



Supporting access to books and reading to promote health and well-being in disadvantaged groups – a realist evaluation of Community Reading Worker provision in Six Local Authority areas [The ‘Reading for Wellbeing’ project]

Summary Report

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Executive summary

1. Background

The Reading for Wellbeing (RfW) project was initiated by author Ann Cleeves as a pilot scheme involving the appointment of nine 'Community Reading Workers' across six local authority areas, including County Durham, Gateshead, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tees – covering Middlesbrough plus Redcar and Cleveland. RfW supports access to books and reading and is embedded in areas of high social deprivation and health need. It is implemented differently in the six pilot areas reflecting local priorities. This study aimed to evaluate the impact of RfW.

2. Methodological Approach

A realist evaluation approach was used to understand the context, potential mechanisms of action, acceptability, and outcomes of RfW. This approach supports the identification and understanding of ideas and assumptions underlying how, why and in what circumstances complex social interventions work, thus enabling development of a more nuanced account of how RfW works.

Data was generated using multiple research methods, including a rapid realist evidence synthesis, qualitative research (involving observations, one-to-one interviews and focus groups) and a participant questionnaire on self-reported outcomes alongside demographic information.

3. Key findings

The majority of RfW participants who engaged in the evaluation were older adults and findings from the study group indicate that RfW works particularly successfully, for those who identified themselves as readers and/or have a positive affiliation with reading for pleasure. Participation in the RfW offered an opportunity to re-affirm their reader identity and offered a sense of respite to participants who were experiencing emotional hardship linked to life changing events (such as bereavement, retirement) or care responsibilities.

The research highlighted the importance of stories in providing a unique opportunity to explore and discuss a wide range of topics and reflect on personal experiences.

Embracing reading for pleasure within group settings enabled participants to build connections and enhance personal capacities that could improve their wellbeing.

The skill of the community reading workers is key. Community reading workers facilitate opportunities to enhance reading enjoyment. Core community reading worker attributes required include being approachable, knowledgeable and having a keen interest in reading; this allows them to create a welcoming and informal environment and make effective reading recommendations.

Location of the RfW groups matters. Participants' perceptions about accessibility of the project are also affected by its location.

4. Recommendations

- Focusing on reaching people who have positive associations with reading will enable RfW to reach the populations who are most likely to benefit from the resources offered through the project.
- The skills, knowledge, dispositions, and passion of community reading workers are essential for the effectiveness of the project.
- When promoting RfW, veering away from stigma-associated themes such as literacy and mental health may help reluctant readers to consider accessing the project.

- When locating RfW activities, considering project's accessibility broadly to include physiological and psychological barriers to access may enable the project to be positioned in a place where people could participate effectively.
- Focusing on sharing stories may enable RfW to reach a broader audience who may be facing challenges accessing written word.

1. Introduction

This summary report has been prepared as a condensed high-level summary for the local authorities participating in RfW. Additional information has been provided in attached annexes. The RfW evaluation research was funded by NIHR NENC ARC.

2. Background

The Reading for Wellbeing project was initiated by author Ann Cleeves, to mark the 21st anniversary of her detective character Vera Stanhope, and in recognition of the solace she's found in stories throughout her life. Ann has also donated personal funding for the pilot. Further funding and support have been provided by the local authorities involved, and other partners including Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (formerly Public Health England), Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE), NENC ICS Population Health & Prevention Board.

The pilot scheme involves the appointment of nine 'Community Reading Workers' across six local authority pilot areas, including County Durham, Gateshead, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tees – covering Middlesbrough plus Redcar and Cleveland, where there is an existing enabling infrastructure including relationships with key partners in public health, library services, community hubs and social prescribing link workers. These areas include populations experiencing high levels of deprivation where literacy levels are particularly low. The Reading for Wellbeing project is implemented differently in the six pilot areas reflecting local priorities. (See **Annex 1** for a detailed description of local approaches to the project).

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of RfW which supports access to books and reading, embedded in areas of high social deprivation and health need.

3. Methodological Approach

We used a realist evaluation approach to understand the context, potential mechanisms of action, acceptability, and outcomes of RfW. Within realist evaluations, interventions (such as RfW) are viewed to operate through introducing new ideas and/or resources into existing social relationships, thus creating mechanisms for change by modifying capacities, resources, constraints and choices for participants and practitioners (Judge 2000). Realist evaluation attends to the ways that interventions may have different effects for different people, by trying to understand configurations of contexts and mechanisms that link to outcomes (C+M=O). The mechanisms are further broken down between the resources brought by the intervention and the response (or reasoning) that participants have as a result, which leads to observable outcomes (Dalkin et al. 2015).

CMO configurations are referred to as programme theories; the ideas and assumptions underlying how, why and in what circumstances complex social interventions work and they are the units of analysis used within realist evaluation (Best et al. 2012), providing a more nuanced account of how the reading worker provision might work. Taking this approach assists with understanding the development and establishment of the reading workers, including how it is perceived and received by stakeholders and end users.

4. Methods

4.1 Rapid realist evidence synthesis

A realist synthesis was undertaken on reading initiatives, to develop our theoretical understanding of the context and potential underlying causal mechanisms which supports or inhibits successful promotion of mental and physical health in individuals across the life course (See **Annex 2** for process).

4.2 Process evaluation

Qualitative research methods were employed between July 2021 to November 2022 to generate data for process evaluation. Observations at project implementation meetings, observations at project delivery sessions, one-to-one interviews and focus groups were undertaken with practitioners and people supported by the community reading workers to provide detailed contextual information and identify generative mechanisms pertaining to the workings of the initiative alongside associated outcomes (See **Annex 3** for an overview of process evaluation data collection).

4.3 Outcome evaluation

A participant questionnaire was developed with input from Public Involvement and Community Engagement and local area representatives delivering on RfW, to capture details for all participants accessing the project. The questionnaire included self-reported outcomes on reading enjoyment and wellbeing measures alongside demographic information to assist in determining reach of the project. Questionnaires were distributed between November 2021 and November 2022 by Community Reading Workers.

5. Findings

5.1 Rapid evidence synthesis

48 papers were included in the synthesis. Data extracted from the literature suggested 6 core mechanisms underlying causal pathways through which reading for pleasure influenced an individual's sense of wellbeing. The mechanisms appeared to be interlinked, working in tandem with other mechanisms leading to the identified outcomes. These stemmed from the context of reading being an immersive experience, which is facilitated by qualities of verisimilitude and relatability. It was indicated that these qualities offer a range of resources that could be mobilised to affect the readers' wellbeing: reading exposes the reader to other people's lives and worlds; enables the reader to experience diverse emotions without the consequence of the actions of the story; facilitates the potential to turn reading into a mimetic experience and form an emotional connection.

5.2 Participant profile

In total 313 questionnaires were returned from 189 individual participants across all six areas. Due to small numbers, local geographical level analysis has not been undertaken on completed questionnaires, instead data from all areas has been analysed together. This number is reported by the Community Reading Workers to be far fewer than the number of participants who attended the sessions. Therefore, statistics from the questionnaires have not been presented in this report. A high-level summary of the statistics is however contained in Annex 4.

5.3 Impacts of Reading for Wellbeing

A positive attitude towards reading for pleasure was found to be a key dynamic affecting the uptake of the RfW offer. Participants who engaged with the project described themselves as avid readers or readers who have lapsed. Alongside a positive attitude towards reading, a desire to make reading a social experience was a significant motivator for participants to engage. Findings cluster around 4 themes. Within these themes, 8 programme theories were identified, which describe how RfW works, for whom and in which circumstances.

Theme 1: Engaging reading habits/ attitudes

Community Reading Workers offered avid and lapsed readers resources that enhanced their reading habits and wellbeing.

Workers mobilised skills and knowledge to address barriers to reading for pleasure.

For lapsed readers, Community Reading Workers mobilised their skills and knowledge to address various barriers, some of which are described below, that were facing them and facilitated access to reading for pleasure. Being able to understand the nature of the barriers to reading for lapsed readers, being aware of and having access to available resources that could be mobilised, enabled project workers to make effective recommendations.

Audiobooks

Some participants described their reading habits had changed due to physiological changes, such as deteriorating eyesight and arthritis, which made it difficult to hold books. Dyslexia was also commented to make reading challenging. Community Reading Workers introduced audiobooks to these participants and raised their awareness of resources such as Borrowbox, an audiobook lending service which could be accessed via library services. Participants explained that the introduction of audiobooks addressed their barriers and enabled them to access reading for pleasure and finding relaxation.

With my dyslexia, I'm more of an audiobook person because I can verbally do more than what I can when I'm looking at things, like, I'm more hands on, I'm more verbal. Sometimes I can't physically pick up a book, so I do like to listen to a book, and I can just melt away.

(Focus group, Area 4a)

When [worker] first came in, I said, "I don't read, I can't keep hold of the book for long enough," and she said, "Have you thought about the library app?" I said, "I didn't know there was one." And [worker] set it up for me, and I've listened to loads of different books. And it's handy, because it means I can put it in my pocket. And whether I'm doing dishes or I'm doing vegetables or whatever, I can actually take it with me around the house. So it's actually very good for me.

(Focus group, Area 1b)

Participants who found audiobooks to be an effective way to enjoy reading highlighted that being able to proceed with the story at a pace that suited them, enabled immersion in the story. However, some participants indicated that audiobooks do not facilitate the same escapism effects as reading a book because they found dynamics such as a reader's voice or the tone in which the book is read interfered with their potential for enjoyment.

Quick-reads

Some participants shared that they had fallen out of habit of reading for pleasure before engaging with RfW as they lacked the mental energy to focus and persist with reading, particularly when they perceived stories were hard to follow. For these participants, being recommended quick-reads (a format of books that are short, easy to follow and are printed in large print) rekindled the ability to read for pleasure, as this requires little mental effort and could fit around their daily tasks. Participants shared that getting back into the habit of reading for pleasure with quick-reads enabled them to 'steal' moments of relaxation and catharsis amidst everyday chaos.

And I mean, you pick all these books up and they're like this big, and I'm like, "I just haven't, how am I going to get through this? I can't see us ever getting to the end of this. ... But then when she bought the quick reads in, I just kind of read the first couple of chapters and before I knew it, I was basically at the end, and I was like, "You know what, I've literally read this in two hours."

(Focus group, Area 4a)

Finding time

Some participants shared that they had fallen out of habit of reading for pleasure due to feeling that they had not the time to devote to reading. For these participants, workers suggested strategies such as reading instead of reaching out to social media or listening to an audiobook while doing household tasks or driving enabled them to feel reading could be interjected into everyday life easily, leading them to finding enjoyment in reading.

Instead of picking my phone up I was picking up a book. But then I was going to sleep a lot easier. Instead of being on my phone until ... I'd be asleep at a reasonable time so it worked out good for everybody really.

(Focus group, Area 5a)

Overall, our findings indicate that workers with knowledge of books, skills to engage with and relate to people, and access to material resources were able to mobilise the combination of these assets, enabling participants who were lapsed readers to consider books to be accessible.

Programme Theory 1	For readers who have lapsed due to physiological and psychological barriers to reading for pleasure (Context), Community Reading Workers being able to make effective recommendations (resource) enable the lapsed readers to feel able to access books (reasoning) leading to finding enjoyment in books (outcome).
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Awareness of different genre and authors enhances practices of reading for pleasure.

For participants who were avid readers at the time of engaging with RfW as well as those who had lapsed in their reading habits, participation in the project enabled them to enhance their reading experience through broadening awareness of books available. Participants pointed out that conversations with workers and fellow participants, workers bringing diverse books to group meetings and organised events such as author visits to the group roused their curiosity about genre and authors they had not previously explored. Participants reported how curiosity motivated them to explore other genres and expand their choice, leading to discovering new ways to find enjoyment in reading.

You tend to just think, "Oh, well, I like that one, so I'll read that one- you know, something by her again." But if somebody says to you, "Oh, try that one." And you may read them and think, "Well, I would never have read that in a million years. I would have looked at the start, but everyone else has said it's really good, so come on, plough on with it, you know?" And it does open your mind a little bit more, you know?

(Focus group, Area 2)

Individual participants elaborated how this mechanism influenced them in distinctive ways. Exposure to different books seem to enable those who did not feel confident to venture out into books/ genres they were not familiar with as well as those who felt that familiarity with storylines had begun to affect their enthusiasm for reading. One participant felt being exposed to new genres encouraged her make new choices and decisions about reading and in other areas of life.

One participant hypothesised that just as expanding reading choice, bringing reading related resources to groups where participants might not share a reader identity may motivate them to read for pleasure. He elaborated that in the group he attended, the fact that the worker highlighted new resources on topics of interest incited the groups' enthusiasm to read.

Programme Theory 2	For people who are interested in reading for pleasure (context), exposure to new genres and authors in RfW groups (resource) motivates participants to explore new books (reasoning) leading to finding enjoyment in reading in new ways (outcome).
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Theme 2: Wellbeing

Participants reported several well-being related outcomes experienced due to participating in RfW, connected to both the act of reading for pleasure as well as participating in reading groups. Participation in the project was shown to encourage participants to proactively consider wellbeing and mental health. This was particularly the case for those who were facing emotional hardship due to life changing circumstances, such as bereavement, retirement, illness, care responsibilities and moving into new areas.

Reading as an act of self-care.

Participating in a group that connected reading for pleasure with wellbeing, enabled participants to acknowledge the need for self-care as well as reflect on how reading for pleasure impacted on their mental health and wellbeing. Participants reported that discussions within RfW groups encouraged them to consider the potential impact of reading for pleasure on their own wellbeing, as well as enabling them to challenge previously held views, such as believing that reading is a selfish act and feelings of guilt for spending time reading for pleasure rather than undertaking other tasks. Participants shared that devoting time for reading and participating in RfW groups was an act of self-care. The project space allowed an opportunity for participants to *be* themselves, shelving their other roles and responsibilities, albeit for a short moment in time. Participants reported that practicing self-care by embracing an activity they liked lead to an increased sense of wellbeing.

It's that self-care isn't it? To sit and read is taking time away from the laundry or time away from the children or time away from doing all these other things that are taking the time of your life, which actually finding that time for yourself is a massive benefit.

(Focus group, Area 5b)

However, one participant shared in an interview that explicit associations with wellbeing and mental health may put off participants joining RfW due to perceptions of stigma attached to mental health.

Programme Theory 3	For participants who consider and/ or are willing to consider reading as a hobby (context), discussions in RfW groups which associate reading with wellbeing (resource) enable them to consider wellbeing and self-care (reasoning) leading to them engaging in practices of self-care such as reading for pleasure to improve their sense of wellbeing (outcome).
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Reading for Wellbeing project gives a sense of purpose.

An overarching reflection of participants was that the project was a planned activity that is scheduled to take place at a set time and date and a specific venue. This enabled participants to arrange their day, week or month around their engagement. This aspect was particularly important for participants

who were experiencing life changing events, or those who felt that they did not have a reason to leave the house. While a significant majority of the participants were also motivated by an interest in reading, one participant shared that while she previously had no interest in reading, she decided to join RfW as she was looking for activities and needed motivation to get out of the house. Having a planned activity to attend instilled a sense of purpose, giving motivation to leave the house, providing hope through offering a positive activity to look forward to, and direction by interjecting a sense of structure, around which participants could plan other activities and tasks. Participants reported that having a sense of purpose in such manner lead them feeling an increased sense of self efficacy, through enabling them to have a direction and a sense of confidence in their ability to manage life.

Female: And there's somebody having something slotted in the month, you know? That month's not going to be horrible and long.

Female: Aha, something to look forward to.

Male: No, it's, like, that's the printed...

Female: Because we've got something that's, you know, slotted in.

Male: That's the printed sheet that tells us when we're here. You know?

(Focus group, Area 1a)

That's part of this wellbeing as well, because I'm going to [place] or whatever I'm doing, I'm going to [town], so even today I've had my lunch, I've had my breakfast, I've had my cup of tea before I've joined you,... All of a sudden you start looking after yourself without realising it... if I've got to be somewhere I've got to make sure that I've got nutrition, I've got to have something to eat.

(Interview 2, Area 2)

Programme Theory 4	For participants who like to read, particularly those experiencing life changing events or those who feel that they do not have a reason to leave the house (context), having a planned reading activity taking place at a set date, time and venue (resource) provide an anchor around which to build everyday activities around (reasoning) leading to an increased sense of self-efficacy (outcome).
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Theme 3: Connection

Findings indicate that implementing reading for pleasure activities in group settings facilitate pathways for social connections that are enhanced through association with reading. These pathways emanate from a shared interest in reading, which enables participants to establish a commonality, through which familiarity and trust emerge. This tendency appeared to relate particularly to participants who were less likely to join other interest-based groups.

Reading for Wellbeing groups facilitate companionship.

Participants highlighted companionship as a valuable resource that was facilitated through RfW groups. This resource was particularly valued by participants who described them as introverts, who liked reading and participants who were facing emotional hardship. The participants explained that sharing an interest and value in reading enabled them to find a common ground. The common ground initiated a network of connections within the group. In addition, it instilled a sense of acceptance in the minds of the participants as they explained that in the group, they did not feel pressured to participate in a defined way. This seemingly enabled participants to experience a sense of belonging, who described RfW groups as meetings of like-minded people. In addition, one participant elaborated that regular meetings with frequent contact helped them feel connected with others in a meaningful way as the contact is not fleeting. It was reported that being in a space with companions enabled participants to find a space for relaxation and recuperation, leading to a sense of increased wellbeing.

that can be a wellbeing thing, just hearing other people talking. You don't necessarily have to be the one that talks. You can be the one that listens. Again, that's where you feel comfortable.

(Interview 2, Area 2)

Programme Theory 5	For readers who consider themselves to be introvert or those experiencing emotional hardship (context), RfW provides an opportunity to meet other readers with whom they share an interest (resource) enabling them to feel a sense of companionship (reasoning) leading to a sense of connectedness (outcome).
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Books offer limitless scope for discussion.

Participants pointed out that scope for discussions in RfW groups is expansive as books offered the potential to explore a multitude of topics and interpretations. In addition, the opportunity to relate content of stories to participants' personal experiences enhanced the richness of the discussions. It was shared that these explorations enabled participants to consider the reading as well as their experiences from different perspectives, deepening their understanding and the enjoyment of reading as well as their understanding of self and the world. Some participants made a distinction between listening and speaking as leading towards different outcomes. They suggested that listening to other participants' perspectives enabled them to broaden their perspectives. Whilst the opportunity to speak and share opinions, enabled them to feel that they were heard and their viewpoints are valued, leading to feelings of increased sense of self-worth. It was indicated that both pathways lead to an increased sense of empathy, trust and respect towards other group members, resulting in strong connections with one another.

I think with reading, because it is so varied, you cover so many topics and a lot of the time, we do not talk about the books, but we move onto other things. Whereas, if you are doing a group maybe with art or something, it is about art all the time. Where this, you cover so many different subjects. It is all encompassing really, isn't it?

(Focus Group, Area 3)

Participants of a pre-existing groups where RfW had been introduced shared that discussions about books provided a new way to connect with each other. Discussions enabled them to explore themes and points of view which hitherto had not been explored, which the participants felt, enabled them to get to know each other in different ways.

It was highlighted that discussions presented a learning opportunity for Community Reading Workers to challenge their points of view of relating to implementation of RfW. Discussions with participants alerted the workers to different ways readers are affected by and relate to books, which challenged their preconceptions, and enabled them to make more appropriate recommendations.

Participant 1: ... It's nice to read that someone else has drama isn't it? ...I prefer a real-life drama.

Participant 2: ... I think sometimes you need to have a book that you can emotionally attach to rather than just having a holiday romance or something. It's good for you to kind of get those emotions out and to feel. Variety. There are the happy stories where they have got a happy ending but then there are some stories where something bad does happen to people and to get those tears flowing and to kind of. Then you feel like you've got a better way of dealing with it if you come across some of those things similar in the future. You have them strategies to go, "Actually sometimes there is a happy ending and sometimes there's not."

Interviewer: It kind of makes you prepared for life?

Female: Yes. It makes you prepared for the future.

Worker: I wonder if it's a safe way. I've just thought, I've never thought of this other than when you were just speaking then, I wonder then if it's like a safe way to feel emotion. You like books that make you really annoyed at people. I wonder then if you can safely get annoyed with those people and have an urge to beat them up or whatever. Then you've got a safe way to feel towards a cancer diagnosis in a safe way.
(Focus Group, Area 5b)

This Community Reading Worker had previously shared that broadening choice was particularly important in the locality she was working in, where readers repeatedly turn to books with distressful content. However, at a Focus Group, readers from that area reported that such books offer an opportunity for catharsis and the distance between the book and oneself offers a safe space to process emotions, particularly those such as fear, anger, disappointment.

Programme Theory 6	For people who come to RfW (context), opportunity to explore diverse points of view and experiences within discussions (resource) enable the group members to broaden their understanding of their lives and the world (reasoning) leading to being able to connect with each other (outcome).
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Theme 4: RfW practice development

Community Reading Workers put participants at ease.

A recurrent theme that was highlighted by participants was the role of the workers in the development and delivery of RfW. It was indicated that Community Reading Workers' demeanour such as being calm, observant, non-intrusive, attentive, willingness to listen and their knowledge, experiences, and passion for reading provided them with a pool of resources, which they mobilised to engage with participants effectively. Participants described that through understanding and addressing their diverse needs and capacities, the workers create an inclusive environment within groups where a broad range of people felt welcome. In new groups of participants who had come together (rather than existing groups where RfW was introduced), it was noted that Community Reading Workers were required to play a facilitatory role in creating an environment where participants felt at ease about participation. Some of these groups, highlighted that continued involvement of the worker is a requirement for the group to continue. For more anxious participants, the workers provided further assistance, such as meeting prior to the session on a one-to-one basis, to enable them to feel at ease about participation. For pre-existing groups to whom RfW activity was introduced, the workers adopting a perceptive and sensitive role so as not to affect the group dynamics facilitated engagement with reading. Across these settings, participants shared that workers' commitment to the project – their knowledge of books, commitment to reading, commitment to catering to their needs – enhanced participants' motivation to read and participate in RfW.

...[worker] has come into that [group] so smoothly and interacted with us in a way that is so pleasant and positive. And reacted so attentively to what we have said. Whatever we have said, she has picked up those little nuances of what we might be interested in, and then thought around that - "Okay, if this person is interested in this author, they might be interested in these." It's that sort of level of interaction, the quality of interaction, and attentiveness.
(Focus Group, Area 1b)

Programme Theory 7	When delivering RfW project (context), Community Reading Workers activating their personality and reading related resources (resource) enable them to create an environment where participants are made to feel at ease (reasoning) leading to more participants meaningfully participating in the project (outcome).
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Project delivery environment influences ideas about accessibility

Participants shared that the qualities of the space where the project activities were delivered influence their thoughts about how accessible the project is. Transport links, size of the room, acoustics of the space, and familiarity with the space seem to influence people's willingness and/or curiosity to participate. In addition, some participants shared that activities being held in libraries help them to familiarise themselves with libraries, challenge their preconceptions about expected conduct in libraries and feel more comfortable about being in libraries. Findings suggest that dynamics such as activities being free and the project location being an accepting space where the participants felt they did not have to be concerned about appearances, helped them view the project as accessible.

Participant 1: Like I've said, I suffer with anxiety, I don't think I could go to a place that I didn't know, especially not on my own,...

I would have to convince myself to get through those doors, whereas here, it's just kind of like, "Oh just come and see what's going on in this room." You don't even have to know what's going on and you've already walked into God knows what.

Yes, it's just like home; we know the place so well, it doesn't set me off at all.

(Focus Group, Area 4a)

That helps your mental wellbeing as well doesn't it? Coming somewhere you don't have to worry that the kids might be misbehaving. You don't have to worry what you look like. If you are going to come in and no one is going to talk to you, because you know that someone will speak to you that day. ... But like I feel like I can come and go home knowing that the kids have had a lovely time, I've had a chance to speak to someone, discuss my concerns, discuss the story that I've been reading, get a new book and then go home and go, "Oh, I've had a nice morning."

(Focus Group, Area 5b)

Programme Theory 8	When delivering RfW (Context), qualities of the place where the project activities were delivered (resource) influence people's willingness and/or their curiosity to participate (reasoning) leading to affecting the number of people who take up the offer of the project (outcome).
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6. Discussion

Reader identity and desire for a social experience of reading:

Our findings resonated with the published literature, which highlighted self-identification as a reader and/or a positive affiliation with reading for pleasure as key factors affecting participation in reading interventions (Garner 2020; Hodge, Robinson, and Davis 2007; Lang and Brooks 2015; Latchem and Greenhalgh 2014; Pettersson 2018; Ross 1999; Thumala Olave 2018). In addition, participants' desire to turn reading in to a social experience further encouraged participation, which is consistent with the literature (Lang and Brooks 2015; Pettersson 2018; Ross 1999). Our findings highlighted that participants experienced positive effects of engaging in reading as a social experience, particularly those who had experienced life changing events. Participants described the project space as a place

to *be* themselves, indicating, as presented in the literature, that participation in the project enabled them to embrace or be re-associated with an aspect of their identity, which they had considered important (Hammer et al. 2017; Lang and Brooks 2015; Latchem and Greenhalgh 2014).

Respite in the face of hardship:

Our findings indicated participation in RfW offered a sense of respite to participants who experienced emotional hardship linked to life changing events or care responsibilities. A status of emotional hardship appeared to be linked to feelings of loneliness, lack of purpose or feeling overwhelmed. For these participants, discussions within groups where importance of self-care was highlighted enabled them to embrace the opportunity to be re-associated with reader identity, reflect on the self-care as well as challenge perceptions that prevented them from reading for pleasure.

Group connections

Our findings indicated that for RfW participants, embracing reading for pleasure within group settings enabled them to enhance personal capacities that could impact on their wellbeing. While participants recognised the potential in reading for pleasure to facilitate immersion, engage imagination and escapism, group discussions highlighted the potential of both mechanisms to affect wellbeing and improving mental health. The conversations, carried out in a context that highlighted the importance of self-care, seem to enable participants to justify engaging in reading for pleasure as well as consider it a mechanism of coping. A parallel resource was that participation in reading groups seem to provide participants with sense of belonging and support.

7. Strengths/ Limitations

The explanatory and iterative nature of realist approaches enabled the evaluation to attend to diverse, complex components of the project. Further, early involvement with the Reading for Wellbeing project facilitated a grounded approach to theory elicitation and refinement.

However, as the outcome evaluation questionnaires was administered differently across the regions, with varying degrees of effectiveness, the data yielded was found to be limited in its capacity to inform theorising on reach and participation, as well as the analysis of cumulative change affected by the project.

While the proposition for realist interviews is that sampling is theory based, the extent to which the researchers could influence sampling was limited, as they accessed participants through gate keepers. PICE consultations with non-participant community members was conducted to address the gap.

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Annex 1: Pen Portraits of Local Authority Approaches to the Reading for Wellbeing Project

Information below has been provided by each of the local authorities participating in Reading for Wellbeing. It provides an overview of the assumptions underpinning each area's provision of the project, alongside their target populations, overall aims, engagement pathways and outcomes.

DURHAM

Assumptions: Reading and increased access to reading can help improve health and wellbeing (wellbeing understood broadly); The project offers an opportunity to develop the evidence base on links between health and reading; Improving literacy skills has benefits for health and builds skills transferable to other areas in life. The Reading Coach role was anticipated to take a holistic and personalised approach to understanding health and care needs, thereby empower people to take control of their health and wellbeing.

Target population: Communities in Tow Law and Stanley (prioritised for socio-economic data and need identified through County Durham Health Inequalities report); the project was anticipated to take an intergenerational approach and work with a broader demographic – project workers was anticipated to assess need and demand in Tow law and Stanley and respond to that.

Aims: Increasing access to reading; Developing evidence to show that reading for pleasure affects mental wellbeing; Embed the principles of Community reading and support for reading through libraries, participatory art/ community engagement (facilitated through community arts)

Pathway: In Tow Law, the project worker was anticipated to liaise with Northern Heartlands to identify and recruit participants, develop and deliver activities. In Stanley, the project worker was anticipated to identify and work with local groups, among which Just for Women, The Venue and PACT House are established contacts. The project was anticipated to engage with social link workers in both areas and was intended to involve one-to-one as well as group work.

Thriving Communities project came to an end in May 22, the reading coach has continued to work directly with the Social Prescribing Link Workers in the area and requested that geographical reach to be extended to include the village of Esh Winning, where a number of referrals came from. This was approved by the steering group in July 22.

Resources: 2 part-time project workers (externally recruited), each focusing on one locality, liaising as peer mentors but largely working independently of one another. The posts were supported by the Reading for Wellbeing local steering group.

Community assets: Northern Heartlands in Tow Law – till May 22; PACT House and other community organisations in Stanley – PACT House was lead partner organisation.

Anticipated outcomes: Developing partnerships (both linking libraries, community arts and public health directorates within the council together and linking libraries and local organisations who may be working with public experiencing reading confidence issues); Understanding local community needs and addressing them.

GATESHEAD

Assumptions: Reading for pleasure allows to broaden the scope of social prescribing activities across the local authority area:

- it could be used to address needs while waiting for mental health services particularly in relation to reducing social isolation and improving mental health.
- it offers a tool to bring people out of isolation and meet in groups.
- it offers an opportunity to escape from life's stresses.
- it can be adapted to suit the needs of the people.
- it offers social prescribing link workers a novel activity.

The Reading for Wellbeing project was anticipated to enable libraries to engage with public who previously accessed libraries less frequently.

Target population: anybody who is referred into Community Linking Project; members of community who engage with Community Houses in the borough; community members approached through groups/ contacts linked with Edberts House and Reading Facilitators

Aims: Develop and offer positive activities around stories for community members of all ages who have previously not accessed or less frequently accessed library services; Using positive engagement with stories to bring people together and create connections

Pathway: Project workers were to be lead by Edberts' House and liaised with Social Prescribing link workers and other available services/ initiatives to identify participants, develop and deliver activities. Details of sessions (i.e. the format (one-to-one, group), the frequency, length) were to be determined by the needs of the identified participants.

Resources: Skills and experience of 3 part-time project workers (seconded through library services to increase the sustainability of the project,) titled Project Workers for the Anne Cleeves Project

Community assets: Edberts House is a partner and a key link; other links are cultivated as the project progresses.

At the end of the year for the project in Gateshead i.e. June 2022, one part-time worker returned to her substantive post within the library and stopped working on the project; another started a new role and the third worker remains on 18.5 hours per week, and is still working on legacy work from the project. RfW was embedded within the library services following the completion of the one-year pilot project.

Anticipated Outcomes:

- Adapting the way library services deliver – to a way through which the services are embedded in the community rather than being a place-based delivery model
- Encouraging people to be less isolated and more connected to their community
- Enjoying and knowing how to enjoy stories in whatever form
- Better quality joined up working between VCS, LA and the NHS
- Developing skills of library staff such that the activities can be sustained beyond the lifecycle of the project;
- Improving wellbeing of participants.

NORTH TYNESIDE

Assumptions: In areas of high deprivation, engaging parents in reading for pleasure will result in embedding reading as a cultural activity within families. Establishing reading for pleasure as a cultural activity will improve literacy. Improved literacy will give children a better start in life.

Target population: parents of children of any age living in the geographical area covered by The primary care network of North Shields, specifically focusing on Riverside and Chirton as they are deemed to be two of the most deprived wards in North Tyneside .

From the end of July 2022, it was felt that the Community Reading Worker had made the most of the contacts she had made in the Riverside and Chirton areas. While she will continue to work in these areas, it was agreed to increase the scope of the project to target other areas and user groups. During the summer of 2022, the Community Reading Worker made new contacts in Shiremoor, Longbenton and focused more on work with the health sector – e.g. NHS staff at North Tyneside General Hospital, a wellness centre in North Shields, the carer's centre and health coaches. She will also use the proposed 'warm hubs' sessions across the borough to engage with more residents.

Aim: embedding reading as a cultural activity within families

Pathway: A Community Reading Worker will scope and identify participants for the project, design and deliver suitable activities at a setting suitable for the participants. The activities could be delivered in group settings or as one-to-one sessions. Number of sessions, length of sessions as well as number of participants will be guided by participants' needs.

Resources:

1 full-time project worker; externally recruited; titled *Community Reading Worker*, managed by the Library services; Community Reading Worker reduced her hours to 3 days per week from August 2022
Guidance and support provided through the Steering Group and other LA and VCS links

Linked partners: Better Connect (Helix Arts); Children's library services

Anticipated outcomes: Increasing personal esteem; facilitating community engagement/ community awareness; reducing isolation; improving wellbeing; confidence in accessing libraries; reading for pleasure and confidence in choosing things for reading for pleasure.

NORTHUMBERLAND

Assumptions: Reading for pleasure could help a range of people in a range of situations to make the situations better. Statistical data from the region shows that there is a high number of needs, and the scope of the project is loosely defined so as to make it amenable to tend to these diverse needs. Project adds to the potential of the integration of library services into community hubs.

Target population: Families who live in Newbiggin (with a focus on adults; may work with children if the need arises) As a result of conversations with partners, the project delivery has expanded to Creswell, Ellington, Linton and Lynemouth (NCT partners), Seaton Delaval (GP surgery) and county wide telephone offer (SP referrals).

Aim: Demonstrate that in that area, reading could help a range of people in a range of situations to make their situations better (to show that from wherever the people were, the situation they are in has improved for them in some way, shape or form)

Pathway: Project workers will, with the guidance of the steering group, recruit participants and develop and deliver activities. Ultimately will involve one-to-one as well as group work.

Resources: 2 part-time project workers with complementary skill sets who could potentially cater to diverse participant needs; externally recruited; titled *Reading Facilitators*

Linked resources: Northern Literacy Trust (to work alongside the Trust to develop reading as an activity that beyond an activity that's associated with functional literacy)

Anticipated outcomes:

Participants in the project report feeling better about themselves or their situation in a way they can relate this to their involvement in the project.

Reach out to and engage people who feel isolated, who do not engage with their communities or local services such as libraries.

SOUTH TEES

Assumptions: In some localities, reading to children is low due to cultural reasons. Working with parents to develop reading as a cultural activity will improve literacy and pave the way to give their children a better start in life. The best way to approach/ engage parents to develop reading for pleasure as a cultural activity is through their children.

Target population: Parents with children aged between 9 to 12 months, living in Loftus (Redcar and Cleveland) and Thorntree (Middlesbrough)

Aim: Engaging parents in reading for pleasure and working with parents in order to engage their children to embed reading as part of their cultural activity to enable children a better start to life; improving literacy across the family

Pathway: A project worker will work with Children's centres to identify and recruit participants; the worker will then work with parents to identify their aspirations and needs and, develop and deliver activities to address the needs.

Resources: 1 fulltime project worker (externally recruited) titled *Community Reading Coach*, supported by the South Tees local steering group

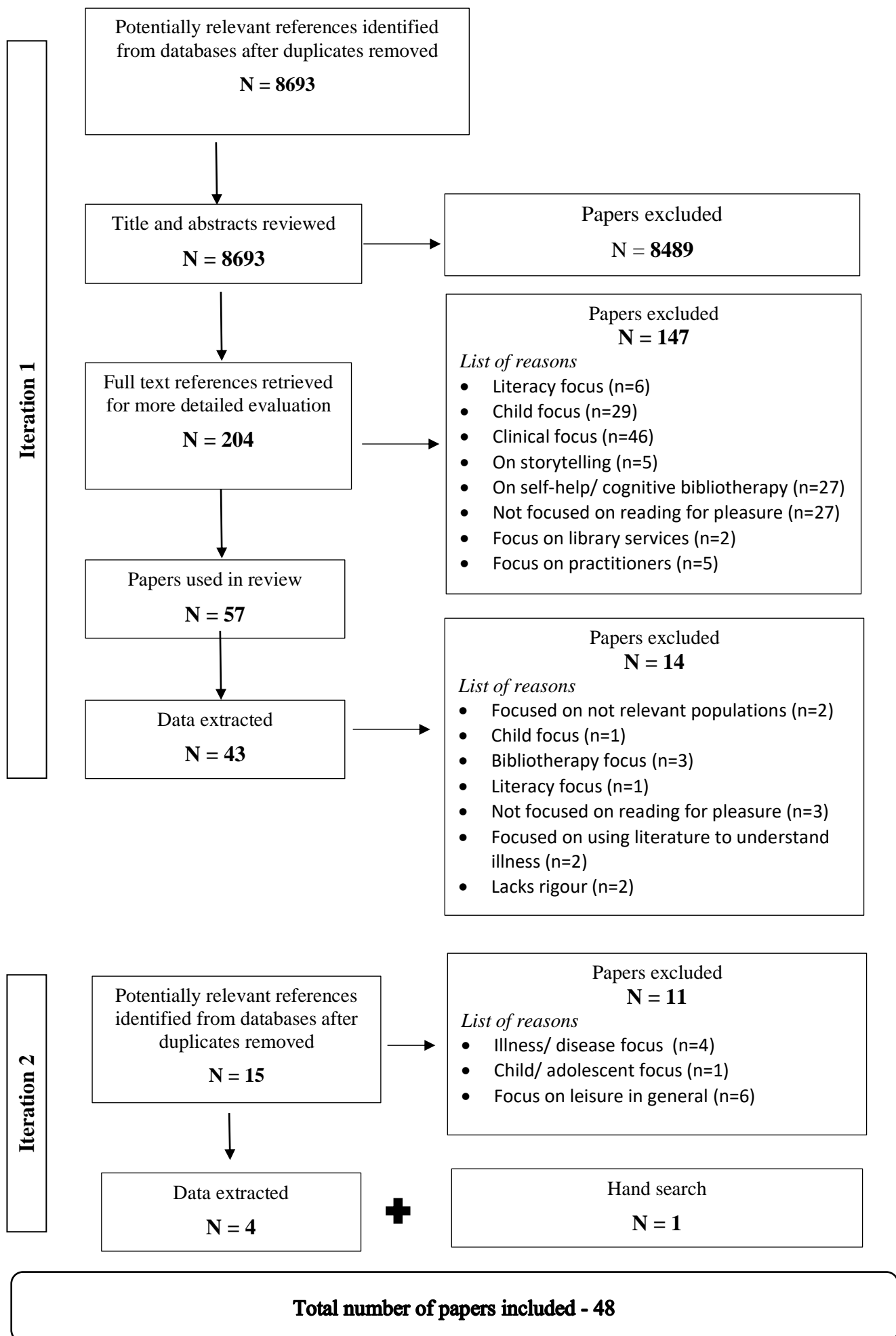
Linked resources: VCS is less developed in the localities. The project worker will be based at family hubs and will liaise with social prescribing link workers. They will explore, identify, and forge links with other relevant local groups/ organisations.

Anticipated outcomes:

Working with parents to identify their needs and what's missing for them in the community (in Loftus in particular); mobilise 'reading for pleasure' to identify community aspirations and community assets on which a sustainable initiative could be built.

Potential indicators of success - isolated parents taking the initiative to do things together or with the project worker; parents who previously didn't use the library visiting the library; parents enjoying reading; improving literacy skills for children.

Annex 2: Process of rapid realist synthesis



Annex 3: Overview of Qualitative data collection

Interviews with practitioners	Local leads	6 (n = 8)
	Reading project workers	6 (n = 9)
Observations	Local Steering Group Meetings	26 (approx. 26 hours)
	Regional Steering Group Meetings	6 (approx. 9 hours)
Informal conversations with Reading Workers	Number of practitioners	7
	Number of occasions	3 (approx. 3 hours)
Data collection from participants	Observations at project delivery sessions	4 (approx. 6 hours)
	Focus groups with participants	9 (n = 45)
	One to one interviews with participants	4 (n = 4)

Annex 4: Outcome Evaluation

Descriptive statistics in relation to reach and participation of Reading for Wellbeing participants from those that completed the questionnaire are reported below. Due to small numbers, local geographical level analysis has not been undertaken on completed questionnaires, instead data from all areas has been analysed together.

Reading for Wellbeing reach

In total, 189 participants across all areas completed the questionnaires during the course of the year. Participants were overwhelmingly female (n=152) with a relatively even distribution of age groups.

54 participants completed questionnaires in County Durham, 51 participants completed questionnaires in Gateshead, 34 participants completed questionnaires in Northumberland, 25 participants completed questionnaires in South Tees and 25 participants completed questionnaires in North Tyneside.

With regards to employment status, the largest group (41%) were retired (n=69), followed by full/part-time employment or self-employed (30%, n=51). 18% (n=31) of participants were unemployed or unable to work.

Half of participants are homeowners (n=84), with almost two thirds of this group having no mortgage (n=57). Just over a quarter of participants (26% n=44) live in private rented and 17% (n=28) live in social rented accommodation. 6% (n=10) of participants report to be living in sheltered accommodation.

Reading for Wellbeing participation

Two thirds (n=124) of participants completed the questionnaire once. 41 participants completed the questionnaires 2 times, 6 participants completed it 3 times, 9 participants completed it 4 times, 1 participant completed it 5 times, 2 participants completed it 6 times, 1 participant completed it 8 times and 1 participant completed it 9 times.

Approximately a third of participants (n=63) attended Reading for Wellbeing on their own, another third (n=61) attended with children. 50 participants attended with a friend and 11 participants attended with a partner.

Wellbeing

Of the 185 participants that completed a questionnaire, 171 completed the wellbeing questions on their first questionnaire completion, providing benchmark data on wellbeing.

The wellbeing questions were taken from the short version of the validated Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). This scale was developed to enable the monitoring of mental wellbeing in the general population and the evaluation of projects, programmes and policies which aim to improve mental wellbeing. The scale used includes seven statements about thoughts and feelings, which relate to mental functioning.

Raw scores from the data were transferred into metric scores using the SWEMWBS conversion table. Taking this approach allows for data to be compared with England population norms.

Participants attaining Reading for Wellbeing had a mean score of 21.71. The population norm for England in 2011 was 23.61. Indicating therefore that the baseline measure for the wellbeing of the participants accessing Reading for Wellbeing was only slightly lower than the England average.

Reading enjoyment

Benchmarking data was collected from 11 statements on reading enjoyment. Mean scores for each are provided below.

(1 strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 disagree, 4 strongly disagree) **MEAN**

STATEMENT

I read only if I have to	3.28
I find it hard to finish books	3.17
I read only to get information that I need	3.21
I cannot sit still and read for more than a few minutes	3.35

(1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 agree, 4 strongly agree) **MEAN**

STATEMENT

I like to express my opinions about books I have read	2.87
I like to exchange books with my friends	2.91
Reading is one of my favourite hobbies	3.11
I like talking about books with other people	2.97
I feel happy if I receive a book as a present	3.22
For me, reading is a waste of time	1.41
I enjoy going to a bookshop or a library	3.08