



## Reading is good for you

By Professor Louis Appleby for the National Literacy Trust, National Director of Mental Health in England, March 2009

### **Making the case for literacy/ reading – an advocacy resource for working with health sector partners**

When we hear that reading is “good for us” we may assume that this is because it helps our education. But reading anything for pleasure can also raise your spirits, offer an escape from everyday stresses, help you empathise with other people AND keep the brain ticking over. Reaching for a favourite magazine or book could well be good for your health.

#### **BACKGROUND**

American research also suggests that *“low literacy is associated with several adverse health outcomes, including low health knowledge, increased incidence of chronic illness, poorer intermediate disease markers, and less than optimal use of preventive health services: This research reports that poor literacy, especially very poor literacy not only relates to an individual’s ability to remain healthy, it has an impact on their ability to return to health once they are ill.”* (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. January 2004)

*“Reading novels and magazines can offer a brief respite from the stresses and strains of everyday life. Traditionally reading was associated with learning, and in this way it is good for personal development, but reading a magazine or even cook book can be very comforting. Our brains are constantly bombarded with information, more so now than ever before, and reading is a good way to wind down.”* (Baroness Susan Greenfield.)

The health and wellbeing agenda is a key issue for both central and local government. In 2007/08, spending on health – and the consequences of sickness – was £102.3 billion. This represents 7.2% of total government spending. The health sector is therefore a key player in local and central government.

It is now accepted that there is more to health than just the absence of sickness. There is also increasing understanding of the costs and benefits of prevention over cure and the requirement for the public to take more responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Articulating how reading contributes to health sector targets can be challenging. However, it is possible to demonstrate how reading can further the health sector’s societal (as opposed to clinical) ambitions by focusing on the broader benefits of reading.

## WHY HEALTH IS A MAJOR ISSUE

- Around 175 million working days were lost to illness in 2006. The annual cost of sickness absence, and worklessness associated with ill-health in the working age population, is estimated to be over £100 billion.
- Mental ill-health has diverse and long-term effects on individuals, families and society. Estimates place the cost at about £77 billion per year for England when wider impacts on wellbeing are included and £49 billion for economic costs alone.
- Women with low literacy skills are five times more likely than those with average or good literacy skills to be depressed.
- Looked-after children are 10 times more likely to have a statement of special educational needs.
- Prisoners and those recently released from custody have high rates of mental illness and alcohol misuse. Up to 90% of the prison population has a mental disorder and/or a substance misuse problem.

**Employability** is fundamental to a healthy community. Recent research suggests that work can be good for health, reversing the harmful effects of long-term unemployment and prolonged sickness absence.

**The priority audiences for the health sector are:**

- Adults with mental health issues
- Care leavers
- Adult and young offenders
- Young people and their mental wellbeing
- Older people

Public Service Agreement (PSA) Delivery Agreement 16: Increase the proportion of socially excluded adults in settled accommodation and employment, education and training is of particular importance within the English health community.

Evidence suggests that ensuring individuals at risk of social exclusion have a stable home and the appropriate life skills to maintain it, and are either in a job or involved in productive, employment-focused activity, can help reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes in the future.

The Government regards social mobility as a key issue, underpinned by the principle that everyone in society, regardless of their background, should have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

There is a growing body of evidence that reading interventions and programmes can contribute to both individual and community wellbeing directly as well as indirectly via improving skills and access to employment.



## INTRODUCTION

The NHS already recognises the obviously beneficial aspects of reading for both adults and children. During the 2008 National Year of Reading (NYR), many colleagues within local authorities and charities were keen to work with the health sector. Some have developed successful partnerships with health providers.

However, engaging with other sectors where improved reading is not in itself a desired outcome, but is a tool to help deliver other key objectives such as improved employability and greater wellbeing, can be difficult. We often need help to understand the language and landscape of targets for potential partners. (Local Authority Coordinators for the NYR reported that where they were able to articulate the broader benefits of reading to colleagues in the health sector, they could be a key partner in delivering national and local community ambitions and targets.)

This document is the response of the NYR team to that identified need. It makes no claims to being definitive. It is based on short-term desk research during late 2008 / early 2009 and includes specific guidance from policy makers within the NHS.

It aims to help local authority services and individuals to engage with health sector partners by providing;

- key facts
- contextual information
- evidence

These areas support the beneficial impact of reading on the work of that sector. It can be used for both strategic discussions on community wellbeing and social inclusion as well as in operational partnerships with local and community health providers.

## WHY WORK WITH THE HEALTH SECTOR?

Working with health sector partners is a key contribution to delivering both national and local government priorities. Yet articulating how reading contributes to health sector targets can be challenging. However, it is possible to demonstrate how reading can further the health sector's societal (as opposed to clinical) ambitions by focusing on the broader benefits of reading.

It is now widely acknowledged that there is more to health than just the absence of illness. In recent years policy documents and other reports have begun to stress the importance of wellbeing, moving away from a narrow definition of health towards one which includes social and emotional factors. Our consultation with the sector suggests that the rhetoric of prevention and wellbeing is now being more generally adopted as practice.

The full "Reading is good for you" article can be found [here](#).