

READING AHEAD

Sheffield Libraries supports asylum seekers with Reading Ahead



Reading Ahead is the new name for the *Six Book Challenge*. See www.readingagency.org.uk

Sheffield City Council was an early adopter of the Six Book Challenge (now called Reading Ahead) after library service staff visited a prototype version running in a nearby local authority and immediately saw its potential. "It linked into council plans for raising literacy levels and providing opportunities for all residents," explains library and information officer Sue Taylor. "We started by linking with adult and community education department colleagues; the emphasis was very much on encouraging people to visit libraries and read for pleasure, and we focussed on people who didn't have a tradition of using libraries."

Successful partnerships

Subsequent work with a range of partners has made the Six Book Challenge available to communities including young people from a secure unit, adults with learning disabilities and mental health patients, but the most successful partnerships have been with ESOL and adult literacy classes. Good relationships with committed tutors have helped spread awareness of the

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Challenge across a network of organisations including Ashiana Sheffield, which works with those affected by forced marriage, domestic abuse and violence in the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

Former librarian Rosemary Telfer now volunteers as an ESOL tutor; her classes routinely include asylum seekers from two women's refuges run by Ashiana Sheffield. "Often when they come in, they don't speak a word and don't want to talk - they have no confidence and many have had very little kindness in their lives," she says. "Most also have very little access to education, so the Six Book Challenge is great for them - they can read whatever they like, whenever they like."

"Every time I read I understand more things."

Group visits to Sheffield's Central Library are a key part of Rosemary's teaching. "They get excited when they realise all that's on offer, including IT and e-learning, and that they can bring their children here," she says.

Marjane, 26, has been attending Rosemary's classes after coming to Sheffield from Albania. "When I first thought about reading six books in English, I thought 'Oh my God!'" she remembers. "But I got books from the library, and I read at home. Now I have finished the Challenge, but I have more books to read from the library. Every time I read I understand more things."

Marime, 29, is also a keen Six Book Challenge participant. "I want to do everything, not just housework, so I want to learn more English," she says.

Volunteer English tutor Pat Rockett has led use of the Six Book Challenge with learners from Ashiana Sheffield for the past five years. "They can discuss their books with each other and discover different types of books. I've noticed that their confidence levels improve and this is reflected in improvements in their understanding of English language," she says.

"The Six Book Challenge is a wonderful introduction to reading and using a library service," adds Rosemary Telfer. "It gets them choosing their own materials, looking up words and enables them to use their own time to read and understand - huge things for them. Now they are writing and reading when they weren't before."

"I loved doing the Six Book Challenge."

The Six Book Challenge is now well-established across the city, but the library service continues to look for new partnerships as it prepares to launch Reading Ahead. Meanwhile, its use with ESOL learners is having positive effects for individual completers and their communities.

Jamila, pictured above, who came to the UK from Morocco a year ago had very little English when she arrived, but was determined to improve and find work. "I loved doing the Six Book Challenge, it improved how I use language and I learned new words - before I could not make phrases," she

enthuses. "I like reading; I go into the subject and lose myself in the story. You can start with a short story - just try!"

Jamila has done voluntary mentoring work with children at a local primary school who lack confidence in their reading, and she has been accepted onto a course to study childcare.

"All Six Book Challenge completers in Sheffield are invited to a celebration event and no-one attending could be in any doubt about the significance for them," concludes Sue Taylor. "Often the whole family comes with them and it is clear that finishing the Challenge is seen as a huge achievement. It's my favourite event in the library calendar, to see the joy and pride of the completers."

Please contact genevieve.clarke@readingagency.org.uk if you'd like to find out more about Reading Ahead.