

City Bridge Trust – Monitoring Visit Report

Organisation: Read - The Reading Agency	Grant ref: 10667	Programme area: Improving Londoners' Mental Health(d) Prisoners, ex-prisoners & other in the Criminal Justice System
Amount, date and purpose of grant: 07/09/2011: £83,500 over three years (£29,000; £26,500; £28,000) towards the running of the Six Book Challenge across London prisons.		
Visiting Grants Officer: Jemma Grieve Combes; Vivienne Littlechild; Ian Seaton	Date of meeting: 03/06/14	
Met with: Genevieve Clark (postholder), Reading Agency; David Kendall, Reading Agency; HMP Wandsworth librarian; HMP Wandsworth education officer; orderly and other 6 Book Challenge participants		
1. Introduction to the organisation: The Reading Agency is a national charity that aims to help people of all ages become confident and enthusiastic readers. Its most well-known activity is its annual summer reading challenge for young people, which engages hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren in visiting their local library and finding out about the world of books. Another flagship project is the 'Six Book Challenge' launched in 2008 and aimed principally at adults who are less confident with their reading. The Six Book Challenge invites people to pick six books – or other reading materials – of their choice and complete a reading diary in order to get a certificate. In 2013 35,000 people took part.		
2. The project funded: A key strand of the Six Book Challenge is to engage priority groups in prisons and young offender institutions. 60% of the prison population are reported to have difficulties with basic literacy skills and this low level of skills has been shown to have a direct correlation to mental health. Prison libraries use the Six Book Challenge to work in partnership with other departments such as education to support skills development in preparation for resettlement and employment. Following a successful pilot, the Reading Agency sought City Bridge Trust funding to extend this work with inmates in 8 London prisons. Through this funding the Reading Agency aims to engage 15% of the London prison population, rising to 25% by the third year; to distribute 88 six book challenge packs; arrange top author visits in each prison; and engage 40, rising to 80 prisoners in year 3, in peer-to-peer mentoring.		
3. Work delivered to date: The Six Book Challenge has successfully run in all 8 prisons, a significant achievement as nearly half believed there would be barriers to running the scheme. In year 1, 991 prisoners took part and 24 reading packs were distributed and in year 2, 1481 prisoners took part and 30 reading packs were distributed. To reward prisons for numbers of completions a gold/silver/bronze award scheme was introduced in 2012. Author events have been held with authors including Andy McNab, Darren Shah, Danny King and Martina Cole with audiences of up to 90 prisoners. The peer mentoring scheme has proved difficult due to logistical challenges. Instead prisoners who complete the challenge have acted as 'champion's' to encourage others to take part.		
The monitoring visit provided an opportunity to see the work taking place in Wandsworth prison first-hand. We met in the prison library with the librarian, orderly, education officer and 6 who had completed the six book challenge. In Wandsworth 75 took part in 2012 and 154 in 2013. All spoke about the difference the challenge had made to them. They talked of how well the incentives that are part of the challenge have worked. These include a six book challenge bag, a certificate, free loan of DVDs – and the most prized of all – a dictionary. This has really publicised the scheme to others in the prison.		

Those we met with were advanced readers and spoke eloquently of the difference the scheme had made to them. They had used the scheme to get into the habit of reading and to push them outside of their comfort zone – reading materials they wouldn't usually chose. They have also established a monthly book club which again works well to encourage participants to read different materials and to have a chance to reflect with others. There are also readers at a more basic level including those with ESOL needs. The flexibility of the Six Book Challenge has meant that they are also able to take part and there are a range of materials for different levels of reading in the library. The prison has 4 reading volunteers who come in to support them and some prisoners act as mentors to others to help them learn to read.

4. Difference made:

What became clear at the meeting was that this scheme was led by the inmates. The orderly had become the chief advocate for the scheme and is credited with the huge increase in numbers of year 2 of the project. But all those involved spread the word and encourage them to join the scheme. The prisoners also had lots of ideas for improvements such as how the library should be part of the induction process – as many prisoners don't know the library is there and may have never been to a library before. The librarian was enthusiastic and talked passionately about the importance of the library being used as a space as well as a resource. Another success has been how the scheme has worked with education. The Education Officer present talked about how they refer people to the scheme and use it as part of their learning not just as an add-on.

In terms of impact the Six Book Challenge had clearly made a difference to rehabilitation and for many was a turning point in their development. One prisoner talked about whether the purpose of prisons was to punish or change. They emphasised that reading is about change – it is about wanting to learn new things and accepting different perspectives. Reading was also seen as empowering. It was commented that you can't be a better father in prison, you can't be a better husband in prison, you can't be a better earner – but you can be a better reader. Despite the successes there have been challenges to the scheme, particularly following prison regime changes and reductions in staffing. This means that many prisoners are not getting their 30 minutes a week entitlement to spend in the library and many creative services have been cut. This means that schemes like the Six Book Challenge are ever more important but staff have to think flexibly to make sure they work.

5. Grants Administration:

Years 1 and 2 of the grant were well reported on and the final report is due in December 2014. No concerns have been raised with the administration of the grant and the Trust has been correctly acknowledged in the 2012/13 and 2013/14 audited annual accounts.

6. Concluding comments:

This is a well-delivered and well-reported grant which has proved the value of a flexible reading scheme with incentives in prisons. The organisation's aim is to run the scheme in all UK prisons and young offender institutions (approx.140) by 2015. In 2013 the Six Book Challenge ran in 100 prisons around the country engaging with 7000 offenders, in line with this target. Key to the success of the scheme is the support of prison staff, and one way Wandsworth and other prisons are looking to increase this is by involving staff as scheme participants. Changes to the prison service have proved challenging and this and other schemes have to be flexible and creative to continue their work successfully. There are lessons here for City Bridge Trust's wider work with the criminal justice system.