



Department for
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Evaluation of the Libraries: Opportunities for Everyone innovation fund

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The Libraries: Opportunities for Everyone (LOFE) innovation fund was launched in December 2016 as part of and alongside the [Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-21](#) strategy document, which set out plans to reinvigorate public library services in England.

Its primary aim was to enable local authority library services to trial innovative projects that would benefit disadvantaged people and places in England.

Specifically, the LOFE fund aimed to support projects that would:

- provide library users and communities with opportunities to remove or reduce disadvantage.
- enable library services to develop innovative practice that meets the needs of people and places experiencing disadvantage.

The fund was also delivered within the framework of the Society of Chief Librarians' (now called Libraries Connected) then 5 [Universal Offers](#), and the Libraries Deliver: Ambition's 7 strategic outcomes.

Figure 1 Libraries Deliver: Ambition's 7 strategic outcomes



Funded projects

Managed by the Arts Council, the £3.9 million fund awarded grants of between £50,000 and £250,000 to 30 projects across 46 library services in March 2017. These were grouped into one of 5 thematic 'clusters' within the evaluation, bringing together projects focused on Libraries Deliver: Ambition outcome areas, aims or activities.

Arts and culture: arts-based activities that aimed to improve young people's confidence and skillsets, as well as their relationship with art, culture, literature and their local library.

Digital: digital activities that aimed to improve people's digital literacy and reduce social exclusion, embedding this within library services through staff training.

Families and wellbeing: a wide range of activities to increase families' engagement, and to improve access to information and physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Literature and creative expression: creative activities that aimed to address low levels of participation and bring literature to life for vulnerable and marginalised



groups.

Makerspaces: physical hubs that aimed to address local deprivation through digital taster sessions, activities and courses, including creative activities such as 3D printing, animation, robotics and coding.

Evaluation of the LOFE fund

Traverse was selected DCMS to undertake an independent evaluation of the LOFE fund in November 2017. The evaluation aimed to investigate what activities were undertaken by projects and whether these made a difference to participants, libraries and local communities. It also sought to generate learning from both the approaches taken by projects and the support that was provided by DCMS, the Arts Council and Traverse.

The evaluation applied a mixed method approach that incorporated elements of supported self-evaluation. This focused on helping projects to collect and collate their own quantitative data (how many, how much and how often) and qualitative data (what happened, what effects were felt and why).

In doing so, this report presents preliminary evidence on the extent to which expected outcomes occurred, and also provides qualitative insights into approaches to project design and delivery, as well as how to improve upon them. However, it should be noted that the variable quality of project-level evaluations limits the extent to which this evaluation can comment on impact and attribution across the whole programme.

As such, this report provides an initial evidence base that indicates both promise and potential in terms of the differences that libraries can make to the lives of service users, their staff and local communities. There is also an opportunity for this to be used by libraries to inform the conduct of more targeted, project-level evaluations in the future.

Meeting the aims of the programme

The evaluation drew together a wide body of evidence to assess the extent to which aims of the LOFE fund were met, which are summarised below.

Table 1: Summary of impacts

Fund objectives	Achievement of objectives
<p>Library users and communities have opportunities to remove or reduce their experience of disadvantage</p>	<p>The available evidence suggests that the LOFE fund engaged regular, irregular and non-users of library services with opportunities to reduce their experience of disadvantage. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging individuals in co-design and co-production activities, which provided individuals with a sense of ownership and helped involve other people from hard-to-reach groups. Building individuals' awareness of the opportunities that engaging with library services, digital tools and reading or arts-based activities could provide. Participation in activities then enabled library users to develop skills that could not only help them to



	<p>address aspects of disadvantage but also develop the confidence to apply these skills in their everyday lives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anecdotal evidence of early improvements in mental and general wellbeing, such as reduced social isolation, improved relationships and improved access to employment opportunities.
<p>Library services will have developed innovative practice that meets the needs of people and places experiencing disadvantage</p>	<p>The available evidence suggests that library services have used their funding to develop new tools and approaches to support people and places experiencing disadvantage. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developed spaces which provided access to a range of technological resources and workshops that had a marked impact on digitally deprived communities.• Improved digital confidence and skills among library staff, which bolstered libraries' offers and improved their position as a service provider.• Improved understanding among library staff of how best to support people with special educational needs and learning disability, often through working with partners. This led to improved practices and the creation of more inclusive spaces.• Transformed service offers where LOFE-funded activities were felt to have helped libraries take a significant step forward in terms of embedding digital or inclusive practices as part of their core offer.

Other impacts on libraries

Many projects commented on how coming together around a clear purpose and delivering LOFE-funded activities had a transformative effect on their services. This included improvements in staff morale where staff had accessed training or taken ownership of delivering innovative activities, and extending their service reach into disadvantaged communities. It also included the transformation of library environments where new spaces had been built or innovative services embedded.

The available evidence suggests these developments also challenged and improved people's perceptions of what their local library could offer and achieve. This was felt to have contributed to greater understanding and improved working relationships with local organisations and other council teams such as IT, public health, social services and policy departments, as well as increased service use.

Enablers

Where projects had worked well, project leads highlighted a number of common factors that were felt to underpin the development of innovative library service



activities for disadvantaged people and places in England. These are summarised on the next page.

Table 2: Summary of enablers

Theme	Description
Staff	Many projects emphasised that securing the support of management, frontline and volunteer staff had been instrumental to the success of their project, especially as project teams often relied on in-kind resources to help them design and deliver activities. Several projects benefitted from electing to recruit project coordinators, reducing their reliance on overstretched library staff and enabling them to push forward with project delivery at 'crunch moments'.
Partnerships	Working through local community organisations enabled some projects to engage and work with vulnerable and marginalised groups which had historically limited engagement with library services. Some libraries also felt that working alongside these groups helped raise the profile and change perceptions of libraries in these communities.
Engaging participants	Engaging target groups in consultation or co-production activities, often with the support of local organisations, helped projects to better understand the needs of and challenges faced by their target groups. When working with vulnerable and marginalised groups, projects also emphasised the importance of tailored approaches to engagement and project activities.
Programme management	Robust programme management approaches such as working with a multi-disciplinary steering group and undertaking monitoring and evaluation from the start of projects were felt to have helped shape effective project design.

Some libraries also reported that their LOFE grant had enabled them to attract and secure additional funding from local authorities and new partners over and above the 10% match funding required within applications. This additional funding tended to be directed towards the renovation of rooms to house LOFE-funded spaces, or towards the addition of further features within existing spaces, rather than towards increasing the scale of activities.

Challenges

Funded projects identified a wide range of challenges that they had faced in developing activities for disadvantaged people and places in England. Suggested solutions to these challenges can be found in Chapter 4.

Table 3: Summary of challenges

Theme	Description
Staffing	Many projects struggled to engage overstretched staff. Where projects were perceived as additional work this sometimes



	<p>resulted in a reluctance to engage while, even among enthusiastic staff, limited capacity sometimes made it difficult to attend training or commit sufficient time to projects.</p> <p>Projects often worked alongside volunteers to help address this demand, though recruitment processes often took longer than expected due to high demand for them among services and volunteers were occasionally unreliable in their commitment.</p>
Engaging and working with participants	<p>Some projects found it challenging to both engage and work alongside vulnerable and marginalised groups – including managing behaviours that may challenge, and unreliable attendance. Other projects also struggled to communicate new types of activities to their target groups.</p>
Working with partners	<p>Some projects developed new partnerships with organisations that later turned out to be unreliable, while, despite good will, other partners' contributions were also limited by competing demands. Several projects that engaged organisations from different sectors also reported a clash of working styles.</p>
Project delivery	<p>Projects also faced a wide range of delivery challenges, including procurement delays when purchasing IT equipment, health and safety obstacles when building spaces and internal issues with IT infrastructure.</p>

Lessons learned

Projects reflected on their participation in the grant programme and identified a number of learning points:

- **Small grants can make a big difference to services:** the open brief behind the LOFE funding enabled projects to deliver innovative activities without fear of failure. Across all projects, funding was felt to have made the most difference through providing projects with the opportunity to invest in high-value equipment and resources, support their staff with training, and market their full-service provision to local communities.
- **Funders should provide clear communication and flexible support:** clear grant aims and criteria supported applicants during a compressed grant application window. The Arts Council's flexible approach to project plan adjustments was also felt to have enabled projects to better respond to emerging needs and challenges.
- **Grant recipients value opportunities to share ideas, challenges and lessons learned:** 'learn and share' events provided project staff with opportunities to network, share transferable learning and seek reassurance from others – outcomes that can also be supported via online forums.
- **Embed evaluation activities in grant awards:** Undertaking programme-wide evaluation activities at the start of the grant programme would have better supported project development processes, enabled projects to ensure that adequate resource was allocated to evaluation activities, and reduced the risk of duplicating local evaluations.



Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged from the delivery and evaluation of the Libraries: Opportunities for Everyone innovation fund (LOFE).

- Awarding funding in a way that **focuses library activities on specific audiences and outcomes** helps to galvanise staff and partners to keep momentum on projects, even as circumstances change.
- Through the LOFE fund, libraries channelled their energy into addressing particular areas of need and engaging specific groups in ways that time and resources may not usually allow. Project leads developed new and innovative ways to reach some of those target audiences, often supported by expert advice and local stakeholder groups. These approaches will enable libraries to continue to build those audiences and strengthen their impact and social value into the future.

- This focus on outcomes links to the value of **building in evaluation from the start of a project**. This not only improves data collection and evidence but helps libraries to strengthen and reflect on their aims (e.g. through the theory of change process) before plotting a particular course.
- Some projects in the LOFE fund reported that creating a theory of change, with support, at the beginning of their project lifespan would have led them to approach some activities differently. It would also have focused their efforts in different ways to reach their intended outcomes.

- However, funders do not need to be prescriptive in how those outcomes are achieved. The LOFE fund demonstrated the **value of giving libraries flexibility around the use of funding**. In some cases, staff have already have the ideas, the confidence, the skills and the networks to deliver something fantastic, and a (potentially modest) amount of funding is all they need to make it happen.
- For services which used the funding to invest in new equipment or entirely new spaces, this is changing what those libraries are and how they engage audiences into the future.
- In other cases, a more important investment will be in library staff (and potentially volunteers) where they need support to develop the skills and confidence to work with a new product or project and bring it to life. Without this, the best projects might never gain traction. It is important for funders and project leads to understand that context and invest resources where they are needed, such as including staff training in grant criteria and funding bids.



- Where funders **encourage (or require) libraries to reach out to local partners in order to deliver a programme** it can help those services forge strong, long-term bonds with organisations in their community.
- These partnerships can enable libraries to raise their game in terms of accessibility and engagement of diverse audiences, raise their profile with other services and community groups, and improve their reputation with more innovative, dynamic partners who may not have looked to libraries as potential partners in the past.
- At its most positive, this can result in the renewal of libraries as a partner and a focal point in a local 'system' and a local community.

- There are clear opportunities for **using programmes like this as a vehicle for building networks and learning across the sector**. Funders who are visible, active and engaged by hosting regional and thematic workshop events can also maximise their impact through the production of thoughtful agendas, activities and resources to underpin learning.

