

the reading agency

4 February 2009

New national reading group network in development

The Reading Agency is planning to develop a national network called Chatabout to support the growing number of reading groups for new adult readers. It is keen to hear from potential funders or sponsors and from those already running groups of this kind.

The new Chatabout network will support practitioners in their work to engage and inspire adults with literacy needs, opening up opportunities for them to discover that reading can be a pleasure. Chatabout's potential audience will be adults aged 16+ ranging from those with very low literacy to lapsed readers. Many will be in classes to improve their skills; some will not be involved in formal learning. Some may get involved as volunteers to run reading groups themselves.

The proposed network has already attracted high-level government support.

"I welcome The Reading Agency's initiative," says John Denham MP, secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills. "It's great news that more and more adults are getting involved in reading groups. Networks like Chatabout provide new opportunities for people to read and discuss books in a friendly and supportive environment. As well as inspiring a love of reading they can lead to long term changes by improving the skills we all need to be successful at home, at work and in the community. It's never too late to improve your reading skills, and we would like to encourage many more libraries and other organisations to support local adults who are discovering the pleasures of reading."

"Recent years have seen an explosion of reading groups in England," comments Andy Burnham MP, secretary of state for culture, media and sport, "with thousands of people sharing their passion for literature with friends, colleagues, neighbours and other book lovers. Our public libraries have of course been at the heart of this revolution, supporting and underpinning this phenomenon by providing books, expertise and physical spaces. The Reading Agency's initiative aims to give these opportunities to more people, and to new audiences. It has real promise, and it has my support."

Genevieve Clarke, senior project manager with The Reading Agency, explains: "We've chosen the name Chatabout because we're keen that these groups bring people together to share their thoughts about books, but also about other things they read or watch or experience, just like any other reading group. Groups may take place in a library but they could meet in a college, workplace, community centre, hospital, prison, church or elsewhere, with their local public library in a support role. They may use audio, TV, digital media or gaming as a way into reading, and they may cater for specialist interests such as health literacy, family reading or ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)."

Chatabout expects to offer training in how to run groups, with support materials for organisers and members and an interactive website, plus writers' tours organised through The Reading Agency's strategic partnership with publishers.

This work forms the next stage of The Reading Agency's Vital Link library and adult literacy programme (run in partnership with the National Literacy Trust), and its National Library Readers Group Development Programme, which won an Adult Learners' Week Opening Doors Award in 2008 for the work of the East Midlands Regional Reading Group project.

The Reading Agency will use the next six months to scope and fundraise for the Chatabout initiative. Contact Genevieve Clarke: genevieve.clarke@readingagency.org.uk or 0871 750 2104

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Notes to editors:

- The Reading Agency is an independent charity working to inspire more people to read more. It is funded by the Arts Council and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. (www.readingagency.org.uk)
- New mapping data released in 2008 by The Reading Agency revealed that the number of reading groups in England and Wales linked to libraries has more than doubled to around 10,000 in the last four years. It also showed that there is a growing number of reading groups for basic skills learners. Around a third of English library authorities have links with basic skills reading groups, and seven per cent with ESOL reading groups. (Reading Group Mapping Data 2008 is available from The Reading Agency's online shop at: www.readingagency.org.uk)
- Following the success of the award-winning East Midlands Regional Reading Group project, The Reading Agency is currently supporting the development of reading groups for new adult readers in the West Midlands as part of wider activity to promote the use of reading for pleasure funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). Most of these groups are using The Reading Agency's Six Book Challenge as a catalyst. Now in its second year as a national scheme, sponsored by Costa, the Six Book Challenge invites people to read six books and record their reading in a diary to get a certificate. 7,000 readers got involved in 2008 through libraries, colleges, community education, prisons and workplaces. 71 per cent of UK public library services are supporting the Six Book Challenge in 2009, many of which are developing reading group activity. (www.sixbookchallenge.org.uk).
- For more information about The Vital Link, please visit: www.readingagency.org.uk/adults/the-vital-link