

Books Unlocked 2019/20:

Evaluation and impact report

Programme overview

Books Unlocked, co-created by the National Literacy Trust and the Booker Prize Foundation, is now in its seventh year of delivery. Since 2012, the programme has supported people in prisons and young offender institutions to read for enjoyment, to read more often, and to engage with literature.

Books Unlocked supports prisons across the country by:

- Donating copies of shortlisted and longlisted Booker Prize titles to prison reading groups, individuals in custody, and community settings
- Serialising audio books via the daily Books Unlocked radio programme on National Prison Radio
- Arranging inspirational author visits to prison reading groups and schools

Key achievements 2019/20

In 2019/20, we distributed a record **2,339** books to **91** settings, growing our reach by **20%** on the previous project year.

Since 2012, we have donated in excess of **10,000** books to prisons, young offender institutions and participating schools and libraries in the community.

The National Prison Radio schedule featured **5** titles that were brand new to air.

[The most valuable thing about Books Unlocked is] being able to say to the men, “No you don’t have to bring it back, that’s your book.” Many of the men come back and tell us about the book or are more willing to do a review, and many will tell us that they have passed it to another prisoner (and sometimes officer) along with a recommendation to read it.

Librarian, HMP Manchester

Participating settings

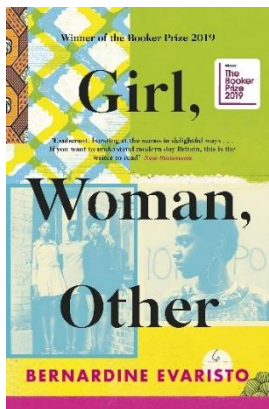
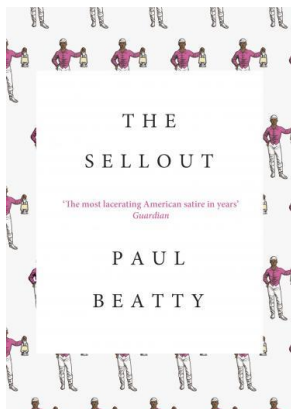
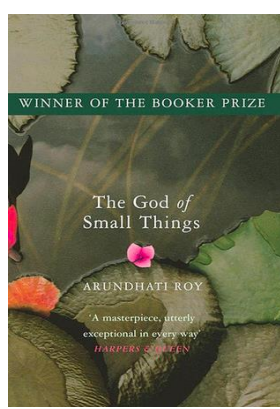
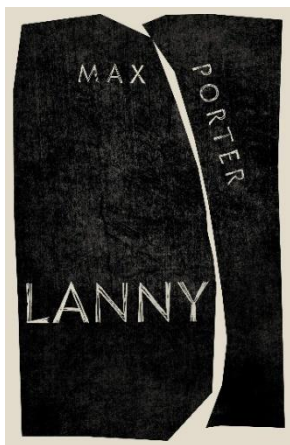
In 2019/20, we increased the number of prisons taking part in the programme considerably. This expansion has been able to take place due to the reputation Books Unlocked has built over the past six years, as well as a huge effort to promote the programme to prisons who had not previously been engaged.

The table below presents the headline data for the settings recruited for the 2019/20 programme.

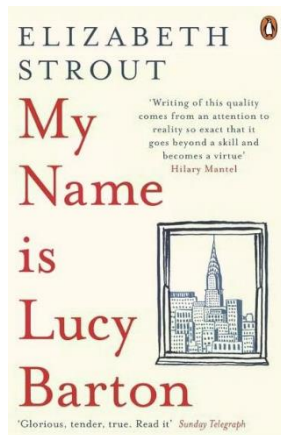
| Type of setting | 2019/20 |
|---|-----------|
| Prison | 76 |
| YOI, Secure Training Centre or Secure Children's Home | 9 |
| Community | 3 |
| School | 3 |
| Total | 91 |

Titles 2019/20

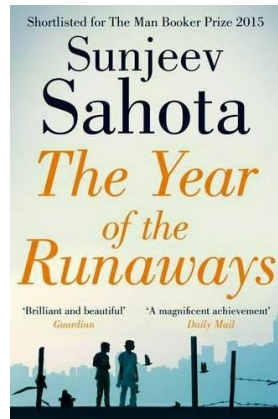
This year Books Unlocked offered a total of 17 titles across two book lists.

| Titles for 2019/20 | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p><i>Girl, Woman, Other</i> by Bernardine Evaristo</p>  | <p><i>The Sellout</i> by Paul Beatty</p>  | <p><i>The God of Small Things</i> by Arundhati Roy</p>  |
| <p><i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i> by Mark Haddon</p>  | <p><i>Lanny</i> by Max Porter</p>  | <p><i>The North Water</i> by Ian McGuire</p>  |

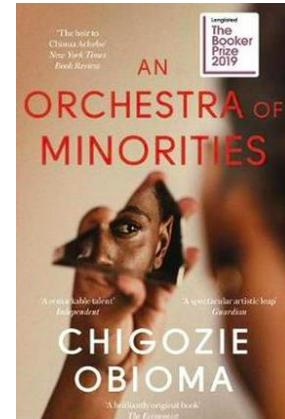
My Name is Lucy Barton
by Elizabeth Strout



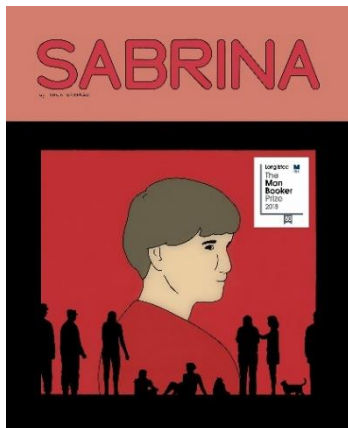
The Year of the Runaways
by Sunjeev Sahota



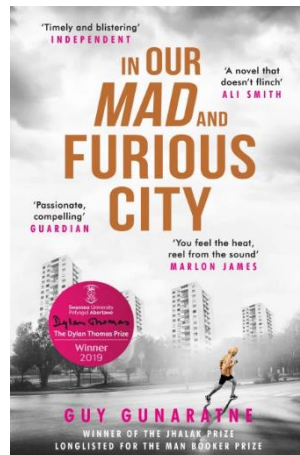
An Orchestra of Minorities
by Chigozie Obioma



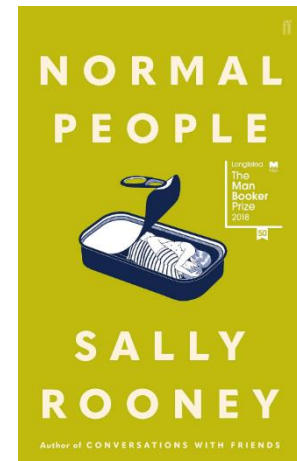
Sabrina
by Nick



In Our Mad and Furious City
By Guy Gunaratne



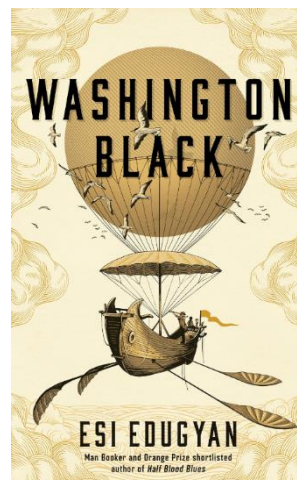
Normal People
by Sally Rooney



The Sisters Brothers
By Patrick deWitt



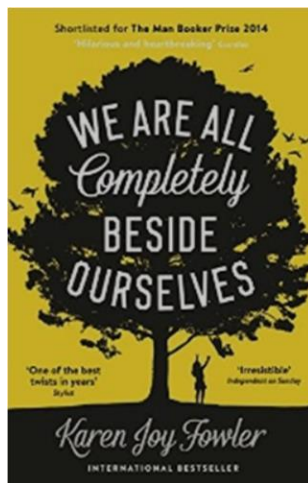
Washington Black
by Esi Edugyan



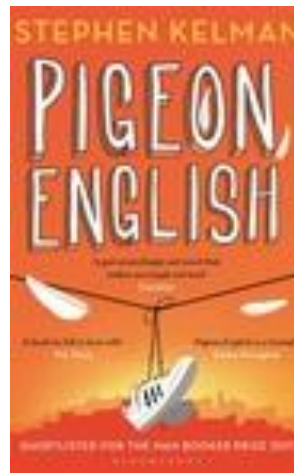
Autumn
by Ali Smith



*We Are All Completely
Beside Ourselves*
by Karen Joy Fowler



Pigeon English
by Stephen Kelman



“The reading group, which I have been a member of since 2017, is an integral part of allowing us to sit down once a month to discuss in a group all about the book, and life.”

Books Unlocked participant,
HMP Isle of Wight

Programme evaluation

In previous years, evaluation of Books Unlocked has used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the impact the programme has on a range of outcomes, from improvements in reading and listening skills through to increased wellbeing. Unfortunately, prisons were placed in lockdown in March 2020 as a result of the global Coronavirus pandemic and have yet to return to their usual regimes.

Historically, surveys and feedback forms have been distributed by librarians to their reading groups and returned to us for analysis, but this has not been possible for the majority of the 2019/20 project year, with reading groups being suspended and librarians having no contact with residents. Fortunately, we were able to gather data in early March from a total of 23 respondents across four prisons – a breakdown of these findings can be found in Part 1 of the report below.

We also chose to further our evaluation of the programme in the 2019/20 project year by gathering feedback from prison librarians. An integral part of the success of Books Unlocked, we wanted to find out more about how the programme supports their role, what they most valued and what we could improve. We are aware that Books Unlocked operates in a variety of ways across the custodial estate, and that this is one of the strengths of the programme, so we wanted to explore that further. We gathered both qualitative and quantitative feedback via a survey which was sent to all of our main prison contacts. We received a total of 22 responses from librarians – eight pre-lockdown and 14 during lockdown. A breakdown of these findings can be found in Part 2 below.

Part 1. Books Unlocked participants

Key findings

In terms of skills development, the data shows a positive impact of the programme on the reading, listening and communication skills of participants. The report also explores how the programme improved attitudes towards reading by promoting and facilitating reading for enjoyment. These shifts in attitudes are complemented by behaviour change, since the data suggests that participants are now more likely to engage in behaviours that are known to enhance literacy and oracy. Finally, the programme also seems to have improved subjective wellbeing for the participants and increased their confidence.

Some of the key findings include:

| Key finding | Key statistic* |
|--|--|
| As a result of Books Unlocked participants reported improvements in their reading abilities . | 35% (n=8) said their reading skills have improved after taking part in the programme. |
| Participants are more likely to discuss reading and talk about books following the programme. | 62% (n=13) of participants reported they now talk more about reading. |

| | |
|--|---|
| Books Unlocked supports people to feel more confident with reading | 44% (n=10) said they were more confident with their reading since taking part in Books Unlocked |
| As a result of Books Unlocked the participants are writing more . | 47% (n=9) told us that they write more as a result of the programme. |
| The evidence suggest the project had a positive impact on the subjective wellbeing of participants. | 57% (n=13) reported higher levels of wellbeing as a result of taking part in the programme. |
| Participants are more likely to visit the prison library | 44% (n=10) of participants reported that they visit the library more regularly as a result of the programme. |

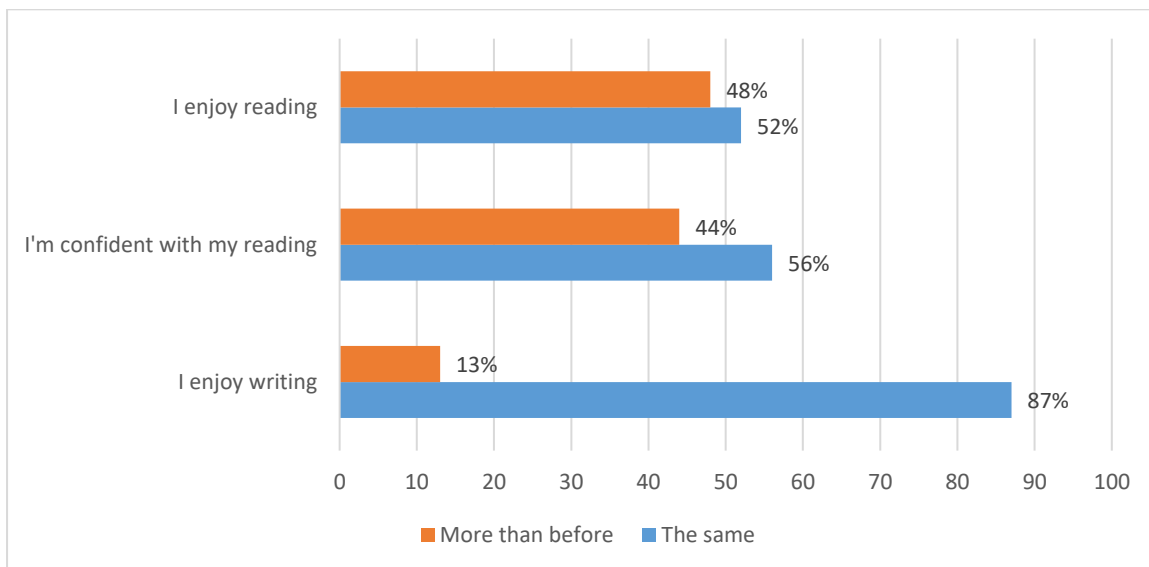
*In some cases, participants skipped a question. Where this has happened, we have derived the percentage from the total number who answered a given question.

Focus on attitudes, behaviours and confidence

The survey data suggests that participants have improved attitudes and confidence in reading, and that these are supported by a shift in behaviours. In fact, an increase in reading enjoyment and confidence seems to go hand-in-hand with an increase in behaviours that promote literacy and communication skills.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of participants who reported an improvement in their reading and writing enjoyment and confidence as result of the programme and shows that 44% (n=10) are now more confident at reading, and 48% (n=11) enjoy reading more than before.

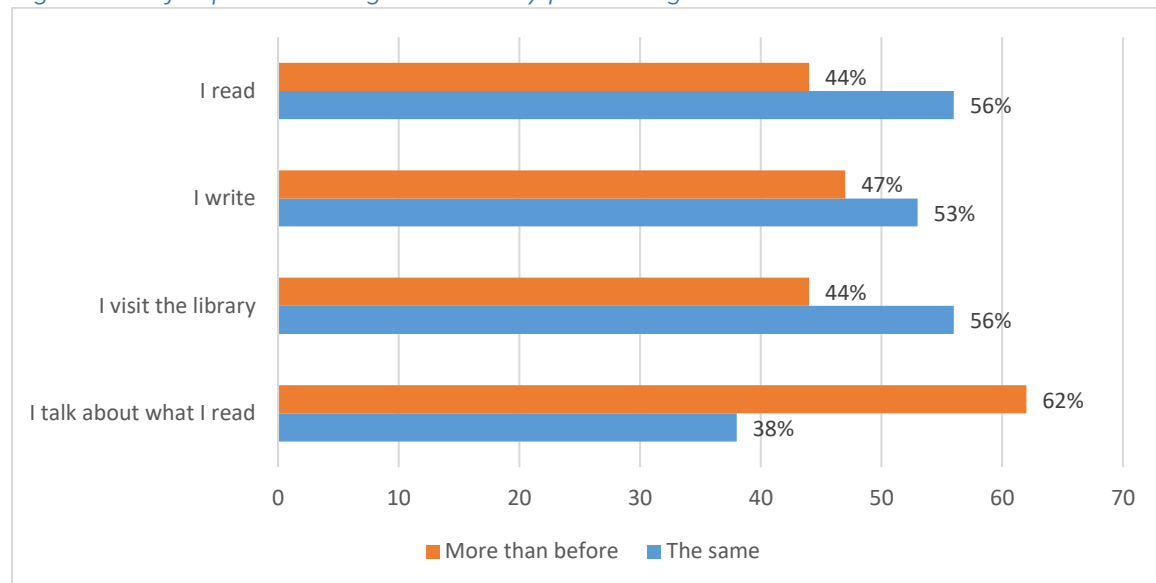
Figure 1. Self-reported impact on participants' attitudes towards literacy



The data also suggests that participants are more likely to engage in behaviours that promote literacy. As seen in Figure 2, 62% (n=13) of participants told us that they are more likely to talk about reading as a result of Books Unlocked. Participants are also making use of the facilities that promote literacy, with 44% (n=10) of respondents telling us that they visit

the library more than before. 47% (n=9) of participants also told us that they write more and 44% (n=10) read more as a result of taking part in Books Unlocked.

Figure 2. Self-reported changes in literacy promoting behaviours



Feedback from some participants indicated that having access to books via Books Unlocked had prompted a behaviour change that made them feel more positively about reading. One participant commented that getting involved in the programme was equivalent to 'Getting out of a rut' and another commented, 'I read very little fiction prior to this.'

Similarly, another participants commented the programmes' impact on their reading behaviours:

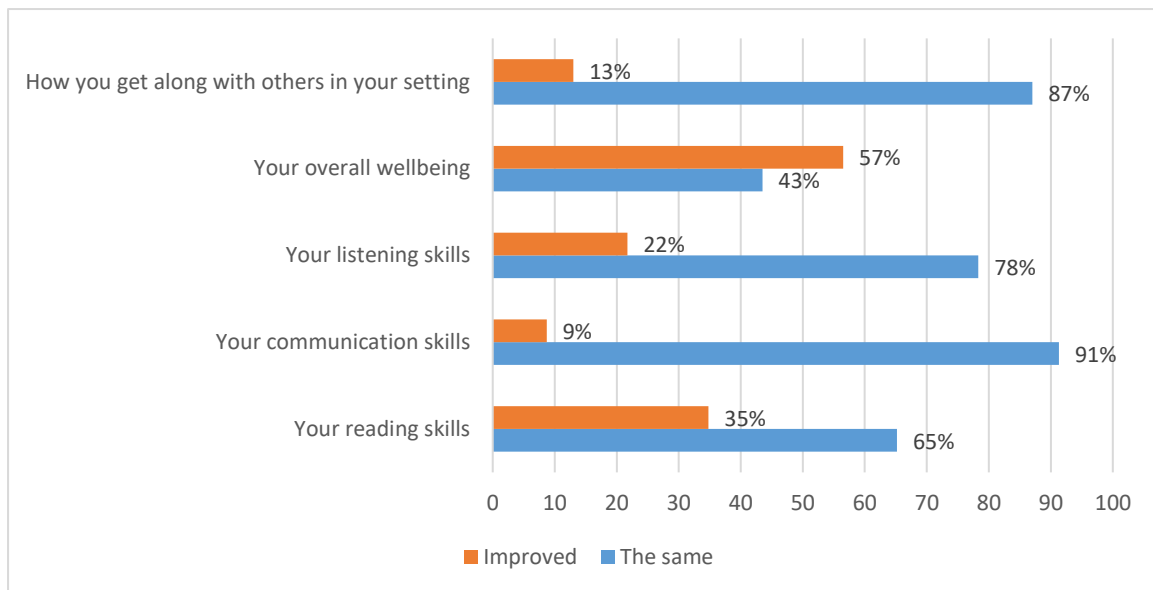
The book club is interesting, listening to others' views on what I've read. I'm trying to diversify my reading and this helps a lot.

At HMP Stocken, the programme was described as 'mind-expanding' and 'challenging' and another participated stated, 'It has widened my reading range.'

Focus on skill improvements

In addition to attitudes, behaviours and confidence, the survey asked participants to reflect on their skills progression since taking part in Books Unlocked. As seen in Figure 3, participants reported a positive impact on their literacy skills. One of the biggest improvements has been on participants' reading skills. As Figure 3 shows, 35% (n=8) of participants report an improvement in their reading skills. A fifth (22%; n=5) also report an improvement in their listening skills.

Figure 3. Participants' self-reported improvements in literacy and communication skills as a result of taking part in Books Unlocked

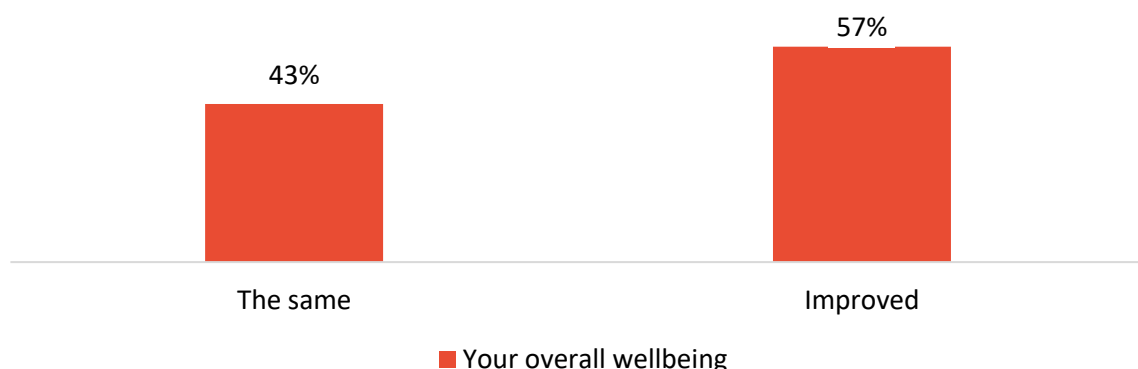


Focus on wellbeing improvements

It is important to highlight that for many participants this programme was about more than just reading. As with feedback from previous years, participants reported on the importance of conversing with their peers about books, developing a potential new interest and having access to a wider range of reading material than they would otherwise.

Indeed, alongside literacy outcomes, the data suggests that the intervention was also beneficial for the participants' wellbeing levels. As illustrated in Figure 3, 57% (n=13) of respondents told us that their overall wellbeing had improved as a result of taking part in Books Unlocked.

Figure 3. Self-reported improvement in participants' wellbeing



The comments in the survey provide a more in-depth insight into how the programme was positive for the participants' mental wellbeing and sense of community. One participant spoke about the importance of the reading group to his experience of prison life:

The reading group, which I have been a member of since 2017, is an integral part of allowing us to sit down once a month to discuss in a group all about the book, and life.

Other participants spoke about the enjoyment they got from exchanging views and different opinions with their peers. When asked what the most important element of Books Unlocked was for them, participants responded:

Taking part in a group, listening to different views about different people.

Getting to hear alternative views on a book and the subsequent discussion.

Having a reason to read a book and discuss it with like-minded people!

Others talked about the importance of the shared experience of discovering a new book as a group. One participant responded that the most important aspect of the programme for them was:

Discovering new authors in a reading group environment.

A strong theme in the feedback this year was that of participants valuing the chance to read books they might not otherwise have chosen or had access to. Evidence of Books Unlocked providing new reading opportunities for participants was a feature of in many responses, with one participant stating that they valued:

Finding new genres available for me to read. I have increased my knowledge of authors by eight new ones this past year.

When asked what they thought of Books Unlocked, respondents further commented:

Although the choice was quite narrow or not what I would normally choose for myself, it forced me to read something different, which was enjoyable.

It is an excellent programme that enables us to be provided with books we may never have had the opportunity to read.

Another participant talked about the value of receiving a book to keep, saying:

Handy for getting a free copy to read and to pass on to more people to enjoy it. Being part of a books group is very rewarding for me.

This comment really demonstrates the value of participants owning the books and deciding what to do with them, whether that's keeping them to read again or sharing them with their fellow residents.

The importance of Books Unlocked and what it means in terms of access to books, audio books and for librarians to be able to run reading groups is summed up perfectly from a participant from HMP Coldingley:

Any initiative aimed at encouraging reading is good. In prison it is essential.

Part 2. Books Unlocked librarians

We received a total of 22 survey responses from prison librarians across men's and women's adult prisons and young offender institutions. Librarians were asked a range of questions covering how Books Unlocked supports their role and their institution, what the most valuable aspect of the programme is for them and suggestions they had for the programme in the future.

Key findings

Results from the data clearly indicate that Books Unlocked was an important offer to the librarians who responded and that it supported both their role and their institution more widely. More specifically, the findings show that:

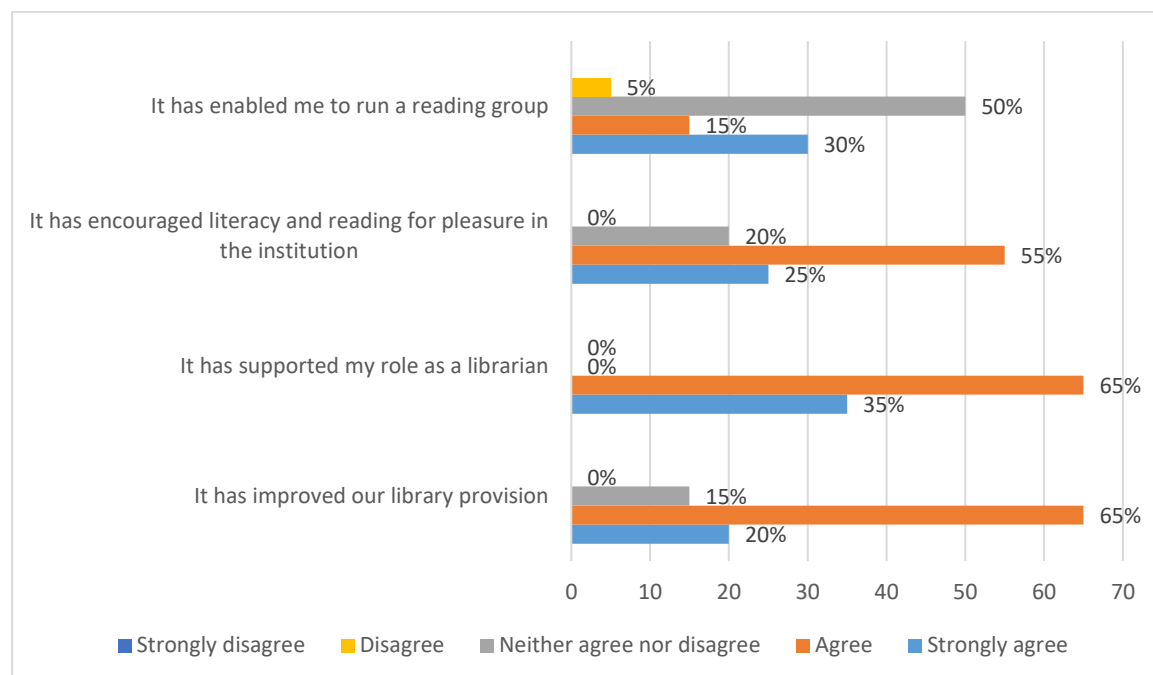
| Key finding | Key statistic |
|---|--|
| Books Unlocked has a strong reputation among prison librarians | 100% (n=22) of librarians rated the programme as 'Excellent' or 'Good'. |
| Books Unlocked improves the literacy provision in prisons in numerous ways | 85% (n=17) of participants told us that Books Unlocked improved their library provision and 80% (n=16) reported that the programme has encouraged for pleasure and a focus on literacy in their institution. |
| The programme directly supports librarians in their role | 100% (n=22) of respondents agreed that Books Unlocked supports their role as a librarian. |
| Books Unlocked enables reading groups to take place | Almost half (45%; n=9) of librarians strongly agreed or agreed that Books Unlocked enables them to run a reading group in their prison. |

Impact on literacy provision

The data shows that Books Unlocked has a very positive impact on the literacy provision among the prisons which responded. As shown below in Figure 4, 85% of participants told us that Books Unlocked supported their library provision and 80% reported that the programme has encouraged for pleasure and a focus on literacy in their institution.

All participants agreed that Books Unlocked supports their role as a librarian and almost half (45%) of librarians strongly agreed or agreed that Books Unlocked enables them to run a reading group in their prison.

Figure 4. Librarians' self-reported perception of how Books Unlocked supports literacy in their institution



The value of Books Unlocked

The survey included an open-ended question which allowed librarians to provide feedback on what the most valuable aspect of the Books Unlocked programme is for them. A very strong theme was having access to multiple copies of a title, in good condition, at no cost. Numerous librarians cited this as an incredibly valuable element of the programme, commenting the following when asked what was most important for them:

Being able to supply multiple copies of a book, which the prisoners can keep, which is used for discussion in the group.

Great selection of books. Free copies of titles. Easy to operate and coordinate.

Being able to give the women new copies of titles in a group. This really spurs them on to read the book as there's a group of them doing it together.

We are supported by the local library authority who very kindly donate withdrawn sets of reading group books to us, but to have new books and a wider variety of titles to choose from is very beneficial and much appreciated by the book group members.

The value of having access to sets of books for a reading groups was summarised by one librarian who said:

Having sets of books for groups is invaluable.

Even in institutions where the books were not used for a reading group, a donation of books could be used in other positive ways to encourage residents to the library or to expand the range of books on offer. The librarian at HMP Durham commented that she valued:

Free books which we can use as an incentive to get residents along to library open days.

Another strong element of the programme seems to be that the Books Unlocked lists is curated externally, so it introduces both librarians and their reading groups to titles they might never have considered, which in turn can have a positive impact on attitudes to reading. The librarian at HMP Birmingham commented that the most valuable element of the programme for them was:

Introducing readers (myself included!) to books they otherwise wouldn't have picked up has been extremely useful and enlightening. 'The Sisters Brothers' in particular, which was on the list a few years ago, has been read and enjoyed by two very different reading groups and many readers have remarked on how they wouldn't have thought it was their kind of book but they found it surprisingly easy to get into and ended up really enjoying it, and it's broadened their reading horizons as they don't just assume anything isn't for them anymore and would consider a wider range in future.

Many other librarians made similar points saying:

It introduces books to the prison that we may not have thought of and allows us to initiate debates about a book among a group of prisoners.

The chance to try out books from a list that was not done by me and therefore I am bringing a more diverse group of literature to the group. This is also taking the readers out of their comfort zone and trying a book that they would not even select themselves. I feel that this is widening their range of literature. The old saying, 'Never judge a book by its cover'.

I feel that if I chose the titles they would be my choice, this way gives me the opportunity to try something new and I can then recommend on to other readers in the establishment.

As with participant feedback from previous years, the value of having a book to keep was also raised by librarians. The librarian at HMP Manchester spoke of the power that book ownership can have, saying:

Being able to say to the men, 'No you don't have to bring it back, that's your book'. Many of the men come back and tell us about the book or are more willing to do a review and many will tell us that they have passed it to another prisoner (and sometimes officer) along with a recommendation to read it.

The librarian at HMP Coldingley also spoke of the unique contribution Books Unlocked is able to make in terms of donating books that do not need to be returned:

I can get multiple copies of books from the local authority library but they would need to be returned at the end of the group. The fact that the books can be kept by participants is great.

Supporting reading groups

In the pre-lockdown survey we asked librarians to tell us more about the ways that Books Unlocked specifically supports their reading group if they run one in their prison. Many librarians talked about involving their reading groups in the selection of the next title and how this activity strengthens the group. HMP Isle of Wight and HMP Wandsworth respectively said:

We involve the group members in choosing the books and they really enjoy this.

The guys can choose the books they would like to read and then it forms part of the discussions.

The librarian at HMP Eastwood Park spoke of the autonomy Books Unlocked gives them as a librarian, being able to keep a set of books and use them for multiple groups, saying:

We usually request our reading group books from other libraries, Books Unlocked books gives us new books to keep and use again and again.

HMP Chelmsford is supported by Books Unlocked to run a successful community model involving local schools and reading groups. The librarian at the prison spoke about the power of this kind of engagement, saying:

The fact that the community and school book groups take part makes the men feel valued.

Conclusion

While this year has been particularly challenging for the prison estate, we continue to see the huge value that Books Unlocked is bringing to reading group participants and librarians. The positive impact that Books Unlocked has on participants' skills, behaviours and wellbeing is needed now more than ever and we will endeavour to continue to reach as many people in secure settings as possible in the coming year.

The data we gathered from librarians while prisons were in lockdown and their reading groups were suspended has proven invaluable in deepening our understanding of the many ways Books Unlocked operates across the 85 prisons and YOIs engaged with the programme.

One of the great strengths of Books Unlocked is that it allows librarians the freedom and opportunity to make use of free books without needing to call on stretched budgets or the services of a local authority library who require books to be returned. It is clear that the distribution of the two Books Unlocked lists per year is hugely welcomed and something librarians and their reading groups look forward to, and that these lists enable many librarians to run a reading group in the first place.

The librarian at HMP Bronzefield perfectly summed up the impact that Books Unlocked has in an environment where people are often forgotten and resources are scarce:

The idea of donating books to a prison library which, as far as I am concerned, is the best investment for the future of our society.