

Running Reading Friends with visually impaired people

Reading Friends is a social reading and befriending programme from The Reading Agency which brings people together to read, chat, meet new people and have fun. It tackles loneliness and isolation, by starting conversations through reading. Reading Friends connects people one-to-one or in groups, face-to-face, virtually and by telephone through reading-inspired chat and the sharing of stories. It's flexible, person-led, starting with individual interests and adapted to meet the needs of local communities.

The Reading Agency's mission is to tackle life's big challenges through the proven power of reading, such as loneliness and social isolation. It's a national charity with high quality partnership programmes, like Reading Friends, delivered through and with public libraries, prisons, education, and health. They work with all ages and reach into every community in the country including the most disadvantaged to deliver the benefits of reading where they are needed most.

Share the Vision is a coalition of UK organisations that work together to improve the quality, availability, and accessibility of library services for visually impaired and print disabled people. Together they produce the [Reading Sight website](#), a bank of resources to support anyone with an interest in helping people with sight loss to access reading and reading services.

Libraries do so much to positively impact people's lives, and Share the Vision is committed to helping develop and champion services that deliver accessible reading. Blind and partially sighted people in the UK, like everyone else, need library and information services to support their daily life. Public libraries are a vital link for people with visual impairment and sight loss and we must work together to make them as accessible as we can.

Libraries Connected developed the **Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise** with Share the Vision to ensure libraries can effectively support people with reduced vision. The Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise sets out the experience that people with blindness, sight loss and other print disabilities should have through public library services. Find out more about the Promise and the work of Share the Vision at <https://readingsight.org.uk>

One of the ways you can meet the aims of the Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise is through running events and activities for the visually impaired, like Reading Friends.

Contact the Reading Friends team to find out more and how you can get involved at readingfriends@readingagency.org.uk



This toolkit has been developed in partnership by Reading Friends and Share the Vision to provide inspiration and ideas to help you run effective reading groups in your library. With special thanks to the Reading Friends projects running in public libraries, Vision Norfolk, Libraries Connected and the visually impaired people who have contributed.

Impact of visual impairment

More than two million people in the UK are living with sight loss that is severe enough to have a significant impact on their daily lives, such as not being able to drive. This includes people:

- Registered blind or partially sighted
- Whose visual impairment doesn't meet the criteria to register
- Who are awaiting or having treatment such as eye injections, laser treatment or surgery that may improve their sight
- Whose sight loss could be improved by wearing correctly prescribed glasses or contact lenses

There are 1.2 million people living with sight loss who are aged 75 years and over and more than 25,000 blind and partially sighted children aged 16 years and under in the UK. As many as half of these children have other disabilities. Around 350,000 people are registered blind or partially sighted in the UK in total.

It is important to remember that certification and registration only provide information about blind and partially sighted people who have been in some contact with health and social care services. They are a useful indication of the number of people affected by sight loss, but they do not provide the complete picture of how many people are affected by sight loss in the UK.

Royal National Institute of Blind People (Royal National Institute of Blind People)

Sight loss has a significant impact on education, work and health and wellbeing. Often people who live with sight loss struggle with daily activities including transport, reading, writing and engaging with things like technology. Everyday activities can become more challenging and inaccessible for those experiencing sight loss.

Through the public library service there are opportunities to address this and provide essential support for the vision and print impaired community.



Reading Friends

What is Reading Friends?

Reading Friends is a social reading and befriending programme which brings people together to read, chat, meet new people and have fun. It tackles loneliness and isolation, by starting conversations through reading.

Why run a Reading Friends group?

These activities can be a lifeline for many who feel lonely and isolated. They demonstrate that the library service is, and should be, accessible to all and that there are opportunities for the visually impaired to find help and support and access to reading.

“Listening to reading takes her mind off her various ailments and out of herself. She has always loved books and misses not being able to read herself.”

Library staff at Cheshire East Libraries

Reading Friends is a flexible programme and is inclusive by nature due to its person-centred ethos. Its key principles are:

- **Fun and Welcoming** - An enjoyable experience with friendly and approachable staff and volunteers, in a familiar and comfortable place.
- **Inclusive and Equal** - Open to anyone and responsive to people's needs. There is no hierarchy, everyone is a Reading Friend just with different roles.
- **Empowering and Participant-led** - Participants are given opportunities to be involved in what happens during sessions and what they would like to read or do.
- **Non-judgmental and Non-elitist** - All kinds of reading are involved. There are no set texts or specific approaches to reading that need to be followed.

Our Guiding Principles have more information but sessions normally include reading and a chat, asking people what they would like to do. This could include:

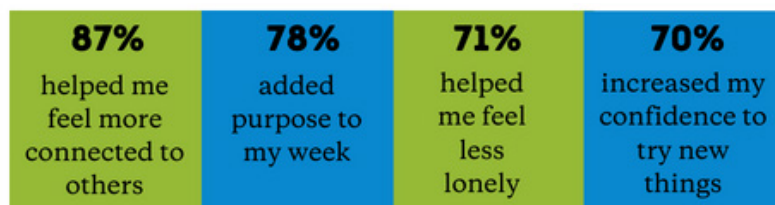
- a poem, extract, or introduction
- a story over a few sessions
- a general chat about books/genres/authors or reading-related activities
- other reading materials such as magazines and newspapers

“We use books as a springboard to start a conversation and see where it takes us... Interspersed with poetry to inspire conversation, the group has developed into more than a reading group, it has become a welcome break in people's lives.”

Library staff at Lancashire Libraries

What impact has Reading Friends made?

Reading Friends has a strong evidence base, demonstrating its difference to people's lives, increasing confidence (70%), adding purpose (78%), with participants feeling less lonely (71%) and more connected to others (87%). Reading has the power to bring people together and connect them socially. The growing number of stories shared on our website show the individual impact to those taking part. Libraries are at the heart of their local communities and are best placed to reach those in greatest need.



Motivations for getting involved in Reading Friends

People want to join Reading Friends for different reasons and it's useful to know their motivations so that sessions can meet their expectations. Reasons could include:

- Reading and stories are an interest, hobby, or passion
- Social reasons to get together with others
- Meeting others with sight loss
- Sight loss has made it difficult to read or enjoy reading
- A distraction – for example, if it's been hard to deal with sight loss or current events
- Developing a new interest in reading

“I have benefitted so much from the Reading Friends Group, I felt very isolated after losing my sight and the group has given me a purpose. I have met many friends and now socialise with them outside the group and go on trips. It has been very useful as we can share advice and tips we have learnt after losing our sight. Our dogs socialise too, which is lovely for them.”

Participant at Portsmouth Libraries

Tips

- ✓ Clear publicity can help people decide if Reading Friends is for them
- ✓ Ask why or how they got involved
- ✓ Ask what they thought at the end of a session
- ✓ Being open to change if people would like to do things differently

“I really enjoy The Reading Friends group where I can meet people (now friends) with similar struggles, it was such a shock losing my sight and I have found so much help and support within the group, even sharing tips on RNIB and phones, TV etc.”

Participant at Portsmouth Libraries.

Planning Reading Friends

Reading Friends is an adaptable programme. Sessions can be run in groups or one-to-one – in person, online or over the phone. The best way to run Reading Friends will depend on what people prefer and what you can provide. Reading Friends has a bank of resources and a project toolkit to support. Below are specific considerations when working with people who are blind or visually impaired.

In-person

People often prefer in-person where possible. It's easier to connect with others and you can showcase library resources more easily, but some people may find it hard to get to the library if transport is difficult, or the library isn't accessible or familiar. You might need additional staff or volunteers to help people get to the room.

Telephone

You can reach people who can't leave their house. It's accessible with no visual distractions and time-efficient for most people, but you need a telephone conferencing system for groups which is easy for people to join and ideally free to participants.

Online

You can reach people who can't leave their house. It's useful for those with digital skills and accessibility functions on their computer like screen readers. People may have some sight and prefer to see others, but not everyone has a device, online access, or the digital skills.

“Discovering a new way of delivering reading related activities to people who cannot get to a library or use a computer [...] participants continue to enjoy meeting with others – who have now become friends – in the comfort of their own homes.”

*Library Staff at
Norfolk Library and
Information Service*



Practical considerations

In person sessions

A good way to start thinking about this is to do a walk-through as though you are a first-time visitor and consider what visiting your library is like for a visually impaired library user. For example:

- ☐ How close do you have to get to your library to see the entrance?
- ☐ How visible is the signage to someone with a visual impairment?
- ☐ What could be done to make the entrance more welcoming?
- ☐ Is the direction into the library clutter-free?
- ☐ What obstacles might there be and can you address these?
- ☐ Is it clear where to get help?
- ☐ Are library staff/volunteers clearly in view and identifiable?

“It has enhanced my life being part of the Reading Friends group.”

*Participant at
Portsmouth Libraries*

For more suggestions read [Navigating the Library Guide](#) on the [Reading Sight website](#). After your initial review, there will be things you can do straightaway, and others that require input from colleagues or time to resolve. Staff/volunteers at the entrance to meet participants or a pull-up banner/large print signs can help guide people.

Online or by phone

When running sessions online or by phone it's important to practise in advance with accessibility in mind. Check the settings and functions to see what's available or if there are any you might want to disable. Here are some considerations to think about:

- ☐ Do you have a telephone or video conferencing system you can use?
- ☐ Will your staff/volunteers need practise, training or to shadow someone using it?
- ☐ Who is the best person to manage the admin to set up the meeting, let people know how to join and send a reminder?
- ☐ The first session may take longer if people need support joining – is there someone who can be on stand-by to help one-to-one?
- ☐ People may want to join an online meeting by phone – remember to give that option

What space will you use?

In-person

Select a space that is accessible, with room to manoeuvre. As with all events you'll want to run a risk assessment and consider what hazards, if any, there are at ground or head height, and see how these might be addressed. Choose an area that's:

- Comfortable, welcoming and accessible
- Quiet with no distractions so you can hear each other
- Well-lit and has appropriate seating
- Avoid space where there's glare from the lighting as this can cause pain for people with visual impairments
- Remember to allow extra space around obstacles, and ensure the area is free from clutter

Online or by phone

People will be in their own homes, but it's still worth considering their environment and whether it's comfortable and quiet and they have what they need to support them. It may be that their phone or computer is in an awkward location or holding a phone or tablet isn't comfortable for long periods of time. Looking at a screen might hurt their eyes.



“ Being a member of this reading group has and still is a fundamental part of my reading experience as a vision impaired person. I enjoy the varied discussions and topics our book choices produce every month via telephone, which brings the group members together no matter the location. ”

Participant at Wiltshire Libraries

Tips

- ✓ An initial chat helps to check if there's a quiet space or any specific requirements
- ✓ Check people are comfortable, or if you/they need to make any changes
- ✓ Make sure people know they can move around or change position if needed

Promotion and publicity

If running a group specifically targeted to those with a visual impairment, make expectations clear through advertising and promotion. This helps you reach the right people and tailor sessions and support appropriately. Running an inclusive, mixed group where some members may have a visual impairment or another condition/illness, can help connect visually impaired people with their local community.

Both targeted and mixed ability groups have worked successfully as flexibility and inclusion are at the heart of Reading Friends.

“By running such inclusive groups, it meant that literally anyone could join and enjoy reading (even if they can’t read themselves) and give them the opportunity to make new friends.”

Library staff at Lancashire Libraries

The strongest form of library promotion has been word-of-mouth so make sure colleagues, volunteers and other libraries spread the word. Useful referral routes have been:

- Phone calls to home library service customers
- Partnerships (see below for more information)
- Opticians or GP surgeries
- Local Eye Care Liaison Officers (ECLOs) who are based in hospitals
- Social prescribers (also known as link workers or community navigators/connectors)
- Library newsletters
- Council pathways like hearing and vision teams, housing teams or adult social care
- Social media



Tips

- ✓ Short, welcoming, and friendly publicity with an email/phone number to chat more
- ✓ Clearly mention the group is for visually impaired people if running a targeted group, or that it's for everyone if running a mixed group
- ✓ Print material on A4 or A3, so the font is larger – size 16-18 is recommended

The benefits of local community partnerships

There are many benefits of partnering with local organisations and they've been important for some library authorities to work successfully with visually impaired people, for example:

- 🔗 Promoting and referring people
- 🔗 Partnering to provide Reading Friends to existing groups
- 🔗 Joining sessions to help and support people
- 🔗 Provide support, advice, or training for your staff or volunteers – possibly sighted guide training or 'simulation spectacles' imitating common eye conditions
- 🔗 Potential for joint fundraising or funding bids
 - You could help them access council grants to support with audio book subscriptions and costs to hold groups in library spaces
 - They could help you access funding available only to voluntary sector organisations

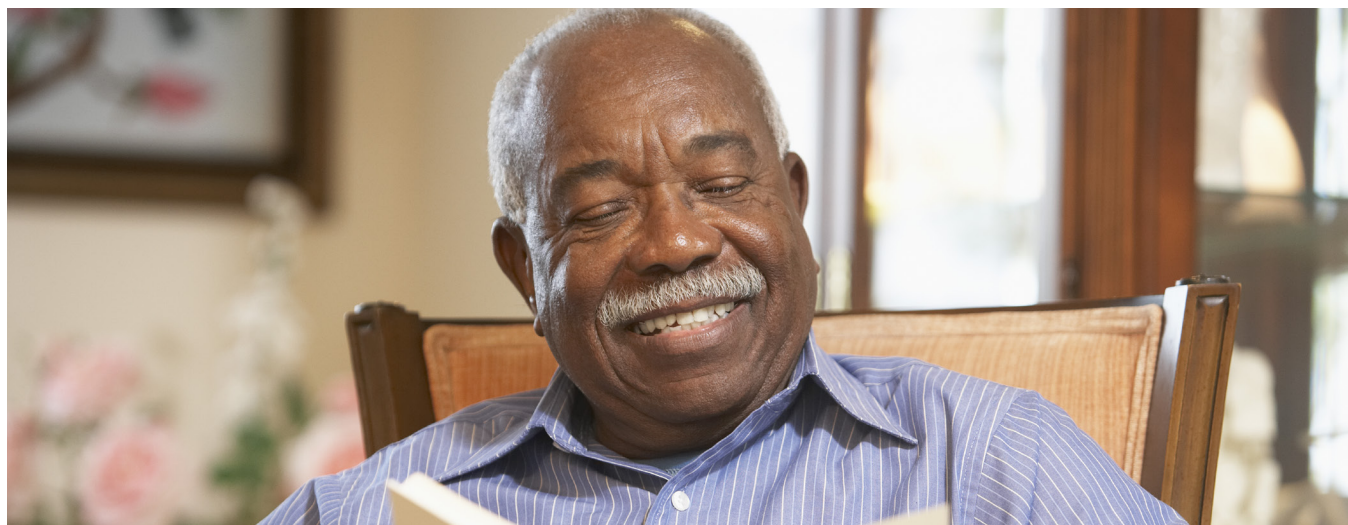
Tips

- ✓ Find out what charities/ community groups are in your local community for visual impairment – a quick search online is a good place to start
- ✓ Arrange a chat to see what would mutually benefit you both
- ✓ Keep in touch – good communication is the key to great partnerships!

Promotion through partners

Partners can be great referral routes and have helped libraries in many ways, for example:

- 🔗 Speaking directly to people or helping identify those who could benefit
- 🔗 Promoting in newsletters, Facebook groups, networks, or through other contacts
- 🔗 Sharing leaflets, flyers, or posters
- 🔗 Identifying opportunities to incorporate reading into existing groups



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Running Reading Friends

Who will run the group?

You may be the person responsible for delivering the Vision and Print Impaired Promise in your library service, or for running reading events in general. It's a good idea to ensure library staff know how to support the visually impaired community. The Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise training module accessible via [Libraries Connected Learning Pool](#) site provides support. Share information from the reading sight pack and website where needed.

It's important to have the right people running sessions when working with people who need extra support. They should be understanding and compassionate but may need additional support such as meetings or training to feel confident.

// The sessions have made a difference to those involved and participants have started to take ownership of the group and lead conversations, with many new friendships forming. //

Library staff at [Lancashire Libraries](#)

// People are more open-minded about what [visually impaired] people can do. //

Vision Norfolk who work in partnership with Norfolk Library and Information Service

Tips

- ✓ Use the Libraries Connected Learning Pool training to support library staff
- ✓ Use/adapt the Reading Friends role description to make sure expectations are clear, whether staff or volunteers
- ✓ Meet regularly with those running sessions to ask if they need support or training
- ✓ Ask participants how their visual impairment affects them to assess their support needs
- ✓ Importantly – remember disabilities do not define someone – get to know them as a person



Planning a Reading Friends session

In any group you run, someone may have health considerations, especially sight or hearing loss, so always have accessibility in mind. A few good practice considerations:

- Have at least two people to support the group
- One person can provide 'audio' to describe what's going on or if something has been shown on screen – for example, if someone shows they want to speak, "Ash has just put his hand up" or "Hanan's cat just walked in front of the camera"
- Keeping group sizes small has worked well – at around six to ten people – remembering that not everyone will be able to attend every session

// We all love the way the conversation goes beyond the specific book. We have had deep conversations about how we choose what we read, why some books are award-winning and others less so, and other similar conversations. //

Library staff at Wiltshire Libraries

Generally, Reading Friends sessions are 'in the moment' without participants having to read in advance, therefore reading aloud or shared reading work well with a visually impaired group or mixed ability groups. However, people may like reading materials sent to them.

// Lovely, because of reading about what I like. Farming and that. The books, the stories are fantastic. //

Participant at Norfolk Library and Information Service

Things to think about before you run a session:

Tips

- ✓ The Reading Friends matching questionnaire helps to find out more about someone
- ✓ Use interests as a starting point for choosing reading materials or themes
- ✓ Take extra time to prepare for sessions if anyone would like extra support
- ✓ Consider a buddy system to support during sessions
- ✓ Ask what formats people prefer and make sure you know where to find them in the library or online such as large print, audiobooks (CD, MP3, memory stick or e-audio), e-books, braille
- ✓ If sending out materials, the Royal Mail scheme [Articles for the Blind](#) is free, but give enough time for them to be received in advance
- ✓ Familiarise yourself with accessibility functions on library reading apps such as [Libby](#) or [BorrowBox](#)
- ✓ Remind participants a few days before you plan to meet

During a session

It's important to get to know people and ask what they think, as this helps plan sessions and support individuals. Often over time, people will talk about their sight loss and groups support each other. Peer support is valuable and can help people's wellbeing, however, it's important to remember that Reading Friends isn't a specific support group. Signpost to appropriate information and services where needed. Working with a local sight loss organisation can help.

// I love the group as it is so friendly and we laugh a lot! I felt very isolated before and now feel I have true friends and support. //

Participant at Portsmouth Libraries

Things to think about during a session:

Tips

- ✓ Stay still when you speak rather than talking whilst walking
- ✓ Think about how you speak and try to be as clear as possible. Don't speak louder or slower as this can be patronising and make you harder to understand
- ✓ If you're reading, try to have an expressive and clear voice
- ✓ You can't rely on eye contact and body language to communicate so refer to people by name when asking for thoughts or opinions
- ✓ Introduce yourself and everyone in the group – wait until everyone has joined so there are no distractions
- ✓ Give each person a chance to contribute, referring to each person by name – over time people will often start to recognise voices as they get to know each other and you may not need such a formal structure
- ✓ Encourage quieter members to talk, or continue talking, if they wish
- ✓ Make sure people know what to do if they need to move/leave/use the toilet etc
- ✓ Check in with people regularly in case support needs change over time
- ✓ For online sessions, don't use chat box functions as they can be distracting if people have screen readers
- ✓ For online sessions, people may prefer to have cameras on or off – it's best for it to be a personal decision
- ✓ Ask what they thought – would they like to do the same or something different next time?
- ✓ Don't walk away or end a call or meeting without saying you're leaving

Communicating and engaging with visually impaired people

“Life is never just exactly the same as it was before.”

Participant at Norfolk Library and Information Service

Remember if someone is blind, it doesn't always mean they have no sight at all.

Guiding

Royal National Institute of Blind People have shared tips on guiding people with sight loss, useful for in-person sessions:

- ✓ Always offer assistance first, not everyone will need help
- ✓ Introduce yourself – ask where the person wants to go and how they wish to be guided
- ✓ Ensure you are one step ahead of the person you are guiding
- ✓ Give instructions where necessary but don't overdo it
- ✓ Give information about the people who are present and the environment as you move around
- ✓ Explain your actions, e.g.: “I'm going to pull open the door now”
- ✓ When approaching seating, tell the person where the seat is and guide their hand to the back and seat of the chair, so that they can sit down independently

Online

Online meetings can be great for people with some sight but remember to consider people with no sight. Describe anything visual if group members talk about people's backgrounds or want to show something, so everyone feels included.

Telephone

Staff or volunteers running telephone sessions might need more support than participants to communicate over the phone as they might not be used to facilitating conversations without seeing group members. Reading Friends has resources to support.

Capturing the difference Reading Friends has made

Reading Friends has developed its evaluation process to best capture impact from everyone involved. In addition, libraries have provided quotes and case studies for the website. Libraries are supported from The Reading Agency with:

- Guidance and good practice
- Evaluation tools to capture impact
- Evaluation summaries for each library authority taking part to show local impact
- Resources to help track how a project is going such as a project plan and diary



“The group has definitely added a purpose to my month and helped me to connect with people and feel less lonely, I feel more confident going out as I know there are others in the same situation that do this...It is fun to meet with everyone.”

Participant at Portsmouth Libraries