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Library reading groups: explosion in membership

New research shows groups thriving and diversifying

In the first week of the government's modernisation review of libraries, The Reading Agency has released new research into library reading groups. It shows that the number of groups in England and Wales has risen by 149 per cent in the last four years. There are now roughly 10,000 library-linked reading groups in England and Wales, providing 100,000 people with new reading opportunities.

"There's an intriguing cultural wave going on in our communities - reading is becoming much more social. Thousands of local people are turning increasingly to libraries for an opportunity to join a reading group and talk about reading," says Miranda McKearney, director of The Reading Agency, the charity with a mission to inspire more people to read more. "Combine this with the increase of library author events, and library schemes like the Summer Reading Challenge which involves 650,000 children every year, and you've got the seeds for a new vision of libraries as lively community centres for reading. Now we need bold leadership and sound investment decisions in the years ahead to make the vision a reality."

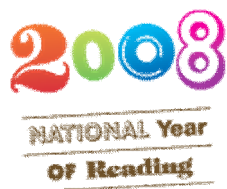
The research for Reading Group Mapping Data 2008 was done with the Society of Chief Librarians. It found that libraries are radically evolving the reading group model. The bulk of reading groups are still for adults, but there are a growing number of groups for children, families, prisoners, asylum seekers, teenagers and readers with English as a second language.

One in three reading groups meet in a library venue, but two in three meet elsewhere. Often in unexpected places like pubs, workplaces, children's homes, elderly care homes, youth clubs and prisons. There are special interest groups too – for people hooked on specialist genres, manga or graphic novels, poetry, non-fiction or playreading.

How libraries work with readers groups

Libraries support groups in different ways. They can advise people on how to set up a new group, provide staff to lead groups, lend free collections of the same book and supply a community space to meet in. There's a growing trend for libraries to work with readers groups on organising events – like author visits and readers' days.

Libraries are experimenting with working regionally to reach more readers. The award winning East Midlands Regional Reading Group project supports a network of 700+ library reading groups involving over 7,000 readers. It has developed a pan-regional storytelling and story-sharing project, which has engaged diverse audiences – from young unaccompanied asylum seekers to adults with learning difficulties. It has brought writers and readers together to enjoy reading and co-produce new writing. The project is being rolled out in the West Midlands and then nationally.



Reading groups and volunteering

Libraries are also pioneering ways to involve the community in delivering reading groups. 30 per cent of library authorities surveyed in England and Wales are involving volunteers or champions in helping to run groups. These volunteers play a role in reaching out to traditionally hard-to-reach community groups.

“This research shows how library reading groups are a powerful force. They are democratic and inclusive and can accommodate all levels of reading ability,” says Debbie Hyde, director of research for The Reading Agency.

**For more information and copies of the new research
please contact Debbie Hyde
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Notes to editors

- Reading Group Mapping Data 2008 is available from The Reading Agency’s online shop at: www.readingagency.org.uk
- The East Midlands Regional Reading Group project won one of the national NIACE Opening Doors to Adult Learners Awards as part of Adult Learners Week, May 2008
- The Reading Agency is leading the library element of the 2008 National Year of Reading. The Year is a year-long celebration of reading in all its forms. It aims to build a greater national passion for reading – for children, families and adult learners alike. The Year will encourage people to read in businesses, homes and communities around the country, providing new opportunities to read and helping people to access help and support through schools and libraries. To get involved and sign up to National Year of Reading activities in your area, log on to: www.yearofreading.org.uk