▶ **4 telephone shared reading groups. 2** of these groups previously met face-to-face before the pandemic, while **2** are new groups open to the public.

- ▶ **6 one-to-one** shared reading sessions via the **telephone**.

- ▶ **The distribution of written resources (printed and via email),** for example distributing poems to sheltered accommodation each week accompanied by an introduction written by a volunteer.

While some online and telephone groups had previously met face-to-face before the pandemic, **many of these attracted new members who were participating for the first time.**

'Test and learn'

The project was **responsive to changing local needs within the fast-moving context** of the pandemic, following a 'test and learn' approach. For example one online group has been set up specifically for people with English as a second language, and is supported by one-to-one phone calls for those who face barriers to online technology or who do not wish to engage in this way.

Similarly, the telephone groups started slowly but membership gradually built up. The lack of visual cues was challenging at the start, but the groups developed strongly and have **enabled people to engage with shared reading who would not otherwise have had the opportunity.** The project has been **surprised by how well these telephone groups work** and the **positive feedback** that has been received, despite the lack of visual cues.

Volunteers and group members have **thought creatively and have been willing to try different methods of facilitation** even within the same group. One group, for example, began as a telephone group but later moved to online video conferencing.

The project **presented its key learning about online and telephone group activities at a learning event** in November 2020 alongside other members of the Bristol Support Hub for Older People. The event recording is available <u>here.</u>

Volunteers

The project also continues to provide a **significant amount of support for volunteers.**

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, approximately half of the project's volunteers wished to continue, while the other half were temporarily unable to commit to volunteering during this time. Some of those who did continue volunteering were themselves shielding or self-isolating and **had a greater need for social contact, which their volunteering with The Reader provided.**

Later on in the pandemic, some of the volunteers who were initially put off by online or telephone groups **began to volunteer again.**

Nationally, The Reader's support for volunteers includes:

- ▶ Twice-weekly **shared reading groups** for volunteers.

- ▶ A monthly **support session** for volunteers. These are **themed to allow in-depth coverage** of subjects that are recurring for volunteers, for example 'Reading via Zoom', 'Coping with Grief and Bereavement', and 'Reading Challenging Literature'.

- ▶ **Online training provision**, for example in running sessions via online or teleconferencing platforms or in working with complex group dynamics. Being online, this training is **not restricted by geography** meaning that volunteers **can access it without needing to wait** for enough interest in their own geographical area.

- ▶ A private digital platform that includes **downloadable resources** and a wide variety of **information and tools,** for example digital anthologies, online readings, 'Care Home Bundles' and weekly 'Lifelines' Activity Packs'.

- ▶ **A relaunched Reader Magazine,** distributed free of charge to all volunteers. This magazine showcases The Reader's work and offers insight, resources and ongoing learning for volunteers.

Locally, this project's support for volunteers includes:

- ► **Monthly meetings** via Zoom. These meetings provide support for volunteers with any ongoing issues and are an **opportunity to share ideas** for future provision in Bristol.

- ► **'Shared Reflection'** session – in-depth conversations with volunteers encouraging them to **reflect on their practice** as Reader Leaders.

- ► **Keeping in touch with those who decided to pause their volunteering** during the pandemic so that they **feel ready to go back to face-to-face groups** when in the future when this is possible.

Challenges during Covid-19

The telephone groups are very successful, however the **cost of telephone conferencing would have been prohibitive** without the BAB and Bristol Support Hub networks.

Prior to the pandemic, The Reader **did not collect participant contact details as groups operated on a drop-in basis.** This aligned with The Reader's ethos of maintaining an atmosphere that is inclusive and no-pressure. However this made it **challenging for Reader Leaders to contact their group members during the pandemic** and let them know how they can stay involved.

At the start of the pandemic, **pressures on care home settings meant it was understandably difficult to establish contact with these members of staff.** However on the whole the project has found that staff are more enthusiastic than ever about the shared reading groups and it has provided a lifeline for residents who are unable to access their regular activities.

Looking to the future

For some people, online or telephone shared reading groups will never replace face-to-face groups. However, for others, these online or telephone groups have many benefits and **offer them opportunities which they cannot get from face-to-face groups.** For those with limited mobility, these groups are **easier to access than in-person groups.** However there are also **benefits for those who usually experience anxiety in groups,** as the 'distance' created by telephone and videoconferencing can allow them **greater freedom to express themselves.**

The Reader would like online and telephone groups to become part of its ongoing provision in the future, through a **mixed model of delivery.**

Case Study: A telephone group during Covid-19

Michelle joined a telephone group in lockdown, having found out about it from Age UK Bristol. She's never attended a face to face session. She has taken part nearly every week for 5 months. She lives on her own and was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease.

"I joined the class and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I've always liked words and reading but I haven't done so much since I lost my husband and was diagnosed. I couldn't concentrate. I hoped that a class could help me concentrate better. I like the **interaction with the others.**
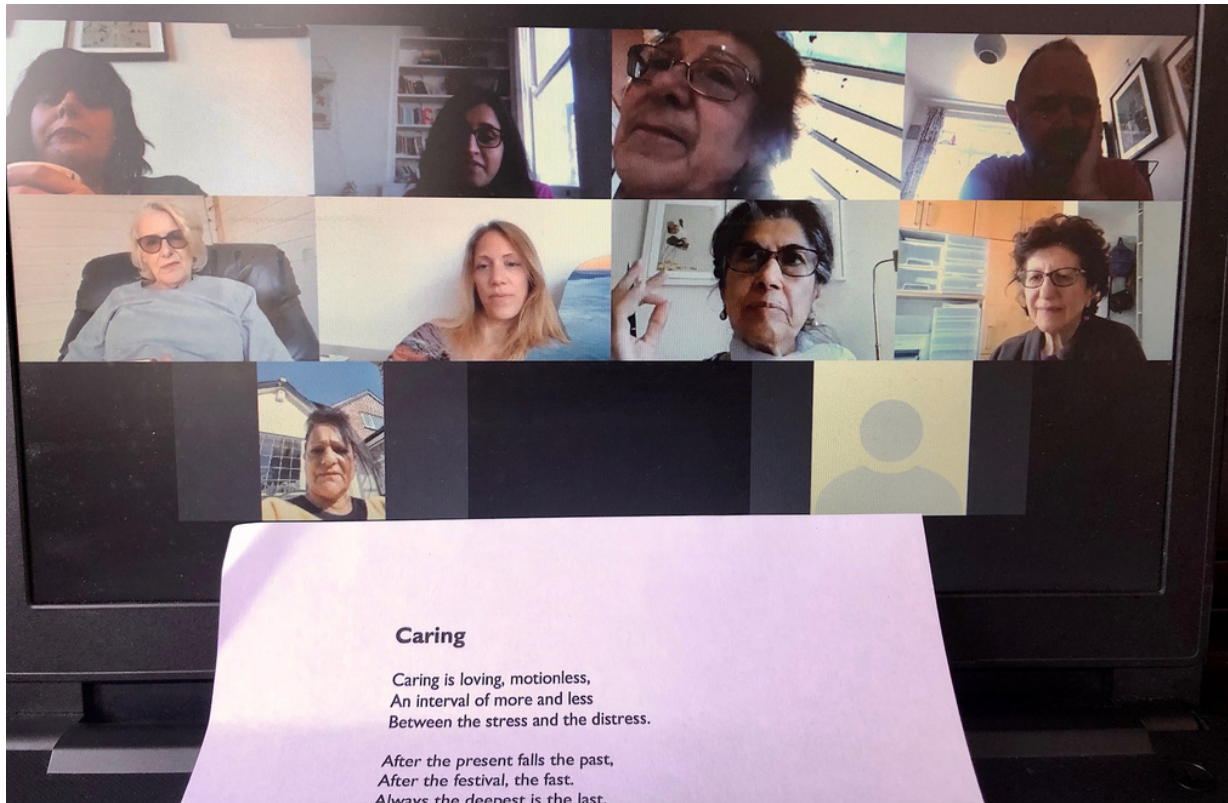
The first poem we read was 'We must go down to the sea' and **I absolutely loved it and I thought, yes, this is for me. I love the interaction and my concentration level was excellent.** I've got a friend who is an ex-Headmistress and I asked her afterwards if she knew the poem, and she said she did, so every week now I let her know what poem we've read and we talk about it. **If there's an old fashioned word I could look it up on Google, but I don't I call her. So I'm speaking to her more as well.**

In the first session I was a bit apprehensive and then **I realised there was nothing to feel apprehensive about.** I didn't know if it was going to highbrow and over the top and I discovered it wasn't. I've found some of the poems a bit dour and highbrow but that's what a class is all about. **Every week it's something different. Learning new things and speaking to other people and gaining confidence.** I hadn't been well and I'd lost a lot of confidence. I'd been on medication for the last year or so and **I suddenly found that this had helped tremendously with my confidence.** I think that's because it's something I put in my diary. **Something I'm planning and I look forward to. I wasn't doing that before, about anything.**

In the pandemic, in lockdown this has made a huge difference. **I don't get out but this has made me feel like I've been out every week.** Instead of just reading, other little things are creeping in to the conversation and **people sharing things and talking about their lives.** Very slowly. I think if we had been all meeting in person we'd know each other even better, so it has taken longer on the phone without doubt.

The class **brings back memories.** Nice memories. We share them and **as you get to know people in the group, you share more.** I always liked poetry reading and used to listen. Now I've bought a book – **the first book I've bought since I can't remember when.** And that's because of the group.

It's very thought-provoking and very confidence building. It's made a huge difference to me. Some days my speech is bad but it doesn't bother me. The group know this now and I'm not embarrassed. I like reading aloud. I like to put the emphasis on the words and hearing how other people say things, how they pronounce things. **The more confidence I have, the better my speech on the day."**

Caring

Caring is loving, motionless,
An interval of more and less
Between the stress and the distress.

After the present falls the past,
After the festival, the fast.
Always the deepest is the last.

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Further BAB learning resources can be found at:
https://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/learning-and-evaluation-hub/