

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

Change your story

# **Transforming literacy through trusted local voices**

**Alasdair Flint**

**June 2024**

## Key findings

Literacy Champions – National Literacy Trust community volunteers raising awareness of the importance of literacy – are helping to make a difference in some of the most disadvantaged communities nationally:

- Literacy Champions are credible advocates who reflect the communities they support: nearly a third (30%) of neighbourhoods in areas with National Literacy Trust Hubs are in the 10% most deprived nationally, matched by the nearly third (30%) of volunteers who live in neighbourhoods that are also in the top 10% of those that are most deprived. 62% of volunteers also occupy positions of trust in their communities, whether they work in community organisations or in settings and libraries.
- The activities delivered by Literacy Champions clearly benefit those who participate. 69% said they were more likely to read having taken part in activities with a volunteer and 50% said they were more likely to read with their family. Participants also became advocates for literacy themselves after working with the volunteers, with 88% reporting they were more confident in supporting the reading and writing of those around them.
- Literacy Champions themselves are confident in the impact of their activities, with 95% believing that they have encouraged others to engage with literacy. More specifically, 89% said they had modelled positive literacy behaviours and 94% said they helped their community access books and other resources.
- Literacy Champions' skills and confidence to advocate for literacy grew as they volunteered. 92% said they were more aware of how best to support literacy in their community, while 82% said their confidence in delivering informal literacy provision had increased.

## Introduction

Literacy Champions is a National Literacy Trust community volunteering programme that seeks to raise awareness of the importance of literacy in underserved communities across the country. Rather than imposing a solution, volunteers are given the knowledge, confidence and skills to support people in their community, and are encouraged to find solutions that work for those around them. Volunteers are recruited from the communities we work with and trained to better understand their local literacy challenges and how to deliver informal activities to tackle them. They then support existing literacy projects or establish small-scale

projects of their own. The form these projects take is intentionally open-ended and includes roles and projects such as:

- Volunteering at or organising literacy events and activities
- Running community libraries and book swaps
- Distributing books and resources
- Creating and delivering content to spread key messages online
- Running book groups and storytelling circles

Established by the National Literacy Trust in 2017, the programme now runs across all the National Literacy Trust's priority communities (Hubs). There were 1,035 active volunteers across 19 areas in April 2024. Data for this report was collected through the following means:

- A volunteer training feedback survey completed by 290 volunteers
- A survey asking volunteers to reflect on their experiences was completed a minimum of three months after joining the programme by 196 volunteers
- A survey of participants in activities delivered by Literacy Champions was completed by 29 respondents

## Working with communities to address low literacy

Literacy provision isn't confined to the classroom. A child's educational development is the result of a whole ecosystem of influences in the home, in the community and beyond. This makes it vital that initiatives looking to improve literacy work in and with the community. Because of the individual, localised nature of both needs and available resources (people, places, and spaces) within communities, working in partnership with them is essential for effective insight and access (Dyson, Kerr, Raffo and Wigelsworth 2012, Crew 2020).

Providing volunteers with the knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver their own informal literacy provision creates capacity within the community (OECD 2009). Community capacity is about seeing communities' potential and actively working with them as partners, rather than simply imposing a top-down solution. This is an asset-based approach that recognises communities' skills and knowledge and their willingness to drive change (Kretzmann and McKnight 1996). 63% of residents of wards identified as 'left behind' because of their combination of high deprivation and high community needs believe they have the capacity to change how their community is run (Community Wealth Fund 2021). As this indicates, increasing capacity also empowers individuals and communities, giving an increased sense of collective influence over the issues affecting them (Chavis and Lee 2015, Hodgson 2017, Rocha 1997).

Literacy Champions aim to mobilise communities by recruiting volunteers to partner with the National Literacy Trust to tackle low literacy. Mobilising communities themselves to effect change has several benefits, including a greater understanding of the issues that need to be addressed, more targeted outcomes and greater sustainability (Coulter 2009). It is especially effective in creating behaviour change, as people's attitudes and beliefs are strongly shaped by those around them (Blomfield and Clayton 2009, Puska and Jaini 2020).

## The importance of credible voices

Effective community mobilisation requires engaging all sections of a community, especially those considered underserved or under-represented. Central to this engagement are credible voices, also known as trusted messengers. These are advocates for a cause who are especially effective because of their credibility with those around them. Although this credibility can take many forms, shared characteristics, experiences and knowledge are often central, as is occupying positions of trust (Shen et al 2021, Bonell et al 2023, Ramgard et al 2023). In the context of mobilising a community to tackle an issue or set of inter-related issues, such as those encountered by communities experiencing complex disadvantage, achieving impact is arguably more likely if the programme volunteers have credibility with those they support.

The link between credibility, trust and shared characteristics means that understanding where volunteers come from and who they are is important context for understanding their impact. Our data shows that our Literacy Champions come from a socio-economic background that reflects the areas in which they volunteer. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019, volunteers from each area provide a postcode on registration that can be linked to an IMD decile.<sup>1</sup> This can then be compared with the IMD information for neighbourhoods<sup>2</sup> for a given local authority where Literacy Champions volunteer. Figure 1 compares the average percentage of neighbourhoods in each IMD decile across 12 National Literacy Trust

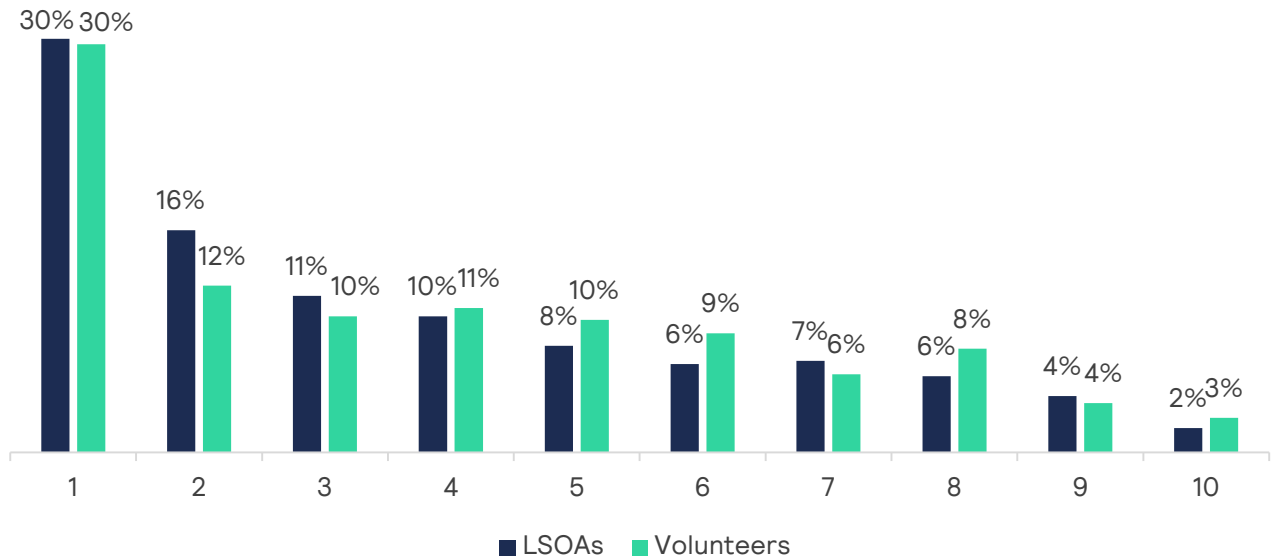
---

<sup>1</sup> A decile divides a set of data into 10 equal parts. So, for the IMD rankings, a neighbourhood in the first decile would be in the 10% most deprived in the country and a neighbourhood in the 10<sup>th</sup> decile would be in the 10% least deprived.

<sup>2</sup> Neighbourhoods here are used as an alternative term for Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA), which are small areas (normally with a population between 1,000 and 3,000) used for analysis of census data, both as a basis for the Index of Multiple Deprivation and by organisations like the NHS and local authorities.

Hubs against the average percentage of volunteers with postcodes in each IMD decile.

**Figure 1: Neighbourhood IMD decile against volunteers**



Although there are discrepancies, the average difference between the percentage of neighbourhoods in an IMD decile and the percentage of volunteers is just 1.5pp. The figure also indicates that the programme is effectively engaging volunteers from all socio-economic backgrounds, including proportionately recruiting volunteers from the most deprived neighbourhoods.

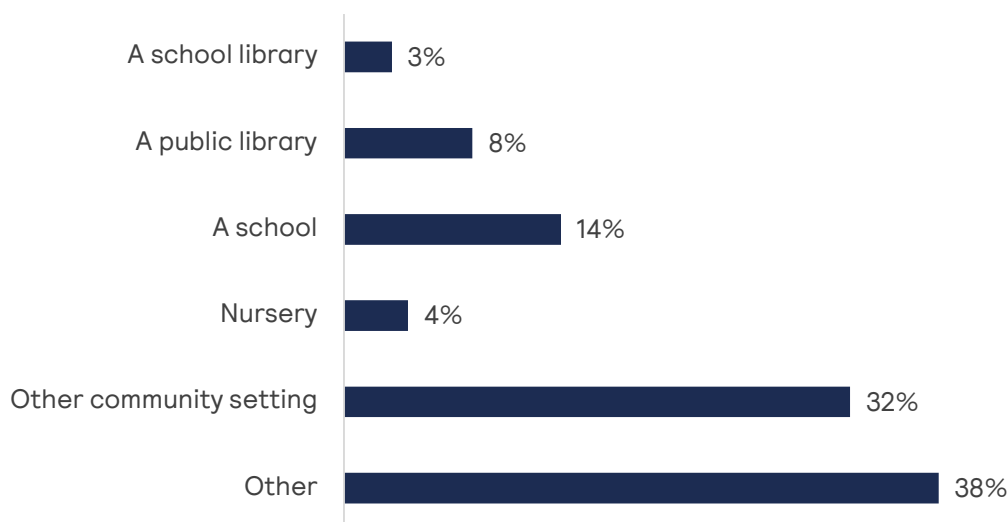
As well as reflecting their communities socio-economically, Literacy Champions also reflect their ethnic makeup (see Table 1). On average, there is only 0.36pp difference between the percentage of volunteers and the percentage across the Hubs where they are working. As with the comparison of socio-economic background, this is an indication of a shared background between the volunteers and those they work with.

**Table 1: Ethnic background of Literacy Champions compared with ethnicity in our Hubs**

Background	% of LCs	% in Hubs	Difference
White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	72.37%	73.11%	0.74%
White - Irish	2.63%	0.68%	-1.95%
White - Any other White background	5.26%	4.68%	-0.58%
Asian or Asian British - Indian	5.26%	3.13%	-2.13%
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	3.95%	6.02%	2.07%
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	0.66%	0.99%	0.33%
Asian or Asian British - Any other Asian background	0.66%	1.55%	0.89%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African - African	1.97%	2.38%	0.41%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African - Caribbean	1.32%	1.01%	-0.31%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African - Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background	0.66%	0.48%	-0.18%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups - White and Black Caribbean	3.29%	1.08%	-2.21%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups - Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background	1.97%	0.63%	-1.34%

Many of the volunteers are also well placed to effect change within their community as they already occupy positions of potential trust (e.g., teachers, librarians), or are part of organisations that are already directly engaging with the community (e.g., community-centre employees, foodbank staff, see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Where do our volunteers work?**



Importantly, 1 in 2 volunteers (52%) come to the programme with some previous involvement in supporting literacy, including:

- **Those involved in literacy through work.** This group includes volunteers who work for organisations with a remit including literacy, and those working for organisations supporting marginalised groups such as refugees, asylum seekers and the homeless.
- **Those volunteering on other literacy initiatives.** Volunteers have previously supported the Summer Reading Challenge, volunteered in schools or as part of another community initiative.
- **Those who have established their own literacy projects.** These include hosting community libraries, setting up storytelling groups, or founding book clubs and storytelling sessions.
- **Professionals in relevant creative disciplines.** Volunteers in this group include poets, novelists, storytellers and those who teach the creative arts.

It is clear that our volunteers have a clear understanding of the literacy challenge facing their communities and of the role that their work as volunteers plays in meeting this. For example, some have told us:

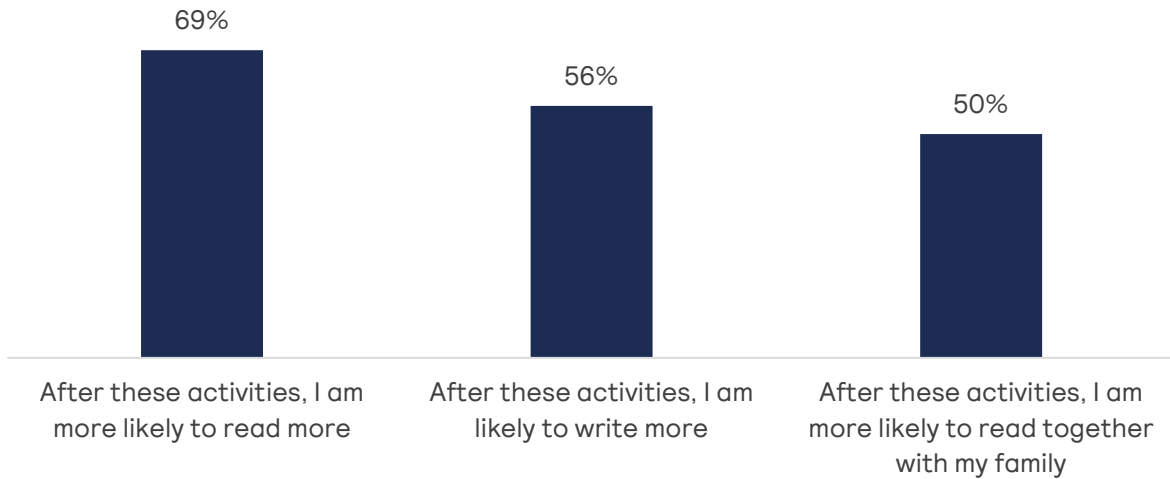
“I work in a deprived area and family in disadvantaged situation where kids get little help or support from parents for reading and literacy. our sessions provide a fun time to interact together as a family and with others too. everyone gets to own a book after the sessions and swap it in next sessions if they want too. Kids have the opportunity to read aloud a short story they have written of their own or with parents help, building confidence and improving reading and writing skills.”

“It’s so difficult, people from all walks of life are struggling and when I’m out in the community giving books and promoting literacy, I feel it restores faith in one another and that builds people’s opportunity to talk, and people want to read just finding that connection.”

## The impact Literacy Champions have

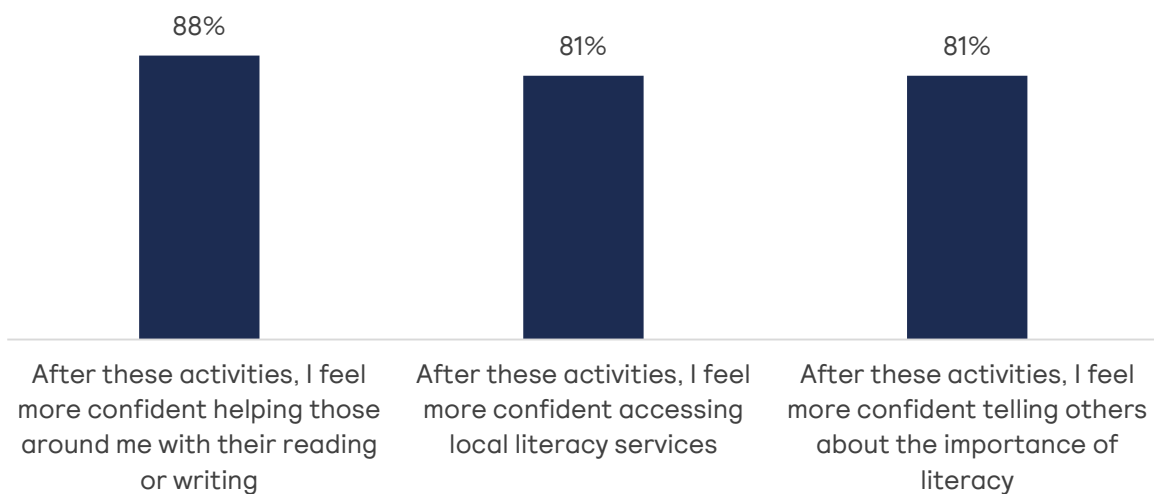
The families and individuals in the communities supported by the Literacy Champions have benefited in various ways. All (100%) who took part in a Literacy Champion-led activity enjoyed that activity, and 94% increased their access to books or other resources. Importantly, 7 in 10 (69%) participants told us that as a result of the Literacy Champions activities, they are now more likely to read, nearly 3 in 5 (56%) told us that they are now likely to write more, and 1 in 2 (50%) told us that they are now more likely to read with their family.

**Figure 3: Impact of participating in Literacy Champion-led activities on participants' behaviour**



Many participants also benefited from the activity in terms of their confidence (see Figure 4). Nearly 9 in 10 (86%) felt more confident supporting those around them with their reading and writing following the Literacy Champions-led activity. 4 in 5 (81%) also said that as a result of taking part in Literacy Champion-led activities, they now felt more confident accessing local literacy services and more confident telling others about the importance of literacy.

**Figure 4: Impact of participating in Literacy Champion-led activities on participant's confidence**





## Case study: providing vulnerable groups with books and advice in the Black Country

A Literacy Champion in one of our Hubs founded and runs a small charity, working with families who lack key resources and access to experiences. Their work includes stay-and-play sessions and a baby bank. Those supported by the charity include those who have experienced domestic abuse, families seeking asylum, those who have experienced homelessness, or people who are victims of trafficking. The Literacy Champion and her team at the charity have incorporated book gifting into their work and share key messages with parents and carers through the stay-and-play sessions and baby bank. Based on their experience with these families, the team at the charity believe these are the first books some of these children have ever had access to. The volunteer sums up their experience as follows:

“If you love your community, then you must sign up to be a Literacy Champion. Being part of the National Literacy Trust is a great but really simple way to give back. As well as meeting new people and making new friends, I have had the opportunity to make a real difference in our community. I have met some amazing people through events, book giveaways and conferences. I wanted to say a massive thank you to [the local NLT team] for all their support.”

Overall, the Literacy Champion and her team have gifted 600 books and reached over 1,000 children, parents and carers.

## The impact on participants through volunteers' eyes

The benefits reported by the participants are echoed in the volunteers' own perceptions of their impact (see Figure 5). Almost all (95%) agreed that they had encouraged others to engage with literacy, while 88% agreed that they had a positive impact on their community's literacy.

Looking at more specific aspects of their volunteering, over 9 in 10 (94%) agreed that they had helped their community access resources to support reading, 9 in 10 (89%) agreed they had modelled positive literacy behaviours, and 8 in 10 (81%) agreed they had shared reading content their community had engaged with.

**Figure 5: Percentage agreement of Literacy Champions' own perceptions of impact**



Literacy Champions were asked to describe how they thought those they had worked with had benefited. Their responses offer more evidence that the programme is meeting its stated outcomes in terms of increasing access to resources, promoting positive literacy behaviours and connecting individuals with local literacy services. Examples of these responses include:

“I have provided one to one support for a young child with additional needs at learning to love books sessions. The child struggles with literacy and I have helped them to engage with the material. I have also had regular conversations with their parents about strategies they might try at home and discussed how successful these have been with them each week. It has been a privilege to watch the child develop.”

“Working alongside Stoke Reads I have been involved in the Tales in the Park summer activity programme. As a public library representative, we were able to work well with the Stoke Reads team to encourage more than 500 people to become members of their local libraries – this will provide families benefits for years to come as they are able to access reading materials.”

“Two members of the [book] group have very low literacy level and have benefited from being in a supportive environment where they aren't made to feel they can't participate. One member suffered a stroke some years back and stopped reading as they found it difficult to concentrate. They participate fully in the group and have rediscovered their love for books, even checking out books from the library.

Several members are socially isolated, have anxiety and have or are suffering with depression – having a friendly place to go has supported them with their mental wellbeing.”

“One of the mums [in the storytelling group] has now purchased a bookcase and many new books for her daughter, her daughter now regularly asks for a story and is now engaging in books at home, something her daughter previously didn’t do. Another mum has said that her son will now sit nicely for a story time, which when they started coming to the group her son would not sit or engage.”

The examples given also offer insight into the capacity of Literacy Champions to provide effective literacy support to vulnerable and/or diverse groups and communities:

“One of the most impactful events we have took part in thanks to the Literacy Champions programme is the ‘Look for a Book’. I teach in a CAMHS inpatient ward which is secure, so it is a really challenging environment to create a buzz and excitement around most activities, but especially around reading for pleasure. Working with Laura at the NLT has been a pleasure as she was eager to listen to the specific context I work in and recommend how I can adapt events etc to suit the needs of the vulnerable children I work with. Each patient/student on the ward received their own book thanks to the NLT and it was the first time they’ve actively engaged with finding books and reading in a positive way. For some of our students, it was the first brand-new book they’d ever had, and I know that it really boosted their self-esteem, engagement and changed their idea of themselves being ‘a reader’.”

“Working with attendees of the Black British Book Festival, mostly interacting with the parents of families and with teachers, who have implemented the resources we have provided. I have also worked with vulnerable Muslim women in the local area helping them gain access to works of fiction and non-fiction and providing a sense of community through the creation of a book club.”

## **The benefits for the Literacy Champions themselves**

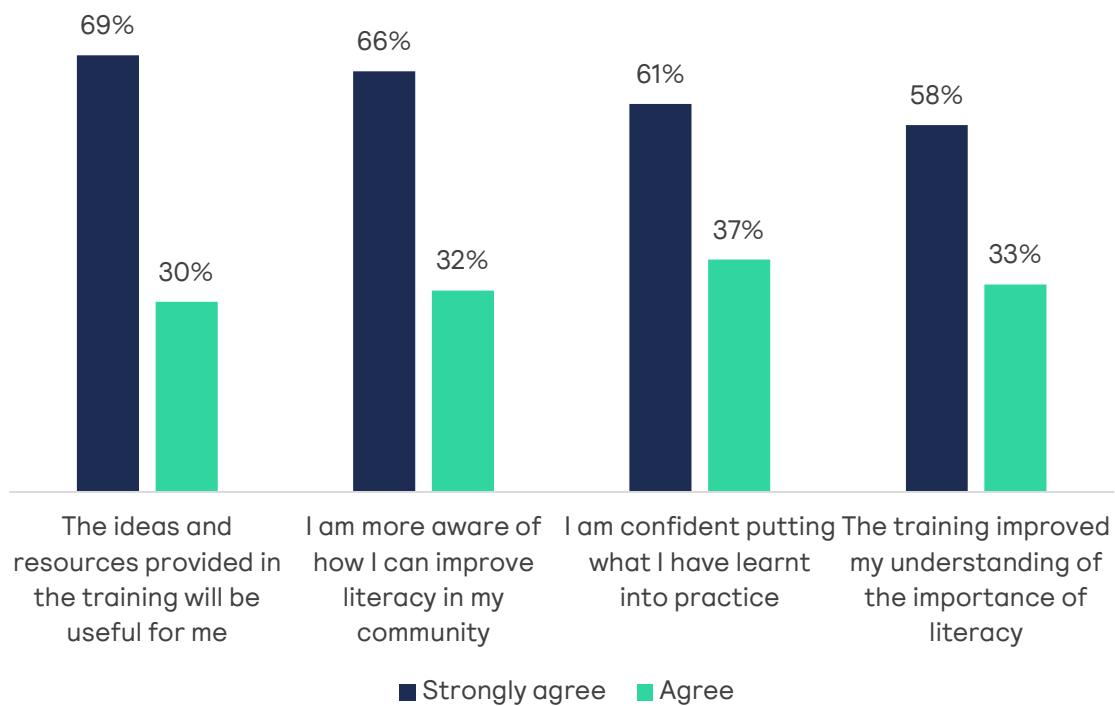
Literacy Champions didn’t just help communities grow in terms of literacy, but many of them also benefited themselves, both in terms of developing their skills and confidence to deliver effective informal literacy provision, and in what they found personally rewarding or beneficial from their experience.

The training provided to the Literacy Champions is central to supporting the volunteers’ knowledge, confidence and skills that they need to promote literacy in their community effectively. Overall, the training provided was well received, with

100% of those who took part rating it as either 'excellent' or 'good', and 100% saying that the trainer met the needs of the group either 'very well' or 'well' in the feedback survey completed immediately following the session.

Encouragingly, we can also see that the training was successful in supporting volunteers' knowledge, skills and confidence. As Figure 6 shows, on average, 96% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements.

**Figure 6: Impact of training on Literacy Champions' awareness, understanding and confidence to support literacy**



We continue to see positive changes for the volunteers once they have delivered activities within their community. After volunteering for at least three months, nearly 9 in 10 (87%) said they had a greater awareness of the most effective ways to provide literacy support in their area, while more than 9 in 10 (92%) felt they were better informed about the range of approaches available for improving literacy in their community (see Figure 7). 4 in 5 reported that they had an increased understanding of the importance of literacy (80%) and greater confidence in delivering informal literacy provision for their community (82%).

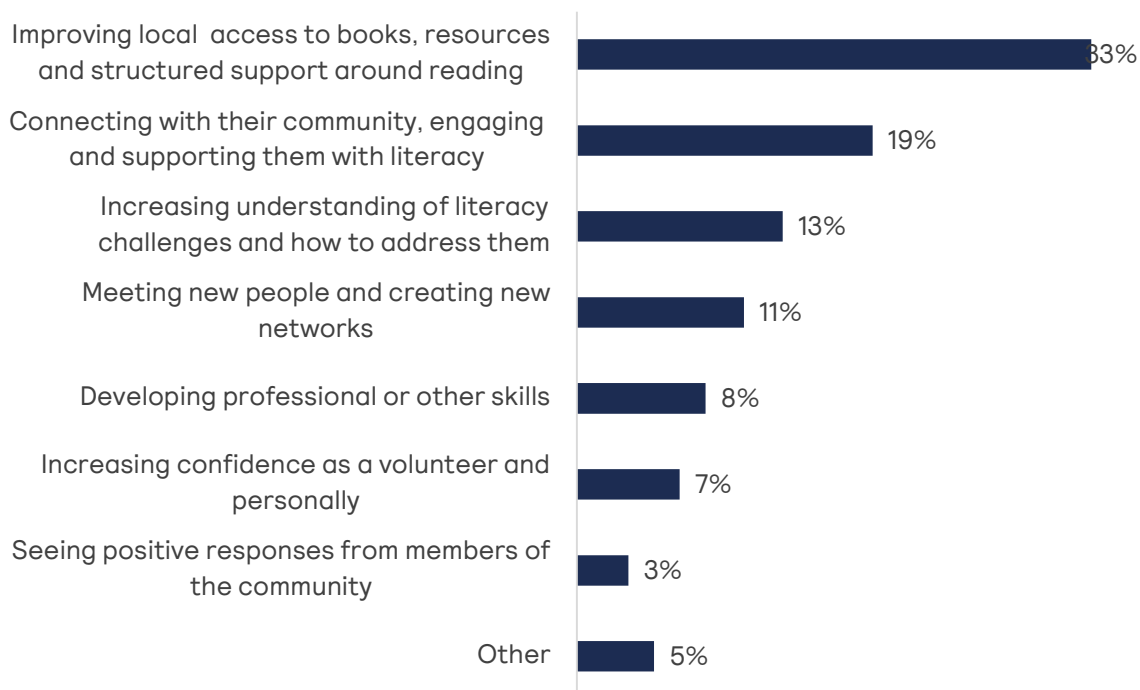
**Figure 7: Changes in Literacy Champions' skills and confidence**



Asked an open question about the benefits of volunteering, 1 in 2 (52%) chose to use their response to highlight the benefits they believed their volunteering had brought to those they had supported, whether through 'Improving local access...' or 'Connecting with the community...'. This makes these responses valuable not just in terms of understanding what the impact has been on the volunteers, but also as an indicator from the volunteers' perspective of the nature of their impact on those they have worked with.

The most popular category when asked about the benefits of volunteering was that of 'Improving local access to books, resources and structured support around reading', with 1 in 3 (33%) respondents identifying this as the aspect of volunteering they had found most beneficial (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Benefits of volunteering**



Some specific responses included:

“It’s very rewarding to see the results of nurturing reading culture, and it’s genuinely fun and inspiring to engage with young readers and writers.”

“I’ve been able to encourage kindness with my son and the children I mind and help them understand that not everyone has money for books. It also promotes kindness and only today I had a little girl at my door with a bag full of books and she was so proud to give them away to other children to enjoy. I think it is great to promote kindness and giving. I enjoy seeing people at the library and when people have been and reorganised it and books have gone and you know someone somewhere is enjoying a free book... it’s a great feeling!”

Another substantial group of responses focused on the benefits of ‘Connecting with the community, engaging and supporting them with literacy’, with nearly 1 in 5 (19%) highlighting this. Examples of responses in this category include:

“Being part of the community, and helping vulnerable children get free books. Since the Dolly Parton Imagination Library stopped in our town, I feel that this is very important.”

“Seeing the level of desire for books & literacy resources activities in our community. Talking to members of the community about their reading journey and gaining a wider understanding of the variety of community experiences in this area.”

Overall, 1 in 2 (52%) volunteers chose to foreground either their perceived contribution within, and their connection to, the community or their contribution to promoting a reading culture.

Additionally, the 13% of volunteers who identified their increased understanding of the literacy challenge as a benefit provides further evidence for the programme’s effectiveness in meeting its outcomes around volunteer knowledge (discussed above). This is illustrated by the following response:

“I now understand the importance of literacy, and I now try to encourage more reading with the children in my family. I have been given free books by the literacy trust to start my own library shelf in my youth group, which gives them access to books they might not have had before.”

Similarly, although relatively few volunteers (7%) focused on increasing confidence as a benefit, the responses themselves offer further evidence of how the programme is meeting its outcomes around increasing confidence in delivering informal literacy provision, as these examples show:

“My self-confidence has improved massively. I know that it is not me taking on the world, but there is a whole reading army behind me.”

“My son thoroughly enjoys helping out as a mini Literacy Champion.”

“Confidence and being part of a team. It has allowed me to talk freely about Literacy and the power it can bring to people. My son and I have been interviewed by both the BBC news and local radio to share our Literacy Champion roles and the importance of Literacy.”

## Conclusion

Meaningful community mobilisation is central to achieving lasting change in literacy levels in some of the UK’s most deprived areas. As ‘credible voices’ living and working in the areas where the need is greatest, Literacy Champions are powerful advocates, increasing access to books and resources, raising awareness and supporting positive behavioural change. A significant number already occupy positions of trust and come to their volunteering with previous experience of supporting literacy. The impact their work is having on participants’ attitudes and

behaviours is clear. Crucially, these participants are themselves finding new confidence as advocates for literacy, suggesting that the positive influence of the volunteers' work extends into the wider community.

Going forward, the programme aims to build on its relationships with volunteers and communities to create local capacity through recruiting lead Literacy Champions. These volunteers will oversee a group of Literacy Champions, providing them with support and advice as they grow their projects. Alongside this, the programme plans to expand beyond the National Literacy Trust Hubs into other areas, and to work with businesses to provide opportunities for their employees to support literacy in their area.



## References

Blomfield, M. and Cayton, H., 'Community Engagement Report', The Health Foundation, 2009

Bonell, C., Michie, S., Antonopoulou, V., Kelly, M. and Vlaev, I., 'Effect of prosocial public health messages for population behaviour change in relation to respiratory infections: a systematic review protocol', *British Medical Journal*, Jan. 2021

Chavis, D. and Lee, K. 'What is community anyway?' *Stamford Social Innovation Review*, May 2015

'Understanding Left Behind Neighbourhoods', Community Wealth Fund, 2021

Coulter, A., 'Engaging communities for health improvement', The Health Foundation, 2009

Crew, M., 2020. 'The Effectiveness of Place-Based Programmes and Campaigns in Improving Outcomes for Children: A Literature Review', National Literacy Trust, 2020

Hodgson, M., 'A tale of two cities: community perspectives on inequality, hope and change', The Young Foundation, 2017

Kretzmann, J. and McKnight, J., 'Assets-Based Community Development', *National Civic Review*, Winter 1996

'Community capacity building: creating a better future together', OECD, 2009

Puska, P. and Jaini, P., 'The North Karelia Project: Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease in Finland Through Population-Based Lifestyle Interventions', *Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, Sep. 2020

Raffo, C., Dyson, A., Kerr, K. and Wigelsworth, M., 'Developing Children's Zones for England', Save the Children, 2012

Ramgard, M., Ramji, R., Kottorp, A. and Sjogrenn Forss, K., 'No one size fits all' – community trust-building as a strategy to reduce COVID-19-related health disparities', *BMC Public Health*, 23:18, 2023

Rocha, E., 'A ladder of empowerment', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 17:31, 1997

Shen, A., Browne, S., Srivastava, T., Kornides, M. and Tanb, A., 'Trusted messengers and trusted messages: The role for community-based organizations in promoting COVID-19 and routine immunizations', *Vaccine*, Feb. 2023

## About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

Visit [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk) to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

## Copyright

© National Literacy Trust 2024. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is Flint, A. (2024).

We will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity;
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.

The logo for the National Literacy Trust, featuring the text "National Literacy Trust" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The text is positioned to the left of a bright yellow circle that partially overlaps the words "Literacy" and "Trust".

# National Literacy Trust

Change your story