



## The Big City Read 2016

### Final Report

York's Big City Read is an annual event where we distribute 5000 copies of a book and invite the people of York to read the book and participate in a range of events and activities over several weeks. In 2016 we chose Pat Barker's *Regeneration* as our Big City Read to commemorate the centenary of the First World War in York.

Explore York Libraries and Archives and our partners delivered more than 130 activities and events for adults and children during October and November across York which were attended by more than 2,800 people including 200 children. These included reading groups, children's storytimes, workshops, author talks historical lectures, craft activities, mental health advice and information sessions, exhibitions, film screenings, hands on archive sessions, vintage dancing, community singing and a literary supper at Rowntree Park Reading Cafe.

The Big City Read events programme is designed to support people in their reading, understanding and enjoyment of the book. The programme this year delivered a wide variety of events and activities to draw people in, encourage them to read the book and to support them in exploring and understanding its themes.

*This has been the best Big City Read yet. The book was superbly written and challenging, unlike some of the previous BCRs. The programme of events didn't let the book down either - it will be difficult to follow up next year. I can't find anything to criticise.*

*Participant*

We distributed 5000 free copies of *Regeneration* from all of our libraries and from City Screen, Tesco at Askham Bar, The Railway Station, the City of York Council's West Offices, York St John University, the University of York's Centre for Lifelong Learning and York Castle Museum. The pop-up giveaways were a perfect opportunity to promote Explore to people who don't use the service and to encourage them to visit their local library to take part in Big City Read events and find out other activities and services libraries have to offer.

### Our partners

*Our organisation enjoyed being a part of a bigger connected event in York and particularly liked the unique cross-over between different events and subjects meaning that it brought together an unusual set of parties around a common theme.*

*Executive Director, The Rowntree Society*

We worked with many existing and new partners in the delivery of the Big City Read, strengthening existing links and forging new ones. Penguin and Waterstones were the key commercial partners, supplying the specially printed books at a low cost and commission on book sales respectively. BBC Radio York was very supportive in terms of publicity and promotion and we have developed a mutually beneficial ongoing relationship with them. York Army Museum, York Castle Museum, Jorvik DIG and the National Centre for Early Music all created unique events and

interpretations as part of the programme. The Workers Educational Association, the Rowntree Society and York Mind delivered talks and participative workshops at York Explore. The University of York, The Borthwick Institute, York St John University, Leeds Trinity University all supported the Big City Read by offering expert speakers to help readers to unpick some of the themes of the book. York City Screen supported Explore in both showing a film as part of the programme and offering us a base for a successful book giveaway session and ongoing distribution of publicity. We were also very grateful for the support offered by The Retreat specialist mental health care provider whose staff delivered a fascinating insight into the history of mental health treatments, information about PTSD, a specialist drop in reading group and numerous one to one sessions supporting local people with their mental health needs all free of charge.

*Always happy to partake in the Big City Read, I think it's a fantastic concept. I thought the brochure looked fantastic this year, really professional. I think that makes a difference...I think it benefits us, as an organisation to be connected to large, integrated, City wide, learning projects. It certainly benefits our learners & hopefully your clients by offering a wide range of cultural, creative & academic opportunities, within a given timescale.* Visual Arts Curriculum Manager, York Learning

Working with partners in the city in this way supports Explore in its aim to be a strong and sustainable organisation. The partnerships developed during the Big City Read benefit both Explore and its partners in reaching new audiences, enhancing reputation, building social capital and creating further opportunities for working together in the future.

### **Sharing the joy of reading and the impact of the Big City Read**

The Big City Read is about taking the individual activity of reading a book and turning it into a communal experience.

*I enjoyed seeing such a good programme put together attracting lots of people who wouldn't necessarily attend other literary events in the city.* Participant

Almost half of the respondents to a survey conducted after the Big City Read said that our events and activities increased their enjoyment of the book. The response to our survey has been incredibly gratifying in respect of the positive effect it has had on people's attitude to Explore and how it has influenced their reading habits.

Respondents to our survey let us know that most of them (82%) have read or are still reading the book and another 10% have it on their 'to read' pile. Over a third of people have already passed their copy of the book onto another person and another half plan to do so. About a third (29%) of respondents told us that they would definitely be reading other books by Pat Barker and 40% said that they probably would, with 79% saying that they have or plan to recommend Regeneration or Pat Barker to a friend.

The majority of people (75%) said that they had not read a book by Pat Barker before taking part in the Big City Read and that most of them 'loved' or 'liked' it (81%). In terms of encouraging people to read more widely more often, The Big City Read has met this objective fully.

Half of the people who responded to the survey said that reading the book at the same time as other people made them feel like part of a community, while two thirds thought that it encouraged them to read a book that they would not normally have chosen. More than a third of people felt that taking part in the Big City Read encouraged them to talk about books more than

they would normally and that a shared reading experience made them feel more sociable than reading alone.

Ten percent of people have read more since taking part and have discovered how much fun reading and libraries can be. Other respondents have said that they have found out more about what libraries and archives are about and have to offer and almost a third said that it made them feel more connected with York and its history.

We asked people to let us know what they have done as a result of taking part in the Big City Read and have found that it has encouraged people's interest in a variety of ways. A quarter of people have said that they have, or plan to, visit York's City Archives, 14 people have or plan to join a reading group and 20 people have or plan to do some creative writing with 7 planning to join a writing group. More than a third of all people who responded have said that they are more interested in both York's and British history as a result of taking part in the Big City Read.

*Loved the idea of lots of people reading the same book at the same time. Will enquire about other activities now.* Participant

### Engaging our communities

It is important that the Big City Read reaches out to people across the whole of York, not just those who visit the centre. Explore aims to be the focus of communities, to encourage learning and creativity and to support the health and wellbeing of the residents of York.

*I like the idea of a whole city reading (or having access to) the same book at the same time and there being a community of readers, some known and some unknown, having a similar experience. I have greatly appreciated the lectures and talks that I've been to.* Participant

All Explore libraries in York actively promoted the Big City Read to their customers, they distributed the programmes in advance to build anticipation, distributed copies of the book and encouraged people to read it and take part in Big City Read activities.

*Talking to so many people about the book has been fantastic. I think it gave the libraries an extra buzz and everyone was so positive* Staff member

Our libraries hosted reading groups to discuss Regeneration and larger libraries hosted one-off pop-up groups for those people who don't want to commit to joining a reading group, but welcomed the opportunity to discuss the book. Similarly all of our libraries held commemorative poppy craft sessions. Both adults and children were invited to go to their local library and make a poppy as an act of remembrance and either take them home or add them to a display in the library over Armistice Day. Many of the sessions were held over the October half-term to encourage children to join in with the Big City Read.

We held under five storytimes in all of our libraries. These mainly focussed on the series of picture books written by Hilary Robinson which introduce the First World War to young children in a sensitive way. Hilary herself attended the Big City Read Family day at York to read some of her stories. Older children were invited to participate in the Big City Read by joining a Poppies and Planes Chatterbooks session in our larger libraries where they listened to stories and made poppies and gliders.

*The events were in different parts of the city and its surrounds - also times varied - the range of speakers were excellent - I cannot think of anything further that would enhance what was achieved this year.* Participant

Explore Acomb led a health walk to the war memorial, held a First World War themed tea party for children, and held a family day. They also hosted DIG's Landscapes of Remembrance exhibition and had a fantastic afternoon learning to dance at a vintage tea party.

Bishopthorpe, Dringhouses and Poppleton Libraries used the opportunity to look at local history and the men from their villages who fought in the First World War and New Earswick held a talk in the Folk Hall about the Chocolate Letters held in our Archives at Explore.

Rowntree Park Reading Cafe made the most of their fantastic venue and hosted a very successful literary supper there featuring a presentation by the MD of Persephone books. The very final event of the Big City Read was a marvellous sell out performance by Lucy Adlington of the History Wardrobe with Great War Fashion in the Reading Room at Dunnington Library which was supported by the Friends of Dunnington Library.

*Big City Read has been a valuable resource for two of my adult learning groups. I have been able to integrate themes of the book into an exam based course and a creative writing group. Our adult learners really appreciated getting a free book (a brand new free book). It helps them to feel valued, especially those learners who are struggling economically. They also appreciated the quality of the accompanying materials and because the brochure was so exciting, I was able to use that as a resource too.*

*Learning and Skills Tutor, York Learning*

The Big City Read offered many opportunities for people to get involved in both formal and informal learning. Opportunities for learning included reading groups, poppy craft sessions, the talks, presentations and workshops delivered by ourselves and our partners which included specialist craft sessions, singing, creative writing, mindfulness, family history and cataloguing the archives.

Residents of Askham Grange Women's Prison were able to benefit from the informal learning offered by the Big City Read in their library by reading the book, discussing it at their reading groups, making poppies and attending an author event by Jo Baker as part of our programme of events.

York Learning tutors seized the opportunity to use the Big City Read as an integral part of some of their classes this year and have developed a website which showcases some of the artwork and poetry they created using the themes of the Big City Read as a springboard.

<http://explorewriting.weebly.com/>.

*It was good to be able to go to the pop up reading group so soon after I had finished the book. The people from the Tuke Centre were so helpful with their input as were other participants. I had not expected to learn as much as I did and with such good company. The Mindfulness in a Bun was also an enjoyable and a good learning curve. We learned how to practise Mindfulness and had further help with a meditation for ten minutes.*

*Participant*

The Big City Read always aims to help people to improve their health and wellbeing. The act of reading in itself has been shown to have many health benefits, not least among them relaxation and pleasure, a reduction in the symptoms of depression and a refuge from the stress of daily life. Being a member of a reading group enhances these benefits further by making people feel connected with those around them, reducing social isolation and improving communication.

This year's Big City Read was able to use the key theme of mental health in Regeneration to form partnerships with other organisations in the city and offer sessions looking at the history of mental

health treatments, what treatments are available now and the opportunity to take part in some 'hands on' sessions to improve their own mental health.

### **Conclusion**

The Big City Read 2016 was a resounding success for York Explore Libraries and Archives. It contributed to our strength and sustainability by enhancing our reputation as an organisation that can deliver a high profile, inclusive project to the benefit of thousands of people in the city. We formed new partnerships and renewed existing ones which we can use in other areas of our work.

We have shared the joy of reading with a wide range of people in York, introduced them to a new author and encouraged them to read more widely and more often. We have also supported people in their creative writing and fostered an interest in the history of York and the First World War, including the use of our archives.

We have encouraged people to be more involved in their local communities via their libraries by distributing books, hosting reading groups, storytimes, craft activities and local history and author events. People have been encouraged to use their libraries more often and friends groups have used The Big City Read to get more people involved in supporting Explore's objectives in their libraries.

We have given people the opportunity to be involved in both formal and informal learning in all of our libraries and supported their creativity in writing and arts and crafts. In addition people have learned about the history of the First World War in both York and in the wider world and this has stimulated them to continue to learn.

We have contributed to the health and wellbeing of the people of York by encouraging reading for pleasure, bringing people together, encouraging healthier lifestyles and offering support to people with mental health issues.

We are looking forward to planning a Big City Read for 2017 which will aim to fulfil Explore's strategic objectives and engage with more people to promote reading, support creativity and learning, encourage community involvement and improve health and wellbeing.