

# **Confidence All Round**

**The Impact on Emergent Adult Readers of Reading  
for Pleasure through Libraries**

## **Executive Summary**

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Confidence All Round: The Impact on Emergent Adult Readers of  
Reading for Pleasure Through Libraries

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This report explores the individual and societal **outcomes** for emergent readers from libraries' creative reading activity in partnership with the Skills for Life sector. The fit of these outcomes is mapped against the Shared Priorities and the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum to provide **evidence** of how the approach can help libraries and the Skills for Life sector achieve their objectives.

**Recommendations** are made for enhancing the effectiveness of libraries' creative reading activity at both a strategic and tactical level.

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Mid-Essex Community College, Brentwood

North Luton Adult Education / Lea Manor Community College

Stockport Family Centre

Swadlincote Adult Learning Centre, Derbyshire

Wreake Valley Community College, Syston, Leicestershire

# 1 Executive summary

*'I used to get shouted down but now I can stand up more for myself. Now I can say "I believe it is this way". I think it gives me confidence all round.'* Adult learner, Essex

## 1.1 The Vital Link Approach

The national Vital Link programme is building libraries' capacity to motivate and sustain Skills for Life students and to attract more adults with low literacy levels into learning. Its main target audience is emergent readers – those adults whose literacy skills are at pre-GCSE level but who are just getting into choosing and reading books for enjoyment. Its main focus is on harnessing the energy of libraries' creative reading activity or 'reader development' and encouraging libraries to work in partnership with the Skills for Life sector.

Run by The Reading Agency in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and the National Reading Campaign, the Vital Link is part of the Books, Reading and Learning strand of the Government's Framework for the Future strategy for public libraries being implemented by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

Through libraries' use of the Vital Link approach, emergent adult readers participate in a range of reader development activity. This includes choosing their own books to read for pleasure from collections specially selected for their readability level and appeal, analysing and discussing books, recommending titles and writing reviews and increasing their use of libraries.

## 1.2 The Research

The research sought to explore the outcomes of participation in libraries' creative reading activity for emergent readers in terms of:

- Learning outcomes, including increased skills, changed attitudes and values, behaviour and progression, using the framework of MLA's Generic Learning Outcomes
- Personal development outcomes around social inclusion, health and well-being and employability

- Family and societal outcomes arising from these

The research collected evidence about how libraries can make a difference for adult learners, by connecting:

- an enjoyment of reading
- improved skills
- motivation to continue reading and learning.

This evidence will be used to:

- Inform and improve future practice for the Vital Link programme and for libraries involved in this work with emergent adult readers.
- Provide an evidence base for advocacy to the education sector.
- Contribute to the development of the public library impact measures.

Fifty-nine emergent readers engaged in Skills for Life activities in both adult and family learning contexts participated in the research through focus group discussions. Nine members of library staff and seven Skills for Life tutors participated through in-depth interviews.

A quantitative assessment of the generic outcomes achieved has been undertaken and a range of specific outcomes identified. These will form the basis of a set of outcome measures to evidence the impact of libraries' use of the Vital Link approach to be piloted with libraries over the next year.

### **1.3 Key findings relating to Generic Learning Outcomes and Societal Outcomes**

- More than three-quarters of participants in the focus groups identified evidence of:
  - related activity, behaviour and progression
  - enjoyment, inspiration and creativity from reading
  - an improvement in literacy skills
- More than half identified evidence of:
  - a change in their attitudes or values about reading, learning and libraries
  - a positive impact on their health or well-being

- More than a third identified evidence of:
  - an increase in knowledge and understanding
  - a greater sense of social inclusion
- Around a fifth identified a beneficial impact on employability

## 1.4 Specific Outcomes

Findings from the focus groups highlighted the following specific outcomes for emergent readers as particularly prevalent.

### **Enjoyment of reading**

Participants report that they are either reading for pleasure for the first time or reading more frequently. Most are reading a wider range of books and all are participating in reader development activity.

Emergent readers describe their immersion in books as providing enjoyment, stress-release and escape from daily life. They also value the inspiration and support for leisure and learning activities it provides.

Most emergent readers intend to continue reading for pleasure.

### **Use of libraries**

Those emergent readers who haven't used libraries before have a more positive of their role and value through involvement in Vital Link activity. Most respondents report new or increased library use and use of a wider range of library services. Librarians' egalitarian ethos in delivering the Vital Link approach is key to this, as are multiple library visits and the warmth of welcome received in libraries.

### **Increase in skills**

Improved literacy, thinking and learning skills are found to result from reading, discussing and writing about books. These skills are further reinforced by learning how to select books and how to use a library.

### **Change in attitudes and values**

Strong personal development outcomes, resulting in significant increases in self-confidence, arise from a greater ability for self-expression, enhanced self-esteem, a sense of achievement and improved self-worth among emergent readers. The whole reader development process offered by libraries contributes to this from choosing and reading books to thinking analytically and creatively and taking part in discussions. It gives the adults involved a sense of greater independence and increased control over their own lives, leading to empowerment and self-motivation.

Emergent readers participating in the research feel that they obtain a wider view of the world and an understanding of multiple perspectives through reading and discussion around books.

### **Health and well-being**

Respondents report that reading for pleasure gives them time out and escape from daily life and in doing this provides relaxation and stress-release.

### **Social inclusion**

The improved social confidence of individuals, sense of independence and empowerment described above provides a platform for greater social inclusion including increased social interaction and feeling more respected by others. At a societal level this contributes to greater social connectedness.

### **Employability**

The increased self-esteem, confidence, motivation, empowerment and skills identified by individuals are highly likely to contribute to their improved employability. However the short-term nature of this evaluation – with people who are *currently* participating in Skills for Life learning – means that it is not possible to prove direct economic impact such as improved performance at work or increased earnings because these impacts are only likely to occur in the medium to longer term.

### **Benefits for family life**

The individual outcomes reported above can also result in benefits for families. These include family sharing of books, children reading more and the use of books as a tool to change patterns of family behaviour such as quiet times and bedtime routines.

## **1.5 What makes the difference?**

The critical success factors for libraries' use of the Vital Link approach are:

**Positioning:** the approach is purposefully positioned to encourage people to read for pleasure through libraries as an enhancement to formal learning.

**Egalitarian ethos:** the ethos behind delivery of the Vital Link approach, which is presented simply as a group of people sharing books with the support of library and Skills for Life or other learning

professionals, makes it accessible for emergent readers and enhances their sense of social inclusion.

Self-motivated and independent activity: emergent readers *choose* to engage with this activity and are responsible for their own reading.

The range of activity involved: choosing and finding appealing books, reading, analysing and discussing them with others, recommending and writing about them and visiting and using libraries, all requires emergent readers to develop and use a variety of skills, both learning and personal.

Effective resources: the range of books employed, including the Vital Link's *First Choice* collections with associated promotional and display materials, are pitched exactly at the right level and presented in the right way.

The delivery partnership between libraries and Skills for Life which creates added value for both sectors. Libraries gain access to emergent readers and non-users in a context in which they are open to the library offer. For the Skills for Life sector, libraries' use of the Vital Link approach extends and embeds emerging literacy skills. The enjoyment and achievement arising from reading for pleasure contributes to increased learning motivation.

## 1.6 Fit with Policy Agendas

The research showed that the outcomes arising from libraries' use of the Vital Link approach align most closely with two of the five Shared Priorities embraced in the Public Library Impact Measures.

The increased confidence, skills and self-esteem identified by emergent readers contributes clearly to the outcomes for *Promoting the Economic Vitality of Communities* and consequently indirectly to better employment opportunities.

The personal development and family outcomes identified from libraries' use of the Vital Link approach also align with the outcomes for the *Improving the Quality of Life for Children and Young People, Families at Risk and Older People*. However, the main emergent reader audience extends well beyond these target groups.

For the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum, libraries' use of the Vital Link approach contributes directly to all the outcomes identified at Entry

Level 3 and Levels 1 and 2 of the curriculum, developing and embedding emergent readers' skills in:

- Listening and responding
- Speaking to communicate
- Engaging in discussion
- Reading and understanding
- Reading and obtaining information
- Writing to communicate

## 1.7 Recommendations

The research suggests that while libraries' use of the Vital Link approach is clearly contributing to significant outcomes for individuals, there are ways in which the impact can be enhanced. Key recommendations include:

### **Strategic**

Embedding use of the Vital Link approach at a strategic level within libraries' and the Skills for Life sector to ensure inclusion in core delivery plans and continued funding to aid sustainability.

Extending and promoting the existing product range to ensure that both tutors and emergent readers are aware of the full range of books offered through the Vital Link's *First Choice* collection and associated ranges to include, amongst others, a wider range of fiction, more non-fiction, poetry, books for parents to share with children at different ages and books in multi-media formats.

Developing an evaluation framework to measure the impact of the Vital Link approach at a strategic policy level, at delivery level with libraries and the Skills for Life sector, and for emergent readers as the target users. This should include piloting the generic and specific outcome measures developed on the basis of the evidence from this research.

Undertaking longitudinal evaluation with individual emergent readers from the start of their learning journey through their engagement with the Vital Link approach and into the medium and longer term so that the full impact of the outcomes, especially in terms of economic impact, can be confirmed.

## **Delivery**

Ensuring that both for libraries and the Skills for Life sector sufficient resources are allocated to partnership development, planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation. This will enable the development of a more effective partnership to ensure maximum benefit for users and encourage sustainability of the Vital Link approach.

Training all librarians, not just those involved in delivery of the Vital Link approach, in the personal and curriculum needs of adult learners and emergent readers. Also training Skills for Life staff to integrate use of the Vital Link approach into their teaching in order for it to contribute towards the outcomes they must achieve.

Raising awareness that some emergent readers need a lot of encouragement and support to engage fully with libraries. This could include providing a wide range of resources in non-library locations through library outreach as a stepping stone to library use.

Encouraging multiple library visits for adult learners and making engagement with the library as interactive as possible in order to build awareness and knowledge and create a sense of belonging and ownership. This engagement should include involving emergent readers in stock selection, display and development of promotional materials.

Stepping up the promotion of what the library has to offer which, for new users, can change their perceptions of libraries. Benefits include being able to experiment with book choices, ease of renewals, lack of fines wherever possible and libraries' increasing role as social, community spaces welcoming to all, including families.