



+READING VOLUNTARY ACTION

The difference we made in 2020–21



Introduction

Every year I say 'I could not be prouder of the RVA Team' but this year I shout it from the rooftops!!

Of course, the year has been challenging, but the team's skills, relationships, flexibility and determination came together just as we were needed. This report highlights some of the ways the RVA staff, trustees and volunteers have worked together to support our town, residents and partners through the Covid year.

Thank you to everyone who has worked with us through the many challenges, we couldn't have done it without you.

Thank you to the RVA Team for your determination to ensure vulnerable residents had food, company, a vaccine and reassurance when they needed it. For supporting the voluntary and community groups to stay safe and digitally connected to the people who needed them.

Thank you to the RVA Trustees who gave time to support us and understood the essential role of RVA.

Thank you to the RVA Volunteer Team who stepped up whenever needed to shop, marshal, support and cheer!

Thank you to the community groups who connected the isolated and provided language skills and understanding when needed.

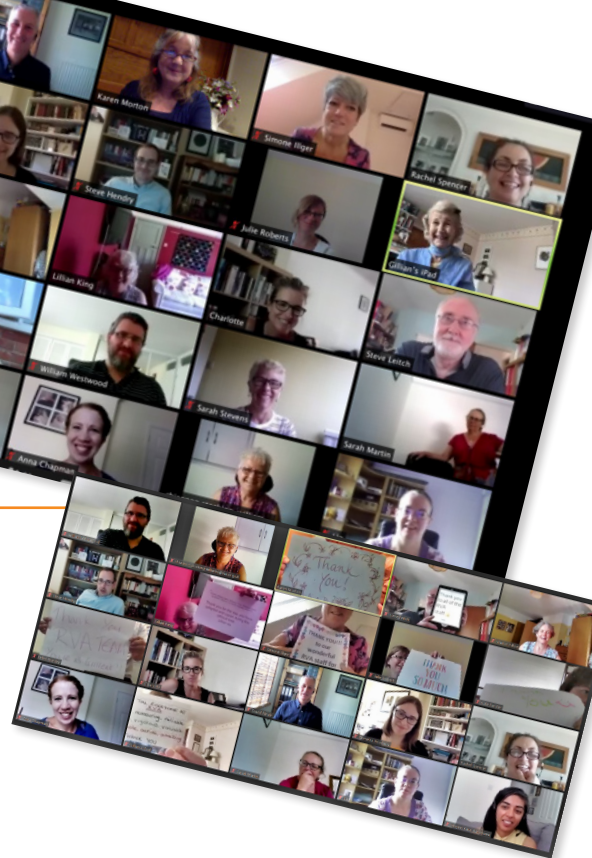
Thank you to all our funders who showed flexibility and responded swiftly.

Thank you to all our fabulous partners in Reading, the Thames Valley and the South West who adopted us as one of their own.

We hope you find the report interesting and look forward to seeing you to celebrate all that was achieved.



Rachel Spencer



Cover images: Azra Raja at the Health on the Move van; RVA's William Westwood accepts a certificate of thanks from the High Sheriff of Berkshire; volunteer Tek Bahadur Gurung from GRNCA at Reading Central and Whitley Vaccination Hub, (vaccine hub photos by Chris Forsey); CEO of Volunteering Matters, Paul Reddish, thanks vaccine hub volunteers as part of the Tour de Thanks (photo by Rhiannon Stocking-Williams).



Contents

RVA key statistics	4
Encouraging volunteering and social action	6
Volunteering service	6
Community food hubs	8
Ready Friends	8
Supporting the voluntary sector	10
Advice service	10
Equality, diversity, and inclusion	12
No one left behind – vaccine support	13
Community grants	14
RVA News	15
VCS Emergencies Partnership	15
Reading Community Lottery	15
Connecting communities across Reading	16
Social Prescribing	16
Wild Being	17
Get Online Reading	18
Improving the lives of young people and families	20
One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership	20
The Parent Employment Wellbeing Project	20
Growing up in Reading – key findings	22
Co-producing local knowledge to achieve change	22
Work with us – how to contact RVA	23

A note on acronyms used

VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
VCO	Voluntary and Community Organisation
BAMER	Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee
RVA	Reading Voluntary Action
CCG	Clinical Commissioning Group
PCN	Primary Care Network
PEW	The Parent Employment Wellbeing Project

Above: The vaccine rollout – see pages 6 and 7. Photo by Chris Forsey

Below: Members of the Reading Green Wellbeing Network at Reading Town Meal. Reading Green Wellbeing Network are part of Wild Being – see page 17



RVA key statistics

Volunteering

Over **150 volunteers** provided **4608 volunteer hours** supporting **17,000** members of the local community to access their first **Covid-19 vaccination** at the Reading Central and Whitley Vaccination Hub. (January–June 2021)

4608 volunteer hours



RVA volunteer Andree-Anne Melancon meets the High Sheriff of Berkshire. Photo by Chris Forsey.

Advice for charities and community groups

From March 2020–21, the RVA Advice Service supported **116 charities** with **477 separate advice sessions**.

116 charities

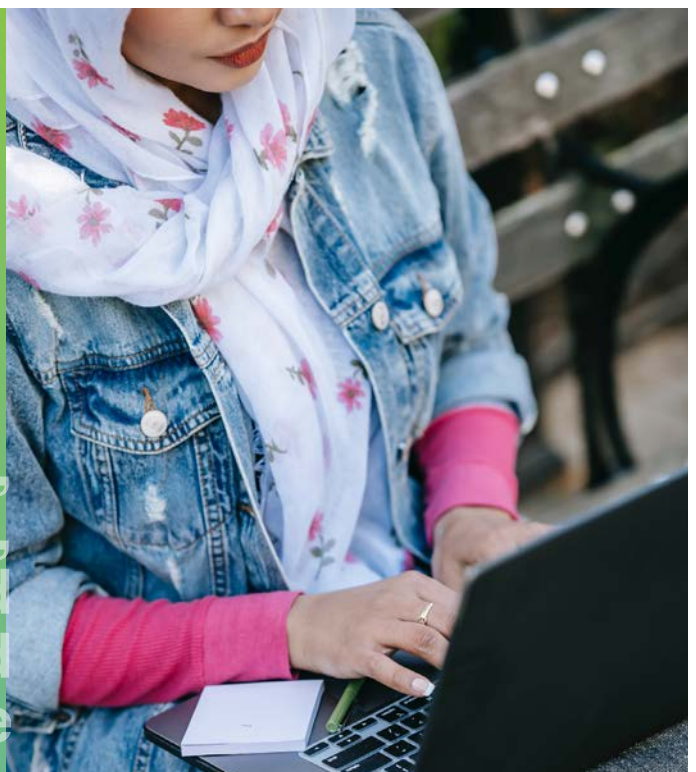


Hempen Co-operative

Digital Inclusion

Get Online supplied **15 laptops, 6 tablets, 4 prepaid broadband offers and 1 smartphone** to **22 households** between April and June 2021. Beneficiaries included BAME households, asylum seekers being housed in local hotels, low-income families with school-aged children and refugee families.

15 laptops, 6 tablets, 4 prepaid broadband offers and 1 smartphone



Better outcomes for families

In 2020/21 **23 participants** were supported through the **Parent Employment Wellbeing Project**, with **39% gaining paid employment**, 43% starting accredited courses or unaccredited training, 21% starting volunteering, 69% engaged in searching and applying for paid work, 52% receiving invitations to attend interviews and **86% reporting improved confidence**.



RVA Team

RVA has welcomed **6 new team members** over the last year – Inclusion Development Worker Azra Raja, Community Participatory Action Research Facilitator Esther Oenga, and Social Prescribing Link Workers Anjum Chaudhry, Patricia Poku, Louise Keane and Helen Murphy.

6 new team members



Funding

Wild Being – a project by RVA and 12 partners – was awarded **£50K from the Thriving Communities Fund**

RVA secured funding in the second half of 2020 to run two small grants schemes – **£10k from Berkshire Community Foundation** for Reading Community Grants and **£20k from Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group** for Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee Mental Health Grants across Reading, West Berkshire and Wokingham. The two small grant schemes enabled the **delivery of 14 projects** comprising a wide range of activities and communities.

Reading Community Lottery is raising **£16,349** for local community causes each year.

**Wild Being awarded
£50K from the Thriving
Communities Fund**



Encouraging volunteering and social action

Volunteering service

In March 2020 with the first signs of the enormity of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic would have here in the UK, one of the few things that seemed certain was that volunteers and volunteering would be at the forefront of the response. In Reading, thousands of people put themselves forward to help in any way they could. Reading Voluntary Action's own initiative, Team Reading, alone saw over 2000 individuals' sign-up within two weeks of launching.

Local voluntary sector organisations were quick to reconfigure their services to ensure that those they support could access services in new ways or to extend that support to a wider audience. The RVA volunteering service was able to support this by linking organisations to additional volunteers and by streamlining the process for individuals to express an interest, avoiding the potential for groups becoming overwhelmed by individual offers of help. From January to June 2021, RVA coordinated volunteer support at the Reading Central and Whitley Vaccination Hub.

Throughout the pandemic we have remained conscious of the positive impact that volunteering can have on not just those benefiting from the support and services volunteers provide but on those undertaking volunteering themselves. For some, volunteering has provided a positive counterpoint to the feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and loss of control the pandemic has created.



I did not know what to expect when I applied to be a volunteer but with very little work of my own I absolutely needed to have a 'purpose'; not just to make time go, but for me to feel like I was helping the cause. I have loved it and met many great people who all share that desire to 'help'... It is a wonderful feeling to be surrounded by lovely people and to feel that, as a team, we really are making a difference.

Jane Brener, Vaccine Hub Volunteer

We know that there is still some distance to go before we can say the crisis is over, however, we are already thinking about the continuing role volunteers and volunteering will play as we move into the recovery stage.

We look forward to working with those who have been inspired by their experiences of volunteering during the crises to continue their involvement and with those for whom volunteering could offer an important step on the journey to recovering their sense of mental, physical and financial wellbeing.

Below, left: RVA volunteers Ona and Rosa attend an event by Berkshire Community Foundation to thank those who have volunteered during the pandemic;

Below: The Tour de Thanks arrives in Reading. Photo by Rhianon Stocking-Williams.

Vaccine rollout

With the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme in late 2020 the work of the volunteering service took on a new direction. In January 2021 RVA began overseeing the coordination of volunteer support at Central and Whitley Vaccination Hub at Garden Hall Watlington House. Volunteers were involved in a wide and evolving range of roles supporting the hub, by the end of June 2021 over **150** volunteers had provided approximately **4608** volunteer hours having helped support around **17,000** members of the local community access their first Covid-19 vaccination.

One of the positive highlights to have come out of the response to the crisis has been the way it has inspired individuals and groups to work across communities towards common goals. One such example of this has been the partnership between RVA and the Greater Reading Nepalese Community Association (GRNCA) working together to support those attending the Garden Hall vaccination hub.



Shopping service

Alongside supporting other organisations, RVA also launched its own shopping service supported by volunteers. Designed to support those not eligible for help via other national or local programmes, the service worked in collaboration with the One Reading Community Hub to reach those unable to access food and other essential items. During the 5 months of the project RVA coordinated a team of over 50 dedicated volunteers to complete 453 shops for 81 households across our town. The service proved a lifeline for some as one shopping service client put it:

'Thank you so much! You all provide such a wonderful service and I hope you know the difference you make, being able to rely on someone to do our shopping for us eases so much pressure... we really appreciate all your help.'



The Greater Reading Nepalese Community Association (GRNCA)

GRNCA has been active in Reading for around 20 years in some form providing a wide range of support, activities and programmes for its members. Activities include an annual football programme that brings together Nepalese communities from across the UK, an annual seaside trip and new year celebrations in April. There are also more regular activities such as language classes allowing younger members of the community to learn how to read and write in their home language and a weekly schedule of popular yoga classes.

During the pandemic many of these classes have moved online. GRNCA has also provided additional support during the period with members of the Executive Committee providing a point

of contact to members of the Nepalese community who struggled to access essential goods, prescriptions or who needed assistance with benefits advice. GRNCA made connections with local grocery stores and pharmacists to put arrangements in place for deliveries. They were also able to help arrange conference calls with benefit agencies to help with communication and offer reassurance to those concerned that their benefits might be stopped during the pandemic.

GRNCA members joined the volunteer team at the Garden Hall in February 2020 to help support the many Nepalese people attending the site to receive their vaccine. Many older members of the community struggled to understand some of the questions being asked and

what was expected of them, GRNCA volunteer were able to provide translation but also reassurance and a friendly welcome to those who may have been nervous or unsure.

The involvement of the GRNCA volunteers at the hub has proven to be a huge benefit to not only members of the Nepalese community but all those attending, as Jagannath Sapkota said

'We were very mindful that it wasn't just Nepalese people we were helping but all those coming to the hub... we were giving back to society where we could, we could see that the doctors, nurses and everyone was working flat out so providing a helping hand has been a great experience from our perspective.'



Community food hubs

RVA strives to strengthen community links across Reading, with leaders who know the concerns of the day and envision plans to address inequalities. Lockdown shed light on work being done to address food waste. It presented a unique opportunity for communities to work with the local authority, Readifood, and each other to make sure no food went to waste and that food got to those who needed it most.

Community food hubs are scattered across Reading, in community centres (Weller Centre), church halls (FoodShare), social clubs (Whitley Community Development Association) and cafes (New Beginnings). These sites had (or quickly secured) infrastructure such as refrigeration and freezer storage, shelving, and a team to collect donations and deliver food parcels in/ around their neighbourhoods. Some hubs partnered with restaurants or others in food service to supply cooked meals as well. Commercial entities, businesses

and schools that had to close suddenly were able to link with these hubs, and that unused food went into food parcels. Food4Families coordinated fresh produce grown locally, harvested and put into food parcels or used as ingredients in cooked meals working with partners, such as Sadaka.

Working with the One Reading Community Hub, these voluntary and community sector partners distributed hundreds of food parcels to vulnerable, isolated individuals and families, or those who never had to rely on support in the past. As the year progressed, these hubs continued to offer surplus food collection in addition to supports such as clothing (eg. winter coats, school uniforms), books and board games, linkages to partners to assist with benefits, energy assistance, mental health and befriending. Community food hubs continue to work together and have started to communicate a shared vision and partnership goals for the future, along with RVA and the local authority.

Ready Friends

The Ready Friends project supports local people, communities, and voluntary sector groups to reduce loneliness and social isolation in Reading. Never before has the need for support to prevent and mitigate the worst impacts of loneliness and social isolation been more urgent. The mandatory requirement to socially isolate during lockdown and beyond presented many people who had never experienced it before with what turned into months of loneliness and isolation, and for those who had, their lives became even harder as their usual places for social contact (like lunch clubs, community centres, libraries, cafés and friends' front rooms) were closed to them, overnight.

This year, the Ready Friends coordinator managed two new grants programmes: the Reading Community Grants scheme funded by Berkshire Community Foundation and the Winter Mental Health for Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee communities grants scheme funded by Berkshire West CCG (see page 14). The two schemes funded 14 new projects designed to meet the urgent need of individuals and families facing the greatest impact of Covid-19. This has connected us with VCOs that we have not worked with much (or at all) before and has enabled us to learn more about what works well in reducing loneliness in a diverse range of cultures and communities. The Ready Friends Coordinator has been sharing this learning within local operational and strategic forums and more widely through Ready Friends News.

Photos by the Weller Centre: (top left) helping Father Christmas to arrange his socially distanced visits; (top right) some of the 3000 lunches provided to local residents; getting ready for a day's food parcel delivery.



Befriending forums

Befriending forums bring together local people who want to take action on loneliness and social isolation. In 2020–21 they took place quarterly, via Zoom. The forums are popular with 100+ participants from 25 VCOs (with a combined volunteer force of over 1,000 befrienders and other 1-2-1 support volunteers) attending forums since June 2020. Topics have included:

- Local mental health support during lockdown and Covid-19 – including a presentation by BHFT's Talking Therapies
- Language and online barriers to getting the right information about activities to reduce loneliness - and safety during Covid-19
- The Psychology of Loneliness, presented by Dr Kalpa Kharicha
- The Right Service at the Right Time – improving timely access to community groups

Ready Friends resources

Ready Friends resources are for local people looking for activities for themselves and others, and for people who work directly with individual service users – in social prescribing and family support.

- During the first lockdown, the Ready Friends Coordinator created three new sections for the Ready Friends Toolkit, reflecting the need for people to **connect and participate with online activities**: Live online meet ups and social activities, Telephone and video befriending, Storytelling, podcasts and audiobooks.
- The Ready Friends Coordinator added new training opportunities to the RVA Social Action and Volunteering Training Hub, which provides access to training opportunities for local people wanting to **volunteer to 'make a difference'** – many for the first time. Not only will it skill people up to support their neighbours, families and friends facing loneliness, it will also help them to develop knowledge and essential skills (such as active listening, wellbeing, mental health awareness and introduction to volunteering) that they can take that with them when they apply to local VCOs for befriending volunteering opportunities – thus reducing the need for those VCOs to train them.

- The Ready Friends Coordinator created a video as a contribution to Reading Borough Council's **Winter Wellness campaign 2020–21**, promoting actions we can all take to reduce loneliness and isolation in our daily lives and well as raising awareness of relevant volunteering opportunities such as befriending, and highlighted the local VCOs that are currently recruiting.

Supporting volunteer recruitment and retention

- The Ready Friends Coordinator produced specially-made **Thank You cards** for local VCOs to request for free, to send to their volunteers in roles that help reduce loneliness. 600 cards were distributed to 12 local VCOs.
- In November 2020, RVA hosted (on Zoom) a second **celebration of friendship volunteering**, with a range of activities including a wellbeing session and a discussion on what works well in befriending.

Reading GOLDERS enjoying a picnic at Caversham Court Gardens in August 2021 – a collaboration between The Globe Lunch Club, Readibus and Reading Association for the Blind (RAB), with support from Ready Friends. Photo on this page and page 10 by Sharon Bignall.


Toolkit

Reduce loneliness and social isolation in your community, street and for family and friends



Supporting the voluntary sector

Advice Service

The pandemic has underscored the vital importance of infrastructure support for charities and community groups, especially access to timely, high-quality advice, information and training. When the first coronavirus lockdown happened, RVA's Advice Service, led by Herjeet Randhawa, was inundated with requests for one-to-one support on crucial issues. In December 2020 the Advice Service received national recognition for the support given to the sector during the pandemic, with Herjeet receiving NAVCA's Rising Star Leadership Award. Herjeet said: "I am really honoured to receive this award, but none of it is achieved alone. All those working and volunteering in the voluntary and community sector, including the whole RVA team, have shown such incredible dedication, skill and kindness in our communities in the last 8 months, even when it has been tough. It's shown me the strength we have together to achieve social justice for all in our town."



Advice on legal and governance matters

RVA's Advice Service provides free and confidential legal and technical advice to those running charities and voluntary organisations in Reading. This year, the advice to charity managers and trustees has largely involved legal and governance queries to assist organisations to respond to and recover from the impact of the pandemic. Common areas of advice sought:

- Emergency planning / adapting services
- Mid-longer term planning
- Staffing and volunteer issues
- Reassessing financial strategy and assistance with funding
- Effective Board meetings and AGMs
- Buildings and leases
- Contracts and services
- Employment issues, including furlough and restructures
- Government guidance, risk assessments and Covid-secure workplaces

Number of charities supported: **116**

Number of separate advice sessions: **477**

The Advice Service continues to offer advice via telephone, email and Zoom, Monday to Friday, either one-to-one to Charity managers or trustees, or by way of Board or Committee facilitation.

Many thanks for your prompt comments on the business plan, we will incorporate your great comments and will apply online soon. (Adapting services and funding advice)

Thanks so much for the draft and extended support. We held a fruitful meeting for the committee and drafted attached documents for your kind review. (Advice on policies)

Thank you so much for all the very helpful advice you gave me today on the phone. And thank you too for sending all the links that you mentioned during our conversation. That will give us lots of information to work with when planning for a remotely held AGM. (Governance advice and planning an AGM in lockdown)



Training

RVA offers a range of training for local charities and community groups. During the pandemic year we migrated to offering Zoom training and adapted our training programme to meet demand. We have also updated our training page (www.rva.org.uk/training) to include free and heavily subsidised local and national providers on a range of topics. Examples of training we delivered:

- Governance and planning
- Adapting your services
- Re-opening and risk assessments
- Trustee Training
- Volunteer Management
- Designated Safeguarding Officer
- Treasurer Training
- Unconscious Bias

Everything was pitched at the right level and attempting the scenarios in the second half of the session consolidated everything. Wonderfully delivered and so helpful, thanks for the really useful links too

Trustee Training

Thank you very much for the "Keeping it Legal" training today. I learnt so much from the training and I'm really looking forward to putting this into practice.

Volunteer Management training

Funding advice and support

Our revamped funding page (www.rva.org.uk/funding) allows local charities to keep up to date with the most relevant opportunities. This can be followed up with one-to-one support through the Advice Service.

The one-to-one session was extremely useful, and resulted in our successful grant application. I would welcome the opportunity to attend further sessions in future.

Safe and Sound Good Governance Accreditation

Safe and Sound is Reading's very own accreditation recognising good governance in charities and is available as a free resource to all charities offering services in our town. This accreditation is recognised locally and nationally by funders and partners. RVA has now relaunched Safe and Sound following a pause during the first half of the pandemic year when we were responding to the more immediate requests for legal and governance advice.

During this pause in Safe and Sound we also channelled our developmental governance advice to support smaller groups, embedded in local diverse communities to ensure equality of support during the pandemic as such groups are supporting individuals who are unlikely or unable to access more mainstream services. An example of this is the governance support given to groups funded through the Reading Community Fund and in partnership with the RVA Ready Friends project.



Equality, diversity, and inclusion

For the past year, we have had an Inclusion Development worker in place which has allowed RVA to reflect on its own inclusion journey. We have made some changes to our service clarifying our statement of intent and commitment to inclusion throughout our organisation. Our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion website page contains this statement and articles and resources to support organisations who are developing their own inclusion journey. At RVA, we are individually and collectively reviewing how inclusive our services are so that we can take steps forward for active change. For example, staff and trustees worked together to review our trustee recruitment cycle to make our recruiting for trustees more inclusive.

This work has also involved providing specific advice and support for organisations that are developing equality, diversity and inclusion. Our Inclusion Development Worker, Azra Raja, offers a personalised service that helps to focus on aims and priorities that are pertinent to each organisation so that tangible actions can result in effective change. We have provided this service to 18 organisations so far since January 2021, to help develop their inclusive practices. Areas focused on include diversity in staff, trustee and volunteer recruitment, adapting services so they are more accessible to a wider range of people and thinking about the role both individuals and organisations as a whole can play in improving inclusion.

After an initial development meeting with the CEO of Parenting Special Children (PSC), an organisation that provides specialist support for Berkshire families who have young people with special needs, we have had further meetings about the work they are undertaking on their journey to better inclusion. They have produced a working document citing information provided by RVA and a training session for staff and trustees on their strategy day has led to short-term, medium term and long-term actions for PSC that they can all work together on.

We thank RVA for their knowledge, expertise and support in helping us to work towards ensuring that equality, diversity and inclusion is part of every aspect of the charity. Parenting Special Children.

You have given me lots to think about and inspired me to take these ideas forward.

A huge thank you to Azra from RVA for her discussion with our volunteers this morning on the importance of equality and diversity and how we can contribute both individually and as a project. We all have a lot to take away from the discussion.

Berkshire West Your Way



I was honoured and privileged to be involved in a team collaboration with various organisations to work in the community as part of my Ethnically Diverse

Patient Experience Facilitator role. I was able to provide health checks to members of the community on behalf of the Royal Berkshire Hospital (RBH) Patient Experience team. This was a collaboration with Berkshire West CCG and Reading Borough Council (RBC) on the Health on The Move van (HOTM). RBC and the CCG worked on providing health promotion and the health checks, and we were joined by Compass Recovery College, Talking Therapies mental health support from Prospect Hospital, Social Prescribers and Reading Voluntary Action (RVA) to provide support and share information for our ethnically diverse communities.

Sarah Lupai, Lead Enteral Nutrition Clinical Nurse Specialist and Lead Ethnically Diverse Patient Experience Facilitator from Royal Berkshire Hospital



No one left behind – vaccine support

Existing inequalities have been further starkly highlighted during the past year, and some groups of people have been disproportionately affected. One example is how Covid-19 has disproportionately affected people with learning disabilities and people from an ethnic minority background.

RVA worked with community partners to make sure everyone who wanted the vaccine could access one. We set up a VCS Vaccine Support helpline to coordinate community transport and offer buddy support. £17,000 was distributed in small grants to enable community groups to participate.

Small community groups and larger organisations contributed to a VCS Vaccine Support Group, which fed community-specific information on local need directly into planning around the vaccine rollout. The Vaccine Support Group highlighted a need for practical support with language, transport, or specific VCS services, in order for service users to be able to attend their vaccine appointment. RVA's Voluntary Sector Vaccine Support helpline has been live since March 2021, offering information and support for those who require it to access their vaccine.



RVA has also been involved in collaborating with Berkshire West CCG and RBC which has resulted in the following:

- The needs of different communities being taken into account and included during decision making in regards to the vaccine rollout.
- Clearer, consistent messaging.
- Translated materials.
- Planning events in collaboration with community groups and organisations so that they could advise on what was most effective when the 'Health on the Move Van' visited parts of Reading.
- Pop-up clinics and Health Vans being located in identified areas in Reading and advertised appropriately, to the very people it is hoping will access the services offered, such as health checks and the vaccine.

RVA worked with partners to support the Health on the Move van providing pop-up vaccine and health hubs within neighbourhoods where take up was slow.

The 'Health on the Move Van' has been located in different areas in Reading. On 5 separate occasions when ACRE and the Warehouse hosted the van, there were a total of 128 vaccines administered. Feedback from community groups resulted in health checks being offered on the van as well the vaccine. These blood pressure and BMI checks were very popular and were carried out by the Lead Enteral Nutrition Clinical Nurse Specialist and Lead Ethnically Diverse Patient Experience Facilitator from Royal Berkshire Hospital.

The majority of vaccinations and healthcare checks given to people were from an ethnic minority background who also had an additional language to English.

Reading Voluntary Action is excited to continue this journey of providing cross-sector inclusion work and inclusion support to the VCS, so that those who may otherwise be left behind due to the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, are not forgotten, but receive the support and services they need to enable them to prosper.

Vaccine Support Line Case Studies

A pregnant woman was unsure of having the vaccine but wanted to speak to someone as she was finding it difficult to speak to her GP. Her first language was Urdu, though she was able to communicate in English. She spoke to an RVA staff member before having her first dose on the Health on the Move van. She rang the vaccine support line before her second dose was due, and found out that she could attend Broad St Mall rather than the van. Both doses of the vaccine were administered a couple of months before her baby's due date.

A recently-arrived refugee was passing the Health on the Move van and had no English. RVA used Language line to translate and the first dose of their vaccine was successfully administered, with the whole process, and any procedures involved, being translated at each step.

A person who had mobility issues and was anxious about receiving their first dose, but wanted help in accessing it, called the helpline. RVA arranged for Readibus to collect him from his home in West Reading, to be vaccinated in East Reading, and he found the experience reassuring and suitable for him. RVA followed up with a call before his second dose was due so that he was able to follow the same process and access his second dose in the same way.



Community grants

Reading Community Grants Programme

Eight projects received a share of the £10k funding that was made possible through a new partnership with Berkshire Community Foundation (BCF). The purpose of the programme is to enable small community-based groups, mostly run entirely by volunteers, to support some of the most vulnerable people in Reading affected by Covid-19. Schemes include telephone story-telling for older people who are still shielding; socially-distanced community gardening training; supporting older people to get online and cycling and walking sessions to engage and support young people. Grants were awarded to:

- British Islamic Gardens – Aisha Masjid Garden Project
- Depression Xpression – Peer Support Groups
- Greater Reading Nepalese Community Association – Vitality through Virtual Platform
- Reading Refocus – Community Active Programme
- Reading Sudanese Community – Reading Sudanese Community
- South Reading Patient Voice – Oldies Online Too, Utulivu – Story Telling, Poems and Music Telephone Conversations for the senior members of the community
- We Men – Community Engagement Project

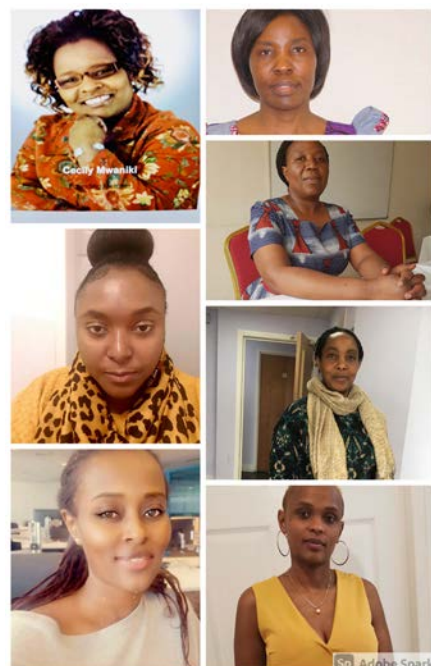


Winter mental health support for Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee communities

Six voluntary and community organisations shared a £20,000 NHS England grant aimed at supporting the mental health of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) communities over the winter.

NHS Berkshire West CCG secured the funding and has worked closely with key partners to allocate the money through a grants scheme open to community groups and charities across Berkshire West. Reading Voluntary Action administered and hosted the grant scheme, working with Involve (Wokingham) and Volunteer Centre West Berkshire. Grants were awarded to:

- Reading Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality – to fund further outreach work, engagement and raise awareness.
- Autism Berkshire and Alafia – for advice and support sessions for parents and carers.
- Community United West Berkshire – to fund two online forums with small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) employers and their employees from BAMER communities on their mental well-being.
- Reading Community Learning Centre – to expand capacity to support BAMER women with extreme mental health needs.
- Time to Talk, (a West Berkshire group) – to fund culturally sensitive engagement and counselling for young BAMER adults.
- Reading Refugee Support group – to support their work with people who are asylum seekers and in need of mental health support.





RVA News

Our website and our weekly newsletter, RVA News, are our main communication channels, letting the local VCS know about news, events, jobs, funding and training opportunities. At the beginning of the pandemic we sent RVA news twice weekly to stay on top of updates and changing guidance, as well as fortnightly Team Reading emails to people who had signed up as coronavirus volunteers. We also set up Coronavirus Community Action pages on our website, directing individuals and groups to support and advice from local and national sources, including translated materials about coronavirus testing and guides to coping with lockdowns and managing feelings about lockdowns easing. Since the beginning of the vaccination programme, we have communicated information about the vaccine rollout locally, including practical support available to access vaccines and good news stories about the volunteers supporting the vaccine hubs.

VCS Emergencies Partnership

Reading Voluntary Action is the Thames Valley liaison lead for the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Emergencies Partnership. The VCS Emergencies Partnership is made up of a range of organisations within the sector and co-chaired by the British Red Cross and NAVCA. It aims to improve coordination at national and local levels before, during and after emergencies, helping people prepare, respond and recover.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership aims to fill the gap when there is not enough local capacity to provide the support needed in an emergency. If local councils for voluntary service, local resilience forums and local authority hubs cannot provide the support a local organisation needs, the VCS Emergencies Partnership can step in to facilitate provision of that support.

Over the last year, the VCS Emergencies Partnership has been responding to the evolving Covid-19 crisis. Longer-term, the partnership's goal is to establish a framework of response for future local or national emergencies.

Reading Community Lottery

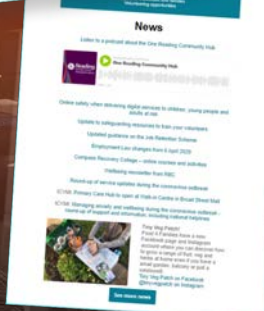
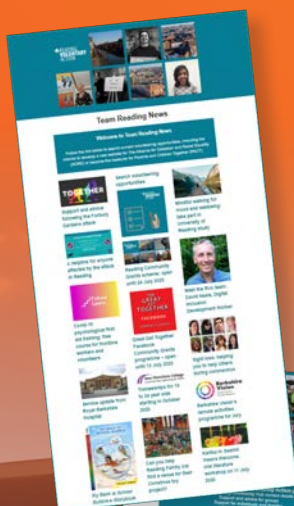
Reading Community Lottery is a weekly lottery operated by Gatherwell supporting good causes in the Reading area. Lotteries are a fun and effective way for causes to raise much-needed funds in these difficult times. By getting more people on board, they don't just raise funds, they also raise awareness. Reading Community Lottery was launched in January 2020, and now supports over 50 good causes.

Sign up

It's free and easy for local charities and groups to sign up at www.readingcommunitylottery.co.uk. You can then share your own page with supporters, and access bespoke marketing materials. Causes keep 50% of tickets sold to your supporters, with 10% going into a general fund supporting all good causes in the area.

Play

Tickets cost £1 per week and players can also register at www.readingcommunitylottery.co.uk.





Connecting communities across Reading

Social Prescribing

RVA's Social Prescribing service links people aged 16 and over to the activities and support offered by Reading's voluntary and community groups, empowering people to improve their health and wellbeing. Our Social Prescribing Link Workers help people to identify what matters to them and work out how to connect with the community activities that might make a difference.

It's estimated that one in five of the people who go to see their GP are troubled by things that can't be cured by medical treatment. GPs tell us that they spend significant amounts of time dealing with the effects of poor housing, debt, stress and loneliness. Many people are overwhelmed and can't reach out to make the connections that could make a difference to their situation. This is especially true for people who have long-term conditions, who need support with their mental health, who are lonely or isolated, or who have complex social needs which affect their wellbeing.

NHS England

In November 2020, RVA launched an expanded Social Prescribing service working with Primary Care Networks across Reading. The team now has 8 Social Prescribing Link Workers working across all of Reading's GP surgeries.

Adapting to online Social Prescribing

The Social Prescribing team were able to seamlessly transfer from face-to-face appointments to telephone and email, allowing the service to remain fully active throughout. They reached out to former clients, with some opting for regular weekly/ fortnightly wellbeing calls. Some of these continue in these uncertain times. A new approach to client interactions was established to better suit remote appointments and to provide clients with more regular contact when deemed beneficial. The team collated a wide range of online resources to support client wellbeing while 'real world' sources of support closed or adjusted services.

The Social Prescribing team played a central role in providing support to those seeking assistance through the One Reading Community Hub. The team were among those providing initial response to residents directed towards RVA for help, providing signposting to the RVA Shopping Service, online wellbeing services and statutory and voluntary sector partners. From April 2020 to June 2021 RVA accepted 313 referrals into service.

I also just wanted to say what an amazing team and service you are. I receive the most incredible feedback from any clients who you are in contact with/supporting and I wanted to pass that on. Thank you for all you do. I can't tell you enough how grateful both patients, and I, are for your service.

Talking Therapies referrer

Feedback from clients

- Really grateful. She said I was her "lifeline."
- "contact has been helpful during lockdown – we have had a lot of chats over the past few months".
- "Wants us to keep in touch, said I'd cheered him up & made his day by phoning".
- She reports that with the support of her GP and Social Prescribing she feels 'more at peace' and positive about the future.

Anna

Anna was initially referred to us in 2019. She had a recent diagnosis of Autism and was struggling with anxiety. We have been working with her since then, initially referring to Berkshire West Your Way, who she received support from over several months. She has also taken on some training which is going well, and we have discussed the possibility of volunteering in the future to support this. We have maintained regular contact over the last year as Anna has said she finds this very helpful, particularly during the Covid restrictions and uncertainty.

Jana

Jana is a woman in her 40s referred via Talking Therapies. She has several long-term conditions, some which inhibit her mobility, and has been feeling isolated and low in mood. This has all been exacerbated by Covid-19 which has also had an impact on impending medical appointments to help her deal with her conditions.

During the Wellbeing Assessment we identified some possible options in terms of socialising, support and managing time in the day. A referral to Recovery College has resulted in Jana participating in weekly sessions which she enjoys and feels a sense of support from. There are also other options of interest to Jana once things begin to resume. She says she feels much more supported now.





Wild Being

RVA and partners are delivering a project designed to help people of Reading to recover from Covid-19 through the power of social prescribing. The Wild Being project will increase social connectedness and help Reading communities cope with the impact of Covid-19, as part of a national initiative to embed social prescribing in communities and healthcare. It has been awarded £50k funding from the Thriving Communities Fund.

There is already a vibrant social prescribing network in Reading, which involves over 80 organisations providing holistic social, physical and cultural activities to improve wellbeing and support diverse communities. This project will enable 300 participants to benefit from an extensive programme of activities to boost their mental health, skills, and relationships.

Partners and roles

- Reading Voluntary Action – project lead and coordination
- The MERL, on behalf of Museums Partnership Reading – lead for arts and culture
- Sport in Mind – lead for sports and physical activities
- Reading Green Wellbeing Network – lead for nature and the environment
- Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality (ACRE) – engaging BAMER communities
- Reading Community Learning Centre – engaging isolated BAMER women
- CommuniCare – lead for advice and guidance



- Compass Recovery College – delivering mental health and wellbeing support on a range of activities
- Parents and Children Together (PACT), Alana House – supporting women who are vulnerable, or at risk of offending or reoffending
- Rosetta Life – providing pathways from hospital into culture and partnership activities
- Age UK Berkshire – engaging older people

The activities

Weekly physical activity sessions will be tailored to people experiencing mental illness, with a core focus on those with severe and enduring conditions. Over 350 one-hour sessions will be offered to adults of all ages, genders and fitness levels, including football, table tennis, cricket, yoga, tai chi and walking.

There will also be accessible, friendly and hyper-local pop-up sessions, offering a mix of gardening and nature-based activities, throughout the growing season, carried out on a drop-in basis in a variety of locations, including the sites of partner organisations.

There will be arts and culture activities through the Museums Partnership Reading. At MERL, participants will be able to explore creative interests through experiences such as Memory Making, Hands on Heritage and Dance for Health. Garden, cafe and gallery spaces will be used to offer Covid-safe opportunities for reflection, refreshment and enjoyment.

Employability programmes will include access to Higher Education and career development, with a range of workshops aimed at young people, aged 16+, as well as an offer of advice and financial wellbeing.

A long-term vision for social prescribing and sustainable networks in Reading

Wild Being also sets out a long-term vision for social prescribing. A sustainable network will see stakeholders, commissioners and funders invest in the programme and work together better to make best use of resources. New peer support and community initiatives will be developed to help address health and economic inequalities in the region. And social prescribing will have the opportunity to support individuals through the Covid-19 recovery and beyond.

About the Thriving Communities Fund

Wild Being is supported by the Thriving Communities Fund, which aims to improve and increase social prescribing community activities by bringing together place-based partnerships of local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise projects. The Thriving Communities Fund has been made possible thanks to funding from the National Academy for Social Prescribing, Arts Council England, Natural England and Historic England, with support from NHS England and NHS Improvement, Sport England, the Office for Civil Society, the Money & Pensions Service and NHS Charities Together.

The National Academy of Social Prescribing (NASP) is an organisation dedicated to the advancement of social prescribing through promotion, collaboration and innovation. They work to create partnerships, across the arts, health, sports, leisure, and the natural environment, alongside other aspects of our lives, to promote health and wellbeing at a national and local level. They champion social prescribing and the work of local communities in connecting people for wellbeing.

Supported by the Thriving Communities Fund, made possible thanks to



Images: Reading Green Wellbeing Network – (top left) Growing Healthy Conversations by Food4Families and (top right) Thrive at Reading Town Meal; (left) gardening at The MERL.



Get Online Reading

Digital life has been vital during the pandemic: helping people connect with their loved ones, maintain work and social connections, get timely access to Covid-19 information from national and local government, set up online shopping deliveries and do online banking. We know that pre-pandemic, there was a digital divide in Reading, and that the pandemic has only exacerbated this.

The Get Online project works to reduce this divide by providing help, support and equipment to households who need it. While the face-to-face service has not been possible, the project has helped clients remotely on a range of topics including getting started with Zoom video calling and setting up devices.

There is very little up-to-date information on the exact digital exclusion situation and Get online is also working to provide evidence and intelligence around digital exclusion in Reading that can be used to target services and attract larger investment. RVA partnered with the University of Reading and the Whitley Researchers to do a survey into digital exclusion in Reading, and the results were published in January 2021. The Get Online project is also working on a crowdsourced map showing the location of free wi-fi hotspots around Reading.

Get Online assistance scheme

In 2021, Get Online secured £5k funding from the NHS for digital inclusion for people over 58 in Reading and £7k for digital inclusion for people under 58 in Reading. The scheme has therefore been able to offer equipment and support to get broadband for households that are not online because of financial constraints. The scheme is tailored to the individual household's requirements, identifying and purchasing an appropriate computer or mobile device, finding the best broadband deal and offering financial assistance if possible, and giving support to get started. So far, the scheme has benefited more than 22 of Reading's most deprived households. Beneficiaries have included BAME households, asylum seekers being housed in local hotels, low-income families with school-aged children and refugee families.





Census support service

The Get Online project successfully applied for funding to support the census in the spring of 2021. The project saw a team of 8 trained advisers helping householders to complete the census face-to-face at Reading Central Library and remotely by phone.

Get Online case studies

All names have been changed.

Hamid

Hamid has two children (aged 5 and 12 years) who are at home due to the current situation and completing online learning. The schools send worksheets via online portals and gives the children blank paper on which to complete the work but doesn't print the worksheets. The Get Online assistance scheme bought a printer and spare ink cartridge for the family, and they tell us this had made a real difference.

Usman

Usman lives with his wife and his two children who are of secondary school age and currently learning online due to the current situation and lockdown. Usman is currently searching and applying for jobs, his wife is undertaking a course to improve her English which is now being delivered online, and his children are completing learning online due to the current situation and lockdown. The Get Online assistance scheme bought the family an extra laptop to allow them to do all their online activities. Usman sent us a delightful email of appreciation with a picture of his son using the laptop for online education.

Adam

Adam suffers from anxiety and lives with his partner and three children (aged up to 3 years old). He is in debt and claiming benefits so unable to afford a device. He has broadband in the home and he and his partner have smartphones but they did not have any computers. He has been trying to search and apply for suitable paid positions and engage with support services, but some of this has involved reading documents that it has not always possible for him to open using a phone. The Get Online assistance scheme bought the family a laptop, and Adam can now apply for jobs more easily and fully engage with his support workers to help him gain more confidence. He has already started engaging with case workers in online meetings for the first time.

Five families

We had an enquiry from a local refugee support charity about 5 single mothers living in flats in one building. They were struggling to get internet access using pay as you go data, and they couldn't afford the frequent top-ups. Some of the women are applying for courses at Reading College, and internet will be absolutely crucial so that they can study. Internet is also essential for the children's education as well as for the women to improve their English and access resources for mental health. The Get Online assistance scheme bought a wi-fi hotspot for the 5 families to share, with 3 months of unlimited data.

Caroline

A social worker contacted us about Caroline, who has a complex lifestyle with drug dependency, and is vulnerable to physical, financial and sexual abuse. She is not able to access the community to complete shopping or any related social activities without help. This make her a target for exploitation by her associate. She recently got a smartphone, which will improve her independence and reduce the risk of financial exploitation as she would be able to shop online for herself and access activities such as therapy groups, but she couldn't afford pay as you go data. The Get Online assistance scheme bought a wi-fi hotspot for Caroline, with a prepaid data plan that could last up to a year or more.

Michael

Michael is a vulnerable adult currently living with his son, and concerns have been raised of financial and physical abuse by Michael's son and his friends who visit frequently. Michael had a panic alarm when he lived alone before his son moved in, but this is now deactivated. He wants it activated again, but in secret because his son may object to it or even remove it. At the suggestion of social services the Get Online assistance scheme bought Michael an easy-to-use big button mobile phone so he can call for help easily when in distress.

Improving the lives of young people and families

One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership

One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership is a multi-agency partnership committed to delivering better outcomes for children, young people, and families, and developing a local consensus on how to work together in Reading. RVA sits on the strategic partnership board, participates in multi-agency school review meetings, and manages its monthly newsletter and web resources at www.rva.org.uk/one-reading. With schools working remotely this last year, partners coordinated with designated safeguard leadership, hosted virtual school review meetings, and linked schools and families to support via the One Reading Community Hub. In the winter months, this team helped ensure food and heating vouchers got to families as well as links to voluntary and community support.

Subscribe to the One Reading Children and Young People's Partnership newsletter at: www.rva.org.uk/one-reading-subscribe



The Parent Employment Wellbeing Project

The Parent Employment Wellbeing project, funded by the European Social Fund and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, first ran from July 2020 to July 2021. Further funding has now been secured, enabling the project to support a second cohort of parents from October 2021 to September 2022.

The project focuses on wellbeing needs first and then traditional forms of employment support. It followed the Stronger Together project, funded by the European Social Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund, which ended in June 2020. During the Stronger Together project it was clear that challenges to parents' wellbeing and achievement needed to be identified and addressed before courses, training, volunteering, vacancies and career paths could even be discussed let alone explored.

The aim of the Parent Employment Wellbeing project is to engage and support parents who are not in employment towards and into training, courses, voluntary work and paid employment. Anna Chapman, the School and Parent Employment Officer, works with parents on a one-to-one basis, in a trauma-informed and holistic way, exploring their needs, ability and aspirations and identifying the challenges and barriers to their wellbeing and achievements. Anna provides tailored, up-to-date information, advice and guidance including referrals and signposting to organisations and websites offering other support, and agrees objectives with parents to improve their confidence, independence, social inclusion and employability. Anna liaises with partners across sectors, acting as the link between parents, schools and organisations.

During 2020, face-to-face meetings became telephone and video calls. Appointments with parents also shifted in focus to theirs and their children's wellbeing (physical, mental and emotional), practical needs (food and clothing), finances (benefits), concerns regarding the current situation and looking after, entertaining and home-schooling their children during lockdowns as well as their anxieties about the uncertainties surrounding the future. Anna concentrated on listening to parents, encouraging, motivating and reassuring them, helping them to establish and maintain a daily/weekly structure and routine, meeting their practical needs such as sourcing and applying for funding and completing referrals for food parcels and clothing, and emailing links to resources regarding Covid-19, wellbeing, coping during lockdown, home-schooling, exercise, and activities for children.

PEW participants in 2020/21

23 participants in total
43% had disabilities
78% were from ethnic minorities
78% were women

PEW outcomes in 2020/21

39% gained paid employment
43% started accredited courses or unaccredited training
21% started volunteering
69% engaged in searching and applying for suitable paid work
52% received invitations to attend interviews
86% improved their confidence



Education & Skills
Funding Agency





Feedback from parents

Thank you for your moral support. Your kind words were like medicine during such a difficult time.

Now I'm happy, thank you for helping me it really means more to me than I can ever explain.

Thank you so much you don't know how much it means to us and what you're doing for me I can't thank you enough, it's things like what's happened today with UC that makes me just want to give in so badly but I know I need to drive forward so kids have a future.

I cannot thank you enough :) Thank you so much your support, encouragement, sincerity and help.

You are doing a great job by helping people to get employment.

After being referred for clothing, shoes and pyjamas: The items have arrived. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I want to search for a word that expresses my feelings. I can't find words that describe my feeling. Children are very happy. Thank you again.

Lisa

Lisa is a single parent to one son. She has a heart condition, physical disability, alopecia, anxiety and low confidence. She is in debt, lacks social inclusion and needs childcare when working. Lisa worked up until August 2020 in a nursery but resigned when she returned to work after being furloughed due to childcare and health concerns as a direct result of Covid-19. She is passionate about working with children with special educational needs.

Since registering with the project, Lisa received links to advice and support regarding heart conditions, mental health difficulties, coronavirus, lockdown and wellbeing, debt, being a single parent, childcare, activities for children and live online meetups. She also attended hospital appointments, gaining up-to-date medical information. Her confidence was low but this improved immediately as she started recognising her existing strengths and skills, and saw progression via her Personal Action Plans.

She received help with identifying charities and schools for children with special educational needs, and completed a two-week course where she achieved five certificates including Understanding Specific Learning Difficulties, Behaviours that Challenge and Safeguarding and Prevent. She completed an online Level 2 Teaching Assistant course and started searching and applying for suitable paid positions. Lisa received assistance with completing an application form and received invitations to attend and attended two interviews. She was referred to Smart Works and was offered part-time paid employment as a Teaching Assistant at a local primary school.

During her last appointment, Lisa stated she thought "the one thing which held me back is my anxiousness and I feel I have a good grip on it now".

Chris

Chris lives with his partner and three children, aged 3, 1, and 6 months. He was referred by Brighter Futures for Children. He left school at 16 and has experience working in retail, leisure and construction. He was sacked by his most recent employer in 2019 due to difficulties with the manager and he has not been able to gain employment since. Chris has severe anxiety and depression for which he is on prescribed medication and has experienced traumatic situations in his life. He is in debt, struggling financially and had a number of housing issues including damp (all five members of the family are sleeping in one room), a kitchen assessed to be unsafe by the Family Worker, other health, safety and fire concerns, and most recently, rats.

Through PEW, Chris was referred for food parcels and a free Easter pack

from The Cowshed. He received a free laptop through the Get Online Assistance Scheme which had a significant impact on his mental health and confidence. His partner commented in a meeting that "he is so much more motivated". He was referred to Reading Frontline Debt Advice, receiving detailed information and advice from them. Through the PEW project, contact was also made with Launchpad Reading, Citizens Advice Reading, and Reading Borough Council regarding Chris's living conditions. Chris received information and advice from Launchpad Reading and Citizens Advice Reading and was able to contact Environmental Health. This led to the landlord addressing some of the issues (albeit after he had threatened to evict them and give them a "bad" reference for a future tenancy for contacting Environmental Health).

Chris gained information about an CSCS course at Activate Learning and received assistance with completing the five enrolment forms for this course. He started the course, and also attended a Construction Virtual Careers Event about which he had been informed. By attending this online event, Chris gained accurate and up-to-date information and advice about the construction industry and the current vacancies and training available, and met employers. This improved his confidence, self-esteem and independence. Despite several setbacks, Chris completed the course and not only took but passed the two tests enabling him to work on building sites. Two employers are already in contact with him and he is waiting to apply for vacancies.



Growing up in Reading – key findings

In March 2021, RVA published the key findings from research into what it is like to grow up in Reading. The research was shaped and carried out by a Youth Social Action Team supported by RVA and the University of Reading Participation Lab. It was completed before the start of the pandemic, but the pandemic has made the priorities identified by the Youth Social Action Team – especially tackling loneliness among young people and supporting the diverse communities in Reading – even more urgent. The key findings also underscore the importance of strengthening the voice and participation of young people in social action, so that they can help shape future services and planning.

702 young people aged 11–18 – from across Reading schools, colleges and youth organisations – participated in the research by either completing a questionnaire designed by the Youth Social Action Team or taking part in a focus group. The priorities identified by the Youth Social Action Team are:

- Mental health and wellbeing, especially tackling loneliness
- Being and feeling safe
- Creating a sense of community
- Widening the diversity of activities and opportunities available for young people

You can download the report from the RVA website to read more about the key findings on voice and self-expression, life satisfaction, the future, challenges and changes needed, community in Reading, and issues important to young people.

I think I've learnt a lot from our research. I've learnt about what people from different walks of life and backgrounds feel about this town and the communities within it. For myself, I've had to consider several questions about how I really feel about Reading and my experiences as a young person.

Lucy, Youth Social Action Team

I particularly appreciated the fact that the Youth Social Action Team were given the freedom to devise the research methods and execute our plan how we saw fit, so that we could fulfil our self-set aims to the best of our ability.

Pradnya, Youth Social Action Team

I've found the experience rewardingly insightful and eye opening to what else needs to be done to benefit the young community. I see this as the common motivation of every member of the group.

Calvin, Youth Social Action Team

This research project has given me the awareness that it is possible to reach out to a large number of young people. Each individual has a unique and distinctive experience of growing up in Reading and we should be more understanding of their thoughts and emotions.

Zarah, Youth Social Action Team

This project had the purpose of encouraging young people to speak up and get involved in local initiatives that matter to them. You'll see quotes in the report that relate to the fact young people feel helpless to initiate change, that there is nowhere or no structure available to them to have their voices heard – so how can they make a difference when no one is listening? It's up to us as organisations to provide our youth with those support structures and platforms they need in order to speak up and to appreciate the value young people can bring to any conversation – political, social or otherwise. We hope that this research and report is the start of a new wave of youth voice, change, and action in Reading.

Charlotte Netherton-Sinclair, Project Coordinator

Go to www.rva.org.uk/article/growing-up-in-reading-key-findings-from-a-report-by-rvas-youth-social-action-team to download the report.

Special thanks and acknowledgement to our friend and partner John Ord from the UoR Participation Lab, who sadly passed away in November 2021. John was essential to the *Growing Up in Reading* project and a champion for young people and their families.

Co-producing local knowledge to achieve change

The *Growing up in Reading* report is part of an ongoing partnership with the University of Reading's Participation Lab, led by Dr Sally Lloyd-Evans, championing community-led research projects. The following projects report later in 2021.

Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR)

CPAR is a partnership involving Reading Borough Council (RBC), Reading Community Learning Centre (RCLC), RVA, the Alliance for Cohesion and Racial Equality (ACRE), and the University of Reading's Participation Lab. Esther Oenga supports and coordinates the local partnership in its development of the research project investigating the impact of Covid-19 on health inequalities. She supports a team of community researchers to engage with individuals and groups from minority ethnic communities in Reading.

Reading town centre strategy community engagement

Reading Borough Council have commissioned a consultancy, Urban Place Lab, to develop a strategy for Reading town centre. Urban Place Lab commissioned RVA, ACRE and the University's Participation Lab to consult with the community about what would make the centre more sustainable, inclusive and liveable, with the results informing the development of their strategy. The community partnership's particular focus in this work has been to ensure that respondents to a survey and participants in focus groups reflected the cultural diversity and community voices of Reading, especially people at risk of being excluded from the conversation about what kind of town centre we want.



Work with us – how to contact RVA



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