

# National Year of Reading (2008) in Birmingham

A summary of the processes and developments taken forward in Birmingham as a contribution to the 2008 Year of Reading.

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## 1. National context: implications for Birmingham

2008 was designated as a national year of reading with various campaigns to get more people reading more widely. As part of this, key national drivers included:

- A national drive to push up library membership and increase use of the variety of library resources.

In Birmingham there was already a rich network of library outlets, including mobile library services; a range of teenage reading groups and homework clubs in library sites; the Young Readers Festival and the Summer Reading Challenge; the ongoing 'Stories from the Web' site....but there was plenty of scope to reach new members.

- An expectation that schools would look afresh (during the year) at the opportunities they have, and can additionally create, for a wider enjoyment of reading.

In Birmingham many schools already created regular opportunities for children and young people to talk about what they are reading; held activities within and beyond the school day for reading a wide range of texts; had strong links with library services; promoted the value of reading at home....but there was plenty of scope to do more.

- Within the broad intentions of the year there were also a number of target groups where it was felt that more might be done to engage with reading for a range of purposes. These groups included:

- Boys in general;
- Pupils at Key Stage 3;
- Children and young people who are dyslexic; who are blind/partially sighted;
- White boys in disadvantaged areas;
- Younger Bangladeshi and Pakistani children;
- Looked after children

In Birmingham varying amounts of work was being undertaken with these groups through mainstream services.....but, certainly, with a lot of scope to do more.

- A series of national adverts, promotions and campaigns

In previous experiences of national 'years'/campaigns etc there has been too much of a sense of Birmingham staff and organisations being called on, at short notice, to do 'national' events in Birmingham, with little or no connections to what was already in place or being developed within the city. Birmingham was initially wary of any such repeated experiences.....but, at the same time, was keen to embrace any opportunities the profile of the Year might give to move our own priorities forward.

## 2. 2008: Year of Reading in Birmingham

A wide range of reading development activities had already taken place in the fifteen years prior to the National Year of Reading (A summary review of progress made to 2006/7 is attached as [Appendix 1](#)) and these were carried forward in 2008. There were specific aspects of Birmingham's core

skills development framework that we wanted to accelerate or strengthen using the momentum created by the national year of reading.

Partnership working across a range of agencies was already well established. It didn't work perfectly all the time but there were strong mechanisms that allowed developments to be cross-referenced with each other. There were robust planning arrangements in place around the Children and Young People Plan, the Local Area Agreement etc and it was a relatively straightforward task to ensure that reading developments in 2008 were taken forward within those planning frameworks.

Whilst there were overall levels of reading (across the city as a whole) that made us better placed than other comparable cities/authorities, there was a wide variation within those whole-city figures. There were distinct areas and communities that had less engagement with reading for a range of purposes, and developments in 2008 contributed to ongoing work to identify 'hot spots' and closing the gaps that exist across neighbourhoods.

### **3. National Year of Reading network and planned developments: Birmingham**

The Core Skills Development Partnership had already (since 1994) maintained the function of giving shape and momentum to developments in reading, writing, speaking and listening across a range of agencies in Birmingham. There was a whole-city 'direction of travel' framework sketched out to 2011 (see [Appendix 2](#)) and the national year of reading was seen as a way of giving acceleration and breadth to specific developments within this framework.

Through the existing working relationships it was fairly simple to bring together a network of people in planning/development roles across the city, who were already involved in reading/literacy development, in a series of joint discussions focused on the opportunities created by the Year of Reading. This wasn't described (or perceived) as a 'steering group' but as a series of 'expert conversations'. This group of people included:

- Head of family learning
- Library Services senior manager
- Library reading development worker (who is also the National Year of Reading library link between the city and national library-focused drivers)
- Core Skills Development manager
- Planning and performance officer – Directorate of Children, Young People and Families
- Skills for Life development worker – Jobcentre Plus
- Workforce/community development staff – Business in the Community
- Birmingham Book festival
- Book Communications – a book/reading private sector agency in Birmingham
- Skills for Life development manager – Learning and Skills Council

- Representative from VCS Matters, the voluntary/community sector network linked into children and young people planning in the city.

As an extension from this 'central' network, other conversations were stimulated between:

- community librarians from the 41 libraries in Birmingham
- literacy consultants and advisers within School Effectiveness division of the local authority
- staff from a range of agencies within the numerous clusters of agencies in localities across Birmingham

Beyond that, a regular set of structured electronic communications were promoted:

- to key intermediaries in the network of agencies, for them to forward on as email updates within their services
- as part of the agreed modes of communication with schools across the city, via e-briefings (whilst, at the same time, not adding to the communication burden on schools)
- within existing networks of organisations e.g. across the network of more than 2000 voluntary/community organisations via Birmingham Voluntary Service Council's own communications
- via existing web pages – Birmingham Grid for Learning; Birmingham City Council pages etc.

The early 'offer' from this coordinating group was that:

- a) Opportunities would be created to promote possibilities opened up by the year of reading: getting more organisations to see what they can do
- b) More parents would be supported to have the skills and opportunities to support reading for themselves and with their families
- c) Common reoccurring messages would be agreed and these 'reading messages' would go out, as widely as possible
- d) Local extended cluster activities would include wider library services/opportunities
- e) Any newly developing activity would be looked at as a potential route to library services/membership – Library membership will go up.
- f) Schools would be encouraged to review what they do – Schools will do more.
- g) Nationally-produced information would be shared across, opened out, spread around
- h) Some dispersed knowledge would be pulled into one place and repackaged for wider use; increasing the common focus on reading
- i) There would be some promotion under the banner of 'made in Birmingham', and some promotion of positive contributions of young people.
- j) More businesses would do more to promote reading by their workforce (including written public services)
- k) There would be development of more community-level activity re reading

- l) Attempts would be made to create more opportunities for reading in common; sharing reading experiences – Reading would be more of a talking point.

#### **4. Partnership arrangements and links to planning mechanisms**

At the beginning of the Year, the existing network of reference contacts across various agencies worked effectively. It was least strong in its connections into health structures; children's centres; arts/galleries/media organisations, and into housing associations. The impetus of the Year of Reading was used to try to strengthen these cross-linkages.

In terms of the major agencies involved, the year was used to attempt to rationalise some of the range of developments that had been put in place over the years and, where seen as 'disconnected projects', to try to build these activities into mainstream activity via schools, libraries, early years providers, businesses etc. The Year was seen as a 'consolidating energies' opportunity; as an opportunity to see joint ways forward, and as a stimulus of new relationships – but avoided generating any further disconnected 'bids/projects' approaches.

There wasn't a separate 'Year of Reading' Plan as such – the aim was to strengthen the reading/writing developments possible through existing planning mechanisms. [In the overall context of Local Authorities being encouraged to reduce the number of separate 'plans'; and to carry things forward as part of one coherent approach].

The intentions around the Year of Reading were carried forward within the framework of existing plans, strategies and agreements. These include:

- Birmingham Sustainable Community Strategy
- Birmingham Children and Young People's Plan
- Birmingham Local Area Agreement
- Birmingham Library Services Plan
- Skills for Life framework: West Midlands

As one example: The Local Authority already had mechanisms in place to reassure the Children and Young People's Board that its various planned outcomes were attainable. One area of development that had been identified as needing to be strengthened was the 'enjoy' aspects of the 'Enjoy and Achieve' aspirations for bringing about change for children in Birmingham. The 2008 developments to encourage a wider appreciation of reading across large numbers of people were seen as supporting this 'enjoyment' aspect as much as supporting a raising of levels of reading skills.

Early in 2008, a report was taken to the Children and Young People's Board, outlining the purposes of the Year of Reading; the challenges that Birmingham wanted to emphasise in 2008; and to get endorsement from the agencies that make up the Children and Young People's Board. The report was also sent to the organisations that make up Birmingham's Strategic Partnership. Through this process the strategic leaders of the

organisations broadly recognising and endorsing the overall direction of the National Year of Reading included Birmingham City Council, 3 Health Primary Care Trusts, Learning and Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus, police, Voluntary Service Council etc. This report is included as [Appendix 3](#).

## **5. Challenges to be addressed within 2008, using the momentum of the National Year of Reading**

The multi-agency reference group identified a number of aspirations/puzzles that they wished to promote for as many agencies as possible to address collaboratively in 2008. These were:

Challenge 1: Increase library usage as much as possible

Challenge 2: All schools and children's centres review and extend their reading activities, particularly activities beyond the formal curriculum

Challenge 3: Deliver a set of recurring messages via as many routes as possible, to add to the culture of reading

Challenge 4: Clarify the network of support and development activities that are working to produce improved reading outcomes with people, identifying gaps and overlaps – but particularly identifying where additional cross linkages can strengthen existing activities

Challenge 5: Stimulate a wider section of the community to engage with text-based activities – particularly in areas where levels of reading activity and ability are below city averages

Challenge 6: Encourage greater engagement of the private sector with reading and writing developments

Challenge 7: Use the National Year of Reading 2008 as a useful way of adding additional momentum to developments already outlined in plans across the 2007-2011 period

Addressing these challenges attempted to 'shift the mean' i.e. change the conditions experienced by the bulk of the population. At the same time, emphasis was put on the following groups:

- children 0-5, particularly those in disadvantaged situations
- boys aged 6-14 in areas of deprivation; particularly white working class boys at ages 11-14
- communities represented by hotspots of reading inactivity
- looked after children
- children/young people with learning difficulties and disabilities
- adults with literacy levels below Level 1

### Activities to meet the 2008 challenges

In order to produce the scale of change anticipated, each of the challenges identified as needing extra emphasis in 2008 had an associated set of activities/commitments from major service developments. These are included as [Appendix 4](#).

## **6. Communications**

- (a) A local communication strategy, for Year of Reading information, was agreed. This included the wide use of a standard briefing sheet outlining the purposes of the Year and the general ideas of the kinds of activity any

organisation might undertake during the year. This included:

- (i) Bullet points on national Year of Reading key ideas (for incorporation into any appropriate opportunity). These included:
- 2008 has been designated, across government, as the year where more will be done to get a broader range of people reading a wider range of material (for a variety of purposes)
  - Key national drives during the year will be (a) a campaign to boost library membership and usage; (b) getting more people to volunteer (in a wide variety of ways)
  - Birmingham is able to draw on a substantial set of developments over recent years – there is much already on offer. Many of the national developments were ‘made in Birmingham’. The challenge, for Birmingham, is not to start to clutter the landscape with lots of disconnected project work – but to get maximum gain from what we already have: broadening uptake by some of our key target groups; widening the appeal and effectiveness; linking opportunities more closely to the bigger intentions of the Brighter Futures aspirations
  - The momentum that a ‘national year of ...’ offers us will be used to take developments forward across a range of agencies in the city: not just schools, not just libraries; not just family learning – but including activity across business networks; across voluntary/community organisations; via the book trade and private sector organisations connected to reading development; and so on
  - As well as looking for changes across a number of systems and networks – there will be the continuing need to look at particular localities/neighbourhoods/communities where reading is not seen as a valued activity to the extent that it is elsewhere – and to puzzle over why this might be and see what might be changed.
- (ii) Ideas that any organisation might take forward as its collective contribution to fostering ‘more reading, of more things, in more ways, by more people’, such as:
- book exchanges; book loans at labelled points within buildings
  - internal communications carrying the reading messages (already done via Birmingham Grid for Learning; e-briefings; etc etc ...); reading messages added at the end of emails.
  - using own structures to ‘thicken’ the links to other opportunities (schools/children’s centres encouraged to link to libraries, to use library services such as Stories from the Web; Young Readers festival; Summer Reading Challenge; Schools Library Service etc)
  - workforce encouraged to share what they are reading; book groups; reading groups
  - book collections/book donations (e.g. to looked after children; to hostels; to children’s hospitals etc)
  - workforce encouraged to use local libraries (and to encourage their own family members to do so)

- (b) A set of common messages were agreed. These were circulated across the key network of contacts for them to choose from within their own promotional materials. The messages are shown in [Appendix 5a](#)
- (c) Regular channels were used to promote these standard communications:
- e-update out through key contacts (reaching more than 1,000 organisations)
  - e-briefing to Children’s Services staff and 500 schools/settings
  - e-link to 47 libraries
  - e-article in voluntary sector bulletin (to more than 600 voluntary/community groups)
- (d) Use was also made of occasional coverage:
- several articles started to appear in local media. Examples of such publicity are included in [Appendix 5b](#)
  - specially designed street posters were used to promote the ‘read anything; read anywhere’ intention of the Year (see [Appendix 5c](#)).

## **7. Existing Activities and Events**

There were a number of ‘business as usual’ ongoing events that, in 2008, were badged as National Year of Reading activity:

- School/Young People Poetry Slam competitions
- Young Readers Festival
- Summer Reading Challenge
- Stories from the Web
- Bookstart (and later varieties)
- Reading Groups; Teenage Reading Groups
- Writers/poets into schools/into prison etc
- School library service/school Key Stage 3 book Challenge
- Existing activities to develop reading activities in priority wards (via Children’s Fund)
- Poet Laureate and Young Poet Laureate
- Writing workshops; storytelling/performance sessions etc taken forward

Given the multicultural, disadvantaged nature of many areas of Birmingham most of these services were already working with substantial numbers of the groups that were Year of Reading target groups, e.g. Bookstart in Birmingham reaches more than 11,000 families each year, with more than 4,000 of these being Pakistani/Bangladeshi parents and children.

## **8. A review was undertaken mid year, to indicate the progress being made:**

The reference group considered the extent to which the extra emphasis had (by September 2008):

- helped Birmingham address the various challenges it has committed itself to
- strengthened or extended the cross-linkages between the range of reading development activities

- taken the city nearer to producing better, planned outcomes for large numbers of people.

This 'light-touch' internal review demonstrated that:

a) Library Service developments:

- There has been higher than usual increased library membership – returns show a substantial increase in new members each month.
- Libraries had been consistently highlighting library stock related to the monthly themes, using specifically provided display stands used to bring relevant stock to 'front of house' promotion in each library.
- Substantial local links had been made or built on, building local library opportunities more strongly into local networks of 'extended cluster' activities (reported in more detail later)
- Schools were more aware of existing library activities (e.g. Stories from the Web; Young Readers; Summer Reading Challenge etc)
- Some libraries were self-assessing against a checklist of 'National Year of Reading intentions' generated at an early awareness day for library staff (see [Appendix 6](#))

b) Getting messages out:

- Existing websites/intranets/internal communications systems had been used to carry the Year of Reading information (logos; link to national website/national information; link to e-briefings/updates, local 'messages' etc)
- A wider range of organisations and venues now see that there are things they could do to carry the Year forward (i.e. not just a centrally-led set of developments): and schools had been prompted to see the year as a chance for them to review their library/book corners; their use of Schools Library Service; their book activities/book events; their ways of increasing 'talking about reading'
- Jobcentre Plus had been able to promote reading ideas to staff but were restricted in what they could pass on to customers. They had set up book boxes/reading boxes/book swaps etc in staff areas including some copies of Quick Reads (short books written by professional writers, aimed at those who needed encouraging into reading) and BBC RaW kits for workplaces; some library enrolment cards were included in these boxes.
- Year of Reading section created on Birmingham Grid for Learning – enables stronger links from library service activities to all schools; schools able to send in e-postcards of ideas

c) Promotion of 'one book ...'; 'things to read in common ...':

- On Birmingham City Council's website was a 'Book for Birmingham' link. This aimed to capture the reading choices of people in Birmingham. People were invited to nominate books in different sections (e.g. 'books that made me laugh; made me cry; books I'd recommend to a friend). Nominations could be made any time up to 17<sup>th</sup> August – after that there was an opportunity to vote on the

list to find the best recommended Book for Birmingham (see [Appendix 7](#)).

- A small number of new reading groups had been established. In one example the library service supporting a housebound readers group – who, at an agreed time each month, communicate with each other by phone about what they have read from a selection of books. (This added to the wide range of existing teenage reading groups, general reading groups, black family reading group, Jewish reading group etc).
- Quick Reads were being built into ongoing activities (e.g. available up to 1,500 parents via family literacy activities; built into Jobcentre Plus book-box activities)
- ‘The Words the Thing’ ([www.thewordsthething.org.uk](http://www.thewordsthething.org.uk)) was going well. Tales/poems had been put on a website for anyone to get. These had circulated rapidly. It was interesting to note how far they had gone worldwide, and how deeply they had got into Birmingham and reached a broad new audience.
- As well as promoting their usual ‘3 for 2’; ‘new titles’; ‘recommended reads’ etc Waterstones, as part of their contribution to the Year of Reading, promoted ‘Writers Tables’ (a space set aside for the books of a well known writer, but also for books that writer feels they have been influenced by); Your Story (a chance for users of the bookshop to write their own very brief story and have this up in the store window ... alongside stories written specially by well known authors).
- Starbucks had a series of events planned – and had been giving away a series of taster booklets, (e.g. ‘The Knife of Never Letting Go’) in their coffee stores in the hope that it inspired coffee drinkers to share a love of reading with others – as part of the Year of Reading.

d) Work via voluntary/community organisations:

- Birmingham Voluntary Service Council Update magazine was used to carry features on the purposes of the Year of Reading and on the key messages, and to ask organisations in the voluntary sector to consider what they might contribute to reading development.
- Work via one of the key contact agencies, the private sector Book Communications, linked numbers of community organisations (in target areas) with local library services and with writers from Birmingham. This reached groups of people who did not habitually read, who were not regular library users etc.

e) Target groups. In addition to the ‘business as usual’ contact with these groups, there were some new developments:

- Visually impaired people:  
Via the reader development function of Birmingham Libraries a group of young people tested ‘Playaways’ (commercially available book recordings on MP3 players), and reported back on these. Libraries now carry a stock of Playaways.

– People with dyslexic traits:

An article 'What can be done everyday in every lesson' was circulated to further education providers and put on BGfL website and in e-bulletin to schools. It received very positive feedback from teachers and groups of learners. The intention was to indicate some of the simple, everyday ways that reading and learning could be made easier for large numbers of people without undermining the need for more specific support for a smaller number.

– Boys in general:

A toolkit 'Boys into Books' was produced during the Year of Reading by Birmingham School Library Service to encourage boys (aged 5-11 years) to read more (see [Appendix 8](#)).

f) 'Made in Birmingham'

– A list of writers in Birmingham/writing about Birmingham was prepared and circulated for any additions. Work is still ongoing, but it shows the extent to which Birmingham is a base for writers and writing. Part of the exercise was to begin to bring together the several various lists that different people had built up identifying writers willing to do sessions in schools, libraries and community groups.

– In order to capture the wealth of reading opportunities already available, and the wide range of developments taking place, the chance was taken to update the descriptions of all that is going on in Birmingham (i.e. the original set of descriptions in [Appendix 1](#)). This is an ever-developing attempt to show the range and variety of development work that has taken place, and continues to take place, in the city. It links loosely to the 'Proud of this City' element of the city's approach to community cohesion.

g) Monthly themes

A grid was circulated via the key coordinating contacts, for them to identify likely activity that organisations were planning to promote against each monthly theme (see [Appendix 9](#)). At the start of 2008 all libraries were given display stands with a header for each monthly theme and encouraged to bring relevant stock to front of house as part of a monthly promotion around that theme.

h) Culture change

The common messages went out widely – via internal documents; as signature messages on emails; in magazine articles; on street posters and so on. There was no attempt to measure the cumulative effect of these message-repeating – it was simply put 'out there' along with use of the Year of Reading logo.

The messages agreed as valuable ones to be selected and promoted were felt to be appropriate. An example of using the messages on a leaflet that twice went door-to-door to more than 200,000 householders is in [Appendix 10a](#). Use of the messages in an advert put three times

in the widely circulated voluntary sector 'update' magazine is in [Appendix 10b](#).

This quick review established the menu of things that could still be worked on during the remainder of 2008. These included:

- What other companies might do?
- Further work through community groups?
- More reading activities as part of the Book Festival?
- Final tidying up the list of writers who want to link with schools and libraries?
- Putting more Wikireadia articles on the national website?
- Identifying links into monthly themes: August – December?
- Establishing current state of play, and potential for developments, in work via Children's Centres?
- Work via adults/community services?
- Work with adult literacy providers re reading?
- A further bending of some of our mainstream activities to include more of the national Year of Reading target groups?
- More work via health?
- Clarify business reading volunteer models?

Even if not all of these were tackled during 2008, they would add to the ongoing reading agenda for the future.

## **9. Actions carried forward between mid year review and December 2008**

### **a) Via schools**

In addition to the regular e-briefings (to 450 schools/settings), a continuing series of update articles/links were put on a Year of Reading section on Birmingham Grid for Learning,

Schools were asked to contribute to a checklist 'Reading and Schools: Do you have all the angles covered?' Staff in several schools helped to refine this and feedback from more than twenty schools was that they had found it very helpful in prompting internal reflections on where their school was in relations to reading developments and provision. The checklist is attached as [Appendix 11](#).

### **b) Linking libraries into extended clusters of opportunity**

As part of the Children's Services localisation of support services all schools in Birmingham are part of local extended service clusters, together with other local agencies in that neighbourhood. Libraries were not consistently included as a recognised part of these local networks of opportunities for children and young people. As part of the National Year of Reading in Birmingham some local activities were supported in order to link local libraries more into the 41 local extended school clusters.

Individual examples of these activities included:

- Promoting library membership via local youth clubs. Link made to local youth work activities.

- 25 children (Year 5, i.e. aged around 10 years old) recruited as library motivators.....encouraging other children to read, spreading news about new books, to promote and explain library use..... becoming involved in stock selection. Ten training sessions included awareness of the role of libraries; the decisions around book selection; practical experience of library procedures etc.
- increased librarian visits to schools (resulting in increased contact with more than 200 children per month) to supplement existing visits by schools/children’s centres to library. Use of more sessions involving authors/storytellers/poets; using enhanced stock to target events for boys; work done intensively with small groups from target neighbourhoods. Resulted in 5% increase in library loans; highest ever take up of Summer Reading Challenge; new neighbourhood library established in community centre; stronger school/library/family links.
- Doubled frequency of sessions of 0-3’s and their carers; use of storyteller; linked across to nearby children’s centre toy library. Resulted in library use by more families of young children.
- Using a book quiz model Year 5 children in eight primary schools encouraged to read four books. This sparked off interests in reading in boys.....children took to quizzing each other in breaks etc. At the semi-final stage two more books were introduced with a further two being introduced for finals.
- Library, secondary school and local youth club organised workshops with local author/poet to get teenagers thinking about the life they want to live, and confronting issues of gangs/violence/vandalism etc....making use of graphic novels. Highlighted a number of issues to be taken forward by the young people.
- Over a two week focused period, 76 reading sessions were held with 2,200 children in the locality. Volunteer readers were recruited from police, leisure organisations, Year 10 (i.e. aged around 15 years old) pupils from local secondary school, local authority workers in the area and so on. Library staff provided an input on storytelling and brought in an author/illustrator to create a mural to maintain an ongoing interest. The library increased its stock of the most popular books.
- Pupils from two schools worked together with a writer to produce a booklet for new parents and pupils which gave information on both schools. The pupils used a special software programme to write the book, which includes symbols as well as words for those who don’t speak or read English.
- School and library linking together and using a performance poet to work with 86 children from Year 4 (i.e. aged around 9 years old) as a conclusion to local school developments to support the national Year of Reading.

These separate examples were fed into a broader list of the activities (drawn from discussions with schools, cluster coordinators, libraries and

other organisations) that demonstrate the fuller range of things that cluster organisations were already doing (as part of their ongoing activities) to contribute to increased local activity to support reading for enjoyment and for specific purposes. The list is a fairly extensive one, and there are quite likely to be other things that will be added in the future. It does begin to indicate the menu of localised activities for children and young people (and adult learners in some cases) that clusters of local services can draw on when doing future planning. The current menu includes:

- Local adult learning provision ensures that learners have opportunity to join library; to encourage relatives/friends to join; and to know about wider library services available for their families.
- Adult teachers provide reading for enjoyment
- Reading/writing support activities are organised out of school hours in the library or other community venue. Library/school (or cluster of schools) links around e.g. poetry or particular themes as the basis for out-of-school activities
- Schools ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to join the library (and know about wider library services activities) and encourage pupils to use library services in their own time
- Extra holiday activities in libraries; local holiday/summer/play activities include opportunities to engage with reading/writing/storytelling/drama etc – with links to Summer Reading Challenge; Stories from the Web etc; library loan boxes for holiday schemes
- Links strengthened between library and children’s centre/ outreach worker/ parenting support adviser etc; Library satellite activity established in community venues where people already go (e.g. Children’s Centre; Community Centre);
- Additional cluster based reading events; reading challenges (alongside library activities such as Young Readers Festival, Summer Reading Challenge; Stories from the Web etc); Children’s/Family/Teenage book groups established as part of extended activities; additional young readers competitions/activities/events (across school/youth services/library); Breakfast reading clubs
- Local community events used to promote ‘join your local library’; ‘get into reading’ messages
- Voluntary sector activities organised by/for young people around drama, scriptwriting; reading/writing/discussing activities linked to theatre visit; films; creative arts
- Local funding/school surpluses used to improve school libraries; young people’s stock choice in community library etc
- Increased peer mentors/reading partner activities e.g. across Key Stages
- Targeting of specific groups (11-14 year old boys; children and young people with learning difficulties/disabled/dyslexia; blind/partially sighted children and young people; Pakistani/Bangladeshi children 0-4 etc); specific activities for young

people at risk; looked after children (or existing library activities opened up more to these young people)

- Training local adults in storytelling skills
- Family activities based on library stock; more sessions to encourage fathers to use libraries with children
- Book boxes in schools and other settings, for book loans to families – alongside an emphasis on the importance of reading at home/parents hearing children read.

Whilst this list may seem quite comprehensive, actual opportunities vary considerably across the various parts of the city. The information was circulated prior to the 2009 planning cycle so that local development planning could make use of it.

#### c) Producing communities of readers

This was part of a national activity to help teachers understand the significance of reading for pleasure in the development of young readers. It sought to help teachers widening their knowledge of children's literature; develop confidence and skilful use of literature in the classroom; understand the value of becoming a Reading Teacher: a teacher who reads and a reader who teaches.

Activities included reading bags; individual reading plans; creating class/school displays of recommended books; pupil reading groups; book presentations; pupil research groups; book blogs; paired reading with younger pupils.

A 'Reading for Pleasure' Network, for those teachers in Birmingham who really want to move this agenda forward in their schools has been established with more than 30 teachers having registered.

#### d) Birmingham Story Spinner development

This aimed to use oral tradition as a link between schools, homes and communities using a commercially-available set of DVDs (a compilation of carefully chosen stories drawn from around the world told by a professional storyteller). It was based on the view that in an age of multimodality and the prevalence of screens, young people may rarely hear the rhythms and cadences of language read aloud without the distractions of visual stimuli. Listening to and telling stories offered a chance to re-focus on the power of language to paint rich pictures in the mind.

Schools involved were provided with a full pack of DVDs for the duration of the work. The activity was a joint initiative between the School Effectiveness Division and Birmingham Library Services.

As the activity progressed it linked with the National Year of Reading 'storytelling' theme for October, with Stories from the Web recording storytellers from a wide range of cultures to provide a permanent online collection for children, young people, families and adults.

e) Further work via networks of voluntary organisations

Community organisations, in 'low reading levels' areas of the city, were worked with. Links were made with authors/writers and with local libraries. Book-based activities were established with families within the communities. Some of the activity included work at the ground of one of the city's football clubs.

Each of the libraries hosted a family open day to introduce community group members to existing library services via a range of activities and events, for example craft activities, story telling sessions etc. At the sessions library staff talked to participants about their family learning needs, and what the library could do to support them. Taster sessions at the annual Young Readers festival were organised using the community links established.

Each library was tasked with further looking at the community groups in their area and considering how the library service might work with them in a flexible way to develop programme activities based on the needs jointly identified through the community groups and the library service.

f) The 2008 Birmingham Book Festival badged a number of its events with the Year of Reading logo. These included, amongst others:

- A keynote talk by philosopher A.C. Grayling on the subject of 'The Good Reader and The World: More reasons why reading matters'. This was given to an audience of over 150 people in Birmingham and was then repeated for a national audience, in London, via the Royal Society of Arts.
- A Birmingham writers' networking day which drew in many of the established writers living and working in the city. The day was focused on professional development and included inputs from the BBC, from Birmingham Rep. Theatre, the Arvon Foundation, the Writers Guild, the National Academy of Writers and others.

g) Developments via health organisations

A seminar for health planners and managers, covering a variety of themes around reading for health improvements, was held at the Postgraduate Centre at one of the city's major hospitals. This led to the refinement of a menu of 'health and reading' possibilities ([Appendix 12](#)) and was followed by some service-specific meetings about training staff in the mental health trust; plans for the establishment of a number of reading/book focused groups amongst mental health service users; the potential to extend reading/writing activity with hospital patients with long-term illnesses (based on a current group of cancer patients who had produced writing based on their common experiences); the opening up of potential development via the Health and Well Being Partnership and the strands of the Local Area Agreement it was responsible for; and a proposal for the library service to work via community groups that had a health focus to establish local reading groups in a number of priority locations.

h) Additional author/writer sessions

The reader development part of Birmingham Library already arranged regular sessions for writers to talk about their books (alongside similar sessions organised by the various bookstores etc). During the June-December 2008 period there was a noticeable increase in the number and range of such sessions, all of which were well attended. The publicity for these sessions went to new audiences (e.g. staff in the Jobcentre Plus offices across the city) because of the links amongst the key coordinating contacts' group.

i) Looked After Children

Building on previous developments, work was done to strengthen links between foster families, libraries, Waterstones and family learning activities; and to use writer visits to establish library collections in each children's home as well as enabling looked after children to build up their own personal collection of books.

Alongside reading-focused developments undertaken on behalf of the Looked After Children's Education Support section of the Local Authority, Birmingham was due, towards the end of the Year, to sign up to the Letterbox Club whereby children in care (aged 7-11) receive a parcel of books and activities each month for six months, sent directly to their address.

**10. 2009: 'Reading for Life' – What next for Birmingham?**

The network of contacts across the city worked together before the National Year of Reading; was somewhat strengthened and extended in 2008; and will be able to make things on in 2009.

The major local development intentions of 2008 were fulfilled to the extent that:

- There was a broad-based, several-agency, multi level push on the values of reading as an enjoyable activity that has links to a range of wellbeing improvements for people.
- No single agency was over-identified with the developments. Reading was not over-defined as schools only, or libraries only, or book publishers only.
- Where there were events these were mostly seen as extensions to existing menus of opportunities; things that can be fed into ongoing planning and development.
- A good balance was maintained between contributing to national emphases and taking forward city priorities.
- Library usage increased more than would have been expected.
- Agencies in local communities connected together more around reading development activities.

At the end of the year there were still some clear things still to be addressed; including:

- A better understanding of opportunities in 'hotspot' neighbourhoods.
- Development threads (notably around early years, families.....) where there are too many disconnected activities (often resulting from relatively disconnected national 'project' developments).
- Promoting reading amongst adults with lower reading skills/habits.
- Enhancing reading skills of adult and children who are recent arrivals and whose first language is not English.
- Focusing on writing skills as an additional way to strengthen reading habits and skills.
- Exploring opportunities for reading development in adult care services; health services; further education providers etc.
- Further bending of mainstream services towards target groups.

These should form part of the ongoing agenda in 2009.

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