

## The Reading Agency: achieving change for young people

We are an entrepreneurial charity with a strategic approach to library innovation, working alongside national and local partners to achieve greater community impact. We work predominantly with the public sector to get more people reading more. Commissioned by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to deliver the national young people's library improvement strategy, we put 11 to 19 year-olds firmly at the centre.

Our approach combines strategic thinking and new business models which demonstrate the Library Offer to Young People at its best. In 2009/10 we worked with over 75 library services to actively engage 12,500 young people, often from deprived neighbourhoods.

### Building social capital

*"This project has changed young people's views of what the library is about. When you tell friends about it and show them what we're doing here, what they can do here, they think it's cool." Shehryar, 15, High Wycombe*

HeadSpace meets the urgent need for free local, safe spaces where young people can take part in positive activities and volunteering, building skills and confidence. With 20 HeadSpaces open (18 funded by the Big Lottery), and more to follow, the project gives a clear message that young people are welcome and their participation is valued. To date:

- 5500 young people have taken part, 40% of whom are at risk of social exclusion.
- More than half had not used libraries before.
- 2000 have taken up leadership and decision-making roles, including designing spaces, recruiting staff, selecting stock, planning and running creative events.
- 300 have taken up longer-term volunteering roles, mostly accredited.
- 36 have progressed to long-term work placements or employment.

As our experience through HeadSpace can attest, quality youth volunteering leads to increased skills, self esteem and community engagement. Building on HeadSpace, we are working in partnership with 20 library authorities across all 9 regions to offer 16–25 Summer Reading Challenge volunteering opportunities. So far 480 young people have signed up. Our vision is to support all library services to offer Challenge volunteering by 2012, building capacity for young people and inspiring more children to read. This pilot is generously funded by the John Laing Foundation and v.

*"One thing that really builds confidence is the feeling that you are being listened to. At HeadSpace we have that and more confidence means that we want to do more things, if you don't feel confident, there's fear and you won't feel motivated. I've applied to do voluntary work at the library because I've found that I like working with younger children and doing youth work." Khalid, 18, Haslingden HeadSpace*

## Transforming libraries

We work in four regions (North West, South West, Yorkshire and Humberside and West Midlands) to transform library services' approach to youth involvement. With expert training and support over 3 years, the North West's youth involvement has been transformed, delivering a broad library offer to young people. In 2009/10:

- 1107 young people were directly involved in planning and delivering services
- 4085 took part in positive activities
- 185 creative reading events took place
- Young library Leaders, the first regional library Youth Council established

## Getting creative

“groupthing.org allows young people freedom for expression and creativity. There really is something for everyone.” Rachel Benson (18)

groupthing.org is our networking website for 13 to 19 year-olds to have conversations with their peers about reading, writing and words, publish their creative work and get advice from creative professionals. It's free for young people to sign-up to and available by subscription to libraries, schools and youth groups. Seventy-five library services subscribe.

We have a dynamic partnership with over 34 publishers through Reading Partners, securing creative reading events for the public sector. Teenage Kicks brought together Crawley HeadSpace young people and Random House publishers to highlight new titles by Bali Rai, Anthony McGowan and Keith Gray. Young people planned the programme, introduced speakers, filmed and evaluated the event. It was extremely well attended and had a noticeable impact on their reading choices: “those who were less keen previously will now borrow books and engage in casual discussion of reading”. Lucy Gill, Librarian

MyVoice – write or wrong? was a creative pilot in partnership with Creativity, Culture and Education and DCLG. Nine 13 to 19 year-olds from eight areas were encouraged to write as about their views on racism, war, violent extremism and gang culture. They received professional support from librarians and writers including Akala, Bali Rai and Hardeep Singh Kohli to develop their writing talent. MyVoice culminated in the young people co-organising local events for other young people and a big celebration at the Free Word Centre and Channel 4. Their work will be disseminated through schools.

## Find out more

We are building our experimental work with young people into an integrated programme with a stronger push on creativity and volunteering. We offer expert training, support and resources to help the public sector develop new youth-led spaces, virtual communities and effect sustainable service-wide change. To find out more, contact [Claire.styles@readingagency.org.uk](mailto:Claire.styles@readingagency.org.uk).