

An Independent Review of English Public Libraries

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Foreword

Our public libraries sit unassumingly at the heart of our communities, a world of possibilities behind their doors.

Their ethos remains as true today as when the first purpose-built library was established in 1857¹. They are there to share knowledge and information, help bring about opportunities and to make sure those opportunities are freely available to all.

The routes by which that knowledge can be passed on are obviously more varied nowadays. You can still pick up a book – and books must always be at the heart of every library - but you might also download an audio version or order an eBook. Alternatively, you may wish to browse the newspapers or magazines online, use one of the library's computers or simply plug in your laptop or borrow a tablet and take advantage of the Wi-Fi that you may not have access to at home.

In terms of opportunity, there are countless ways in which today's libraries can help people achieve their potential. They might provide employment advice, adult literacy support or any number of different language classes.

There are libraries with Business & Intellectual Property (IP) Centres which can provide assistance to business owners, entrepreneurs and inventors. Others have nurses on site with a link to the GP's surgery so that basic health checks can be carried out.

There are social groups designed to tackle the stigma of men's mental health, code clubs for children and libraries where young people can borrow a FIFA standard football for free.

Each programme is there to serve a particular purpose or reach a certain demographic, but they all have a common goal which is to improve people's lives and help build a better, stronger, community.

No matter who you are or where you are from, you can walk into any library in the country and ask a member of staff to help you. And if they can't help you themselves, they will be able to point you to someone who can.

In return for all of this, you'll be asked for precisely nothing. There will be no charge; in some instances, you won't even have to give your name and address. You will never be asked to justify yourself or explain, any more than you want to, why you are

¹ <https://historicensland.org.uk/images-books/publications/iha-english-public-library-1850-1939/heag135-the-english-public-library-1850-1939-iha/>

there. You will simply be welcomed in, offered help if you need it and left alone if you do not.

There is no other institution today, be it public or private, which can say the same.

“It stops time and noise, it broadens my mind, it makes me explore and discover new things, it excites my little boy’s mind and makes me feel happy. I love my library because it is always there.” Manchester

So why then are our libraries so often overlooked and underappreciated? Why do they struggle to be heard at a national and local level and what can the government do to best support them and ensure they are properly recognised as one of the most valuable community assets we have at our disposal?

Last September, the Arts and Heritage Minister, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, commissioned this independent review to try to find the answers to these questions. A lifelong library user, and passionate supporter of the sector, he encouraged me to hear from as broad a range of people as possible; to speak to them about the challenges they face but also to find ways to enable libraries to flourish, both now and into the future.

To that end, I have visited libraries across England to see how our libraries are delivered, be that directly by the local authority, outsourced via commercial enterprises or through community groups or a mix of options.

I have spoken to hundreds of people working at all levels within libraries and have been struck by their enthusiasm and readiness to adapt to changing circumstances in order to deliver the best service possible.

As local commissioners discovered during the Covid pandemic, as the last public facing agency on the high street, library staff have a profound understanding of the needs of their users. Libraries are too often seen as old-fashioned or out of touch when in fact they are weathervanes of their communities, reflecting and forerunning societal trends, good and bad.

I have met with sector organisations, campaigners, volunteers and representatives from local and national government. I have looked at international examples and along with Luke Burton from Arts Council England (ACE), Ian Leete from the Local Government Association (LGA) and Isobel Hunter and colleagues from Libraries Connected (LC), we have held a series of nine roundtables which have taken an in-depth look at the many ways libraries support communities in cities, towns and villages across the country.

While the recommendations that follow are my own, they are based on the insights of all those who have kindly agreed to take part, either in person or via written submission. As per the original commission, the findings will inform a new Libraries Strategy that will be developed by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

This work is a continuation of the all the good work that has gone before, not least William Sieghart's Independent Library Report for England in 2014 ² and the 2021 report, Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries 2016-2021.³

Both reports played a crucial role in protecting and promoting the role of libraries but this is an endeavour which requires an ongoing commitment. I hope this review will build on their achievements and where there is repetition, that it only proves the need to keep working on those challenges that have proved especially difficult to overcome.

This review began after the Covid pandemic during which libraries really came to the fore. As well as the knowledge of their communities which was invaluable in terms of targeting support, the home library service offered a lifeline to those who were shielding while exemptions were put in place during lockdowns to allow people to access public PCs.

I have noted areas where lessons may be learned post Covid but overall, the themes that quickly and clearly emerged related to more fundamental challenges:

1. A lack of recognition across government, locally and nationally, of the work that libraries do. This is not a new problem. As far back as 2003, the then DCMS Libraries Strategy called for 'greater recognition ... of the role of the public library service as a delivery agent across a range of local government services and objectives.'⁴ William Sieghart made the same observation, saying 'not enough decision makers at national or local level appear sufficiently aware of the remarkable and vital value that a good library service can offer modern communities of every size and character.'⁵ In 2016, the Ambition report still deemed it necessary to urge decision-makers to 'think libraries first'.
2. A lack of awareness among the general public of what the modern-day library offers, not helped by the persistent but outdated perception of libraries as somewhat strait-laced institutions where you will be told to 'shush' and there won't be anything of interest to you.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-library-report-for-england>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021>

⁴ https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4709/21/Framework_for_the_Future1_Redacted.pdf

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388989/Independent_Library_Report-18_December.pdf

3. A lack of comprehensive data on our libraries. We do not have an accurate national picture of how libraries are performing across the country. Nor are libraries able to prove, to an acceptable standard, just how much they contribute to key agendas from literacy to skills to health and wellbeing.
4. A better sense as to what the government wants to see from our libraries.

The recommendations which follow each serve to address one of these four challenges. While the government strategy may look at more specific policy areas, I have purposely kept my proposals to ways in which the infrastructure might be adapted in order to strengthen support.

According to the remit of this review, they are for national government to consider. However, I have also heard many reflections on the role of local government, included at Annex A, which I hope will be of use to local authorities.

The roundtables elicited numerous fascinating discussions and led to some interesting new connections and potential partnerships. I would like to thank all the libraries which hosted us, all those who attended, particularly Luke Burton, Ian Leete and Isobel Hunter, and the team at DCMS and Che Donald for their brilliant organising and facilitating.

I would also like to thank all those who took the time to meet with me and to write in with their thoughts and suggestions. I hope you will all see something of your contributions in this review.

Inevitably, there were many different points of view but there is one thing on which I think we all agree, and it is Albert Einstein's famous maxim.

"The only thing you absolutely have to know, is the location of the library."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The establishment of a national data hub to better evidence the role libraries play in our society
2. A national branding campaign to raise awareness of our libraries
3. The closer involvement of the British Library
4. An expanded library membership
5. A stronger volunteer network
6. The creation of a Libraries Minister and a more joined-up approach within government
7. The establishment of a Libraries Laureate
8. A change to the timing of Libraries Week to better involve politicians nationally and locally

- 1. A national data hub to better evidence the role libraries play in our society**
 - i. The creation of a comprehensive data dashboard, at a national level, to evidence the impact of libraries on their communities.**
 - ii. DCMS to work with the Evaluation Taskforce to ensure libraries are included in the government's wider work to provide better evaluation support.**

Comprehensive data at a national level

The current data picture for libraries is precarious. Historically, the government has relied on CIPFA (the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) to collect data on the number of libraries, the number of book loans and how many people are using other library-based services.

DCMS needs this to advocate across government on behalf of libraries, fulfil their statutory duty of superintendence and to feed into the calculations for Public Lending Right payments for authors. It is also needed by local authorities and sector supporting organisations for strategic planning so that they can make sure libraries are delivering to the best of their ability.

While the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964⁶ requires library authorities to provide the information necessary for superintendence, the most recent CIPFA survey (21/22) only included returns from approximately c.45% of library authorities in England, meaning no robust conclusions may be drawn from it. Government no longer funds CIPFA to make the data collected available to all local authorities.

The situation is now at an impasse. Numerous complaints were raised at the roundtables about the usefulness of the data which many believe is too basic to give a rounded picture of the services they offer, cannot measure 'success' and yet is time-consuming to collect as it has to be done manually. Many services were also not prepared to pay CIPFA for the data which they themselves had provided. DCMS is looking at ways to plug the gap but the overall ambition should be to develop a platform that not only collects basic data, such as visits and loans, but can actively help the library service by looking across the sector as a whole.

Exploratory work is underway. A group which includes Arts Council, DCMS, the British Library, Libraries Connected (LC) and the Chartered Institute of Libraries and Information Professionals (CILIP) has been looking at the development of a new data hub which would capture all the information held on the country's Library Management Systems.

⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75>

Collected digitally, via an API (application programming interface), this would not create any extra burdens on local authorities or take valuable time away from library staff. The data set would be richer than that previously collected by CIPFA and, if built in the right way, it could be used alongside the local government data platform, LG Inform, and the national library platform, LibraryOn, to improve policy and decision-making at a local level to provide a more targeted library service.

Some local authorities have begun to use data analysts to ‘interrogate’ the data they have of their own accord, but many do not have such a capability and it must be a national resource.

*In **Reading**, we wanted to investigate patterns of use and map usage of library items and IT use across the town, to see whether customers were or weren’t coming from particular areas. We refreshed our strategy in the immediate post pandemic period, and wanted a dataset that could be manipulated live in order to answer questions and test what we could see. Previously everything would have been done in quite a static way using charts and tables, and reports would need re-running, and be much less visual. As part of the work we carried out, we were able to bid for an internal data analyst to support this work, and effectively plug all the library data into a mapping system, which also mapped against other indices such as multiple deprivation.*

This enabled us to demonstrate that library use reduced as deprivation indicators increased and enabled us to set strategic priorities accordingly. We now have an annual process to upload data, to assess how things have changed.

A data hub, Moving Communities, was created for the leisure industry in 2021 and there are a handful of library versions ... Finland and Belgium have created them, Ireland is developing one, as is Scotland.

***Moving Communities** was launched in March 2021 and is driven by the largest data set ever gathered for the local leisure sector. It allows analysis and comparison by time periods, statistical neighbours, geographical areas, operator and individual sites, activities and social value. This enables local authorities and leisure providers to understand their performance and how this compares with others. This insight informs strategic decisions about where time, effort and money are best invested to benefit local communities and the audiences most in need of help.¹ Moving Communities can be accessed by local authorities, service providers, active partnerships and national governing bodies such as Sport England and the LGA.*

While ACE is able to carry out the scoping work, it would need government to support the building of the dashboard itself. Government can provide the framework, and a central body can provide the stewardship but it will be up to local authorities to join up and provide the data that sits within it.

Ultimately, while helpful to government and arms lengths bodies, this would be a service driven by the sector for the sector. I have been told that a number of local authorities are supportive and I would hope others would follow suit given the benefit it would bring.

Of particular interest is the potential measurement of social value which has already been done with Moving Communities, in conjunction with Department of Health and Social Care analysts, and would be of enormous interest to the library sector.

*In the London Borough of **Barking & Dagenham**, a group of data professionals from the council, led by Pye Nyunt, implemented a localised tool, known as the “Social Progress Index” which brings together data from multiple sources including libraries, on the social, environmental and wellbeing outcomes of its 219,000 residents. This led to the development of a new model for libraries; moving these towards a “community hub model”. The Barking Learning Centre for example has hosted the council’s “Homes & Money Hub” for the past five years, where thousands of residents have been supported within the library to find employment, upskill, seek benefit and welfare where required, and prevent vulnerable families from homelessness. Each library has a slightly different offer to residents depending on the need in the community evidenced by the data.*

Decisions will need to be made over who holds the data and agreement should be sought to ensure it is available to all. Finally, as well as a development cost, there will be an annual maintenance cost.

In my view, this cost should be borne centrally. While it is not within my remit to make financial recommendations, I have noted the comments made by CILIP and Libraries Connected in their scoping study towards a blueprint for public library development and sustainability in England.⁷

“There have been several national development initiatives for libraries over the last five years, but these have tended to focus on supporting innovation and change within individual library services. Whilst these are welcome, they have not generally addressed the structural support that can be brought into the wider national operating environment with a view to supporting the sustainability and security of the sector as a whole.”

⁷ <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/sites/default/files/Scoping%20Study%20Towards%20A%20Blueprint.pdf>

They point to the success of the national funding for Wi-Fi rollout where central funding made a significant difference to the consistency and quality of the service. The provision of a central data hub could be equally transformative in terms of the evidence it would yield and the benefits that would bring.

Having data that can be properly analysed will enable libraries to build a stronger narrative about the services they provide which can then be used for advocacy on a national, regional and local basis.

Work with the Evaluation Taskforce

Erik Boekesteijn, who helped create Storyhouse in Chester and is a senior adviser to the National Library of the Netherlands talks of libraries as a 'third space'. The concept, pioneered by the urban sociologist, Ray Oldenburg, relates to a place that is not work and not home, where people are treated equally and can enjoy a 'feeling of being apart together.'⁸

It is not a phrase that I have heard used particularly in this country, but it surely encapsulates the enduring appeal of the library; and it is perhaps one of the reasons that libraries are so good at addressing many of the social challenges we face.

There is no judgement in a library and no stigma to walking through its door. It is why a person might visit a nurse in a library but be too nervous to go to the GP's surgery for a check-up. It is why, at one of our roundtables, Youth Employment UK, said they would be interested in libraries as a way of accessing the teenagers who are dropping out of the system, who won't visit JobCentre Plus, but 80% of whom recognise libraries as a service they can access. The government strategy may wish to look at this in further detail.

Day in, day out, library staff see the difference they make to people's lives across a range of national agendas. Yet this has not translated into sustainable funding to the sector from those departments which benefit from their work.

When libraries have tried to evidence the value that they bring, they are often told that it is not Magenta or Green Book compliant and therefore does not meet agreed government guidance on evaluation methods or project appraisal.

We need to get to a point of being able to measure the things we say libraries are good at; however, it should be said, this is not a problem unique to libraries but an issue across government.

⁸ Ray Oldenburg, The Great Good Place, 1989

To that end the government set up the Evaluation Task Force (ETF)⁹, a joint Cabinet Office and His Majesty's Treasury (HMT) unit to provide significant evaluation support across 10 priority areas.

DCMS should work to ensure that the role of libraries is included in their work – in particular, the priority areas covering the Youth Investment Fund, equipping young people with skills for work and life; opportunities to learn from changes to public service delivery arising from Covid-19; children's social care in relation to family hubs and educational recovery.

It is a fact, largely unrecognised, that libraries help meet a range of government objectives spanning several different departments. In time it would be hoped that an important loop can be closed, whereby libraries are able to attract sustainable funding from those departments which benefit from their work.

2. Undertake a scoping exercise for a consistent national branding campaign to raise awareness of our libraries

A national branding campaign

Public awareness of our libraries is a complicated issue. The public has retained its affinity for libraries; certainly, when libraries are threatened with closure - as local politicians know to their cost - the public reaction tends to be formidable.

However, at the same time, there is no denying that the number of visits to libraries has dropped dramatically - from 272 million per year in 2009/10 to 178 million in 2018/19.¹⁰

Anecdotally, part of the reason for this contradiction lies in the feelings people have for the libraries they used in childhood; or as one person said to me, *“libraries are like seaside towns. You have strong memories of visiting them as a child but it doesn't mean you automatically want to go to them now.”*

There is a power in this attachment and it underlines the special role libraries play in our lives but we shouldn't rely on it to sustain them over time. We need to better understand why people use our libraries and perhaps, more importantly, why they don't.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/evaluation-task-force>

¹⁰ [Supporting libraries | Arts Council England](#)

The DCMS Taking Part Survey 2019/20 ¹¹ and its successor, the Participation Survey 2021-22 ¹² offer some insight.

When asked to give a reason why they hadn't used a library in the last 12 months, 60% of respondents in 2019/20 said that they did not need these services. In 2021/22, 30% of people ticked the 'I'm not interested' box and 27% opted for 'no reasons in particular.'

Further research into the public's use and perception of libraries is needed. In particular, it would be helpful to understand the key points at which people engage with their libraries and why. Parenthood is an obvious one but according to Robert Glick, Founder of the Adult Literacy Trust, the loss of employment or threat of employment is another key engagement or re-engagement point.

DCMS should undertake a research project into the reasons why people do and don't use libraries. In the meantime, however, the figures about those who are 'not interested' or 'don't need these services' accord with the biggest frustration that came up during our roundtables.

Time and again, people noted the general lack of awareness of libraries among the public and more specifically, a lack of understanding about the range of services they offer.

Having only recently started to use the library I'm amazed at the ease of use and what is available. Superb." A GLL library

The most repeated request was for an advertising campaign but when asked, "Okay, but what's the message?" no one could agree on an answer. So, while I completely accept the value of targeted campaigns around certain offers such as the Summer Reading Challenge, I do not think a generic campaign would have the desired result.

Far more beneficial, to my mind, would be a national branding campaign.

In truth, the majority of people pass by the library without giving it a second thought. It might be a beautiful Carnegie building in the heart of the town or it could be on a street that no longer attracts the same footfall it once did. Alternatively, it might be a newer library, deliberately placed by the local shopping centre or close to a vital bus route. But whatever the location or age of the building, the fact remains that all too often, people walk on by without really noticing it is there.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-libraries/libraries-taking-part-survey-201920>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/participation-survey>

Our libraries are all around us and yet they simply aren't 'visible' in the way that other institutions are.

We know our local GP surgery because we instantly recognise the NHS sign. If you need to find a pharmacy in Europe, it's easy because of its distinctive green cross.

We are often told there are more libraries than there are branches of McDonalds. While it's not possible to break down the figures exactly, broadly speaking this is absolutely the case. There are more than 1,270 branches of the fast-food chain across the UK. According to the ACE basic data set, in England specifically, there were 2,892 open static libraries as of 31 December 2022.¹³

I appreciate some might find the comparison with McDonalds jarring but one of the reasons they are such an integral part of our high streets is the sight of those familiar golden arches.

If the aim is to encourage more people into our libraries, if we want to make people more aware, then it might be helpful to give them a much stronger physical presence - to encourage an affinity with the building, not just the offer.

I am not the first person to suggest this. William Sieghart made the same recommendation in his report saying, 'we would like to see some greater consistencies in libraries, such as branding and signage'.

When I asked why this suggestion had not been taken forward, I was told that branding is the domain of local authorities and it would therefore be difficult to agree a national strategy.

I don't accept this is a reason not to try. Of course, library services should be delivered locally and there is nothing to stop local authorities from providing individual signage as to the different services each library has to offer but our libraries are also an essential part of our national civic infrastructure and we can and should do more to promote them as such.

Certainly, when I put the idea to frontline staff throughout the course of this work, the majority of them were supportive and did not see it affecting the local offer in any way. The decision, ultimately, will come down to the agreement of local authorities but in the first instance, it is up to the centre to provide them with the pros and cons of such a proposition.

ACE has done some initial work on the possibility of a new advertising campaign. Meanwhile, the British Library has already invested a lot of time in the

¹³ [Supporting libraries | Arts Council England](#)

branding of the national digital platform, LibraryOn. Under the 1964 Act, government has a duty to promote the improvement of the library service. It should now look at ways of bringing this work together to see how we might pursue a national branding campaign, something that would not only raise awareness of our libraries but also demonstrate how much we value them.

***The Library Campaign** is an independent national charity which supports Friends and User groups across the country. These groups tend to operate on a hyper-local basis but they are also the most vociferous defenders of the service and a key part of the library eco-system. Sector organisations may want to consider how they could work more closely with The Library Campaign for as their Chair, Laura Swaffield says: ‘Some library services work with us willingly but friends’ groups are sometimes perceived as a nuisance, sometimes even a threat. But libraries are better used and better protected where they exist.’*

3. The closer involvement of the British Library

Background

While I have heard mixed feelings about the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), it is fair to say that its disbanding in 2012 left a fragmented structure in its place.

Within government, DCMS is the policy lead for libraries and advocates on their behalf to other government departments while the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities leads on local government funding issues.

ACE took over from the MLA as the National Development Agency for libraries. It has increased the number of libraries within the National Portfolio (organisations which represent leaders in their areas) and co-funds with the LGA, a small programme of peer reviews for libraries which have been praised during our roundtables as being extremely helpful in identifying how and where a local service can improve.

It administers the Libraries Improvement Fund which supports building and digital infrastructure work and National Lottery Project Grants, as well as investing its own funding in library projects.

CILIP is the professional body for the information, knowledge management and library profession and focuses on professional development as well as doing work in specific areas such as green libraries and different funding models. Its CEO, Nick Poole, is a passionate and committed advocate for public libraries.

The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) is one of two Investment Principles Support Organisations (IPSOs), partly funded by ACE, which is working to embed quality children's and young people's engagement across the library sector.

Libraries Connected, formerly the Society of Chief Librarians, is a charity and membership organisation, also partly funded by ACE as an IPSO and its support is crucial to the sector.

Under the stewardship of its Chief Executive, Isobel Hunter, it has driven increased co-operation and innovation amongst the sector, helped broker national partnerships and brought a new cohesion to the 152 library services.

It has developed a draft accreditation scheme which ACE is now working to implement and should help encourage best practice. It is also piloting work, funded by ACE, to strengthen local and regional support.

The funding allows for two development managers and some administration support covering nine regions over three years. As well as testing the concept of an 'Expert Bank' where libraries can receive targeted support to tackle a specific challenge, the pilot will build stronger peer networks and help drive strategic collaborations.

It is not within my remit to make recommendations to ACE but as a general rule, the library service works at its best when it is locally led, regionally supported and nationally developed.

ACE has clearly recognised the need for better regional support through the Libraries Connected pilot but it is, by the very nature of a pilot, on a limited scale. The programme has been designed to build capacity as opposed to a project that will require ongoing funding, and so they may wish to look at whether it should be expanded further.

In terms of national development, as the national development agency for creativity and culture, ACE should be given credit for taking on responsibility for libraries when it wasn't an obvious fit.

On an individual level, I have liaised with members of ACE throughout the course of this review and found them to be absolutely committed to their work and the role of libraries in our communities.

Sector organisations have also pointed out that ACE's increased commitment to, and understanding of, libraries over the last decade has been notable.

However, it should be said that questions have been raised about the lack of a clear development path for libraries.

Some have said they would like to see ACE focusing on one or two areas of the library offer and taking the time to research and evidence them rather than trying to cover too much all at once. Others have questioned the development model.

As one person told me during a library visit: *“The problem is that ACE only gives funding on the basis that something is innovative so you do a project and then it’s never repeated because, by definition, it’s no longer new. There are no repeat studies because we don’t get funding for it. ACE should be taking the scoping study and replicating it to get findings but they’re not doing it. Why not?”*

ACE has said it is looking at core development programmes that can be evaluated – as their current work on data shows - but it would be helpful to see a detailed development and delivery plan beyond what is in their overarching strategy, ‘Let’s Create.’¹⁴

The upcoming quinquennial review of ACE might want to look at this in more detail. It is not that I doubt ACE’s commitment to libraries; rather that libraries have a different set of objectives to the other art forms in ACE’s purview. It would be helpful therefore to have a better sense of ACE’s strategic ambition for libraries.

The British Library

The British Library has no formal role in the public libraries sector but thanks to the efforts of its current CEO, Sir Roly Keating, and his team, it does view itself as having a responsibility towards it.

It works directly with the public library network through its Business and IP Centre National Network¹⁵ and it runs the Living Knowledge Network which is a UK-wide partnership of national and public libraries to share ideas and connections which includes more than 20 public libraries, the British Library, the National Library of Scotland and the National Library of Wales.

It is also responsible for the Public Lending Right and for LibraryOn, the national digital platform, funded by ACE, which aims to raise the profile of public libraries - to connect more people to their local library services while also improving public access to the collections, exhibitions and online events of libraries across the country.

¹⁴ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030>

¹⁵ <https://www.bl.uk/business-and-ip-centre/national-network>

Clearly the British Library is already playing an important strategic role in the library sector. With their agreement, I believe there is a further opportunity to take on a convening role that could be of huge benefit to public libraries.

The great advantage of the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council was that it was the first and obvious point of contact for any organisation with an interest in libraries.

There are, of course, other points of contact. Libraries Connected and the LGA have created some excellent partnerships with the sector and should continue to do so. As previously mentioned, ACE has a committed and knowledgeable libraries team which can be called upon while the team at DCMS have deliberately operated an open-door policy to library services and sector organisations.

It is, however, a complicated landscape with no obvious 'front door' for those wishing to engage with public libraries.

While in no way wishing to diminish the important role of all the other organisations involved in this space, I would argue that the British Library has a unique status, as well as a reach across the United Kingdom, that brings with it the opportunity to broker some interesting, strategic, partnerships across the public and private sector.

Many have said during the course of this review that there is a need for more national, big-scale, programmes delivered locally which the British Library has already done very successfully with its Business and IP Centre Network.

*The **Business and IP Centres (BIPCs)** provide free business support to start-up businesses, owners, entrepreneurs and inventors. In the past three years, with the investment of £13 million from DCMS, the network has grown from 13 to over 100 libraries, with services helping to create over 18,000 businesses. 21% of BIPC users come from the 20% most deprived areas in their towns and cities; meanwhile 72% of BIPC businesses are owned by women and 26% by ethnically diverse people. (According to figures published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, nationally, only 20% of businesses without employees are owned by women and only 5% are owned by individuals of Black, Asian and minority ethnic origin.) Together, the BIPC entrepreneurs generated £168 million for the economy with a pay back of £6.63 for every £1 of public money spent.*

Every Centre is tweaked according to local needs. With some BIPCs securing support from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, matched by local authority budgets and private sector investment, the BIPC network could work with many more library services to extend their reach to communities across the UK, further propelling the evolution of libraries as hubs of innovation and enterprise.

I am not suggesting that there needs to be an entirely new department within the British Library, rather some small, proportionate extra resource to develop a new convening role which would generate – alongside other sector partners - a valuable central conversation about libraries and potentially lead to some interesting opportunities and collaborations.

4. An expanded library membership

Universal child membership

As has been discussed, our love of libraries often begins in childhood but more than that, there is a growing body of evidence to show how libraries can support speech, language and communication skills in the early years and beyond.

In Scotland, the Every Child A Library Member programme (ECALM) provides library membership for all children at three key stages: birth registration, Nursery, and Primary enrolment and there is an interest from the sector in doing something similar in England.

It has been looked at previously. In 2012/13 ACE ran a pilot, supported by DCMS and the Department for Education, investigating how best to reach pre-school, primary and secondary school-aged children.

The programme ran up against a problem with data protection. Since joining the library was not the purpose for which the data was collected, schools could not share their pupil data unless parents opted into the scheme or the school's admission process included permission to share the data with libraries.

Findings also indicated that auto-enrolment really needs to be supplemented by a continuing programme of activities if children are to become active readers. This chimes with the view of many during our roundtables and was also raised as a key point by ASCEL.

The Reading Agency's Summer Reading Challenge (SRC) avoids this problem by encouraging primary school age children to read a selection of books, of their choice, from their local library over the summer months.

This is a brilliant scheme. Not only does it address a specific policy problem – 'the summer slide' or the dip in reading skills and confidence over the holidays when children are not in school – it has become part of the fabric of our library service. I have lost count of the number of brightly coloured boards I have seen, in all sorts of imaginative shapes and sizes, filled with the stickers of each child taking part in the Challenge.

There are still issues regarding data protection but a three-year pilot to broaden the reach of the SRC, working through cross-local authority partnerships to support universal access, has shown that it can be done.

Begun in 2021 and extending across 34 areas in the UK, some authorities negotiated GDPR exemptions using either the 'legitimate interest' or 'opt out' principle, or a combination of the two.

The SRC now reaches more than 700,000 children, at a cost of £1 per child to the local authority, but given its success, it would be good to see it rolled out more widely, particularly given its potential to fulfil so many other objectives.

The pilot showed that the universal enrolment/automatic library membership models brought parents and caregivers into the library who might not otherwise have done so, thus helping libraries to target those that could benefit the most from reading and simply using the library.

By supporting libraries to work in partnership with education, public health and children's services, it also helped raise awareness of libraries across local authorities – a key objective, frequently raised at roundtables.

Of particular interest is the way many worked closely with the Holiday, Activities and Food Programme (HAF) teams to target children from more disadvantaged areas and which was highlighted as an underused potential partnership during our discussions.

Another key programme is Bookstart, the world's first national book gifting programme run by BookTrust, which entitles every child in England and Wales to a free Bookstart pack before they are 12 months old.

For the last 25 years, the Bookstart network has supported parents across the UK to read to their children in the early years with all the benefits that brings, particularly to children from disadvantaged backgrounds who continue to face the biggest barriers to reading.

A new collaboration focused on low income families, BookTrust Storytime, offers a raft of resources for libraries alongside different activities for families to help bring the power of reading to life. Over 70% of the families which took part in the programme returned to their library after the initial visit.

DCMS should look at ways of aligning the different models and identifying the best ages and access points to provide every child with a library card. This could provide an important platform for encouraging not just children into libraries but also parents and caregivers who might otherwise struggle to engage with the service.

There is no data protection issue if the information is collected specifically for that purpose, i.e. when registering the birth of a baby, but any scheme supporting children into libraries throughout their young lives, will undoubtedly involve schools. While the SRC's pilot has managed to overcome some of the hurdles, there is little consistency across local authorities in the interpretation and application of data sharing policies. The department should also begin work with DfE to enable the schools admissions process to secure permission to share data with libraries which was one of the recommendations from the ACE pilot.

"Schools put my boys off reading books but Kitty Jane saved their love of reading. We take out nearly our whole quota each week." Surrey

A universal library card or universal library membership

If the aim is to give every child access to the library, there is a question about what we are giving them access to.

In reality, we mean their local library and that is, of course, a wonderful thing; but how much more powerful would it be to give them the key to every library, large and small, across the country?

When I have raised the possibility of a universal library card, I have been told that it is too difficult because it would have to be compatible with the different library management systems. However, I was surprised to learn of the 'every library a local library' scheme which was promoted in 2009 and neatly gets around this problem.

The brainchild of Tony Durcan, the former President of the Society of Chief Librarians, the scheme was brilliantly simple – it allowed visitors to borrow books from any English, Welsh or Northern Irish public library, just by showing their existing library card as proof of address. This built on decades of informal inter-library service cooperation.

There is a risk with such a scheme that books might be lost but there's a risk of that in any library service and, in truth, it's a risk that is far outweighed by the benefits of making the library available to all users, not just the local community. Nor is this just about books – being able to use a printer or know that you can take your children into a Rhyme Time, no matter where you are, would open up the library service in a whole new way.

As Tony told me: *"People make huge barriers out of possibilities that are miniscule. In the end it's very straightforward. If you join the library in Rotherham, say, you can use the library in Scarborough. If you've joined one library, why do you need to go*

through the bureaucracy of joining another? All you need to do is show your library card as proof of identity in order to borrow on a temporary basis – and positively promote that opportunity.

If you want to build a vibrant library service – and it is vibrant in lots of places – you have to have universal access and a national identity.”

The scheme was greeted with genuine excitement and led to national print and broadcast coverage but as people moved on and priorities changed over time with the onset of austerity, it disappeared from view, so much so it didn't come up once throughout the course of this review until very recently.

I have since been told by one Head of Service that they still use the scheme on an informal basis but that this tends to happen as the result of a chance request, rather than because people actually know about it.

'Every library a local library' could be resurrected, very easily, by a simple information campaign. While I appreciate that this may be for the sector to pursue, government should explore the possibility of a single card in the future.

At the time of the scheme's introduction, the Society still wanted to look into introducing a one-library card system. And as more and more libraries are joining consortia - finding agreement and breaking down the old cross authority barriers – this feels more achievable than it potentially once did.

The London Libraries Consortium was originally formed of three authorities which came together, in 2004, to share resources and contracts. Today, as the Libraries Consortium, it is made up of 23 authorities, covering 321 libraries with a reach of 8.2 million residents. Their shared catalogue provides access to over seven million books, 40,000 eBooks, 800 e-magazines and nearly 5,000 eAudiobooks. It provides a one-card solution for all members and last year it launched a socially interactive platform, Discovery, unashamedly based on the Netflix model. It pulls together all the consortium's online resources, hosts virtual book clubs and is easily browsable, encouraging people to stay online and discover all that the consortium has to offer in terms of current content, latest releases and the many events taking place across the different authorities. To a teenager who is used to today's streaming services, it might not seem revolutionary but for libraries it is an enormous step forward and it will be interesting to see, over time, how it has raised awareness and brought new people into the library.

5. Strengthening the volunteer network

There is a valid concern that in an era of difficult financial constraints, volunteers have often been seen as a way of replacing trained staff, rather than being used to bring important, additional, value to a service.

I agree with CILIP that job substitution will lead to services becoming unsustainable over time. Where possible, volunteers should only be used to support experienced, qualified staff.

“Library employees always help, they are polite. The range of books in the Ukrainian language has increased over the past year.” Coventry

However, even in the best run libraries, where councils are willing to invest and have placed libraries firmly on the asset side of the balance sheet, volunteers remain an important part of the service.

I don't think there's a library in the country that doesn't have volunteers but post Covid, there has been volunteering fatigue with many people dropping out and one library only keeping about 10% of Covid volunteers on their books.

Work is being done to boost volunteering more generally via the Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) Fund, a £29 million package of funding from DCMS designed to widen participation and tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England.

Libraries Connected, in partnership with ACE, will distribute £2,450,000 specifically to libraries to engage additional volunteers and host activities.

In relation to libraries, there are further ways to strengthen the volunteer network in collaboration with the NHS and I am grateful to Neil Churchill from NHS England for attending one of our roundtables and agreeing to speak further about the ways in which libraries can work more closely with the health sector.

While acknowledging the fatigue mentioned above, there are still approximately 400,000 people on the Covid volunteers programme. This is a national network with an app that will be familiar to most of us and it might be possible to build a libraries portal onto it.

This would clearly be of benefit to libraries and also to the NHS given the ways in which libraries help tackle loneliness and isolation and can also reach into pockets of the community that the NHS cannot.

It is these outreach and engagement programmes, large and small, that rely on volunteers. At one level it may be to help with a book club or a digital literacy session. At another level, the Home Library Service is heavily dependent on the good will of others.

Ian Leete, from the LGA, cites the Home Library Service as one of the most undervalued parts of the library offer and believes it could benefit from increased training and better join up with other council services.

Most libraries have retained a home library service although anecdotally, it appears to be an area that is often underrated and not prioritised for funding and development. It is however one of those areas where well trained volunteers have a very significant multiplier effect on health and social outcomes for a relatively small investment.

In this too, there is a possible partnership with the NHS and their Every Contact Counts programme, an approach to behaviour change that uses millions of day-to-day interactions that organisations and people have with other people to support them in making positive changes to their physical and mental health.

The Home Library Service

At its most basic, the Home Library delivers books to your home if you are unable to visit your local library due to an illness, disability or if you are elderly; in reality, however, it offers so much more than that. It was a lifeline to people during Covid, is of huge value in rural areas and the benefits it brings to those suffering from isolation are immeasurable. To give just one example here is the story of John, a Home Library Service volunteer from North Yorkshire:

'John had been speaking to one of our Home Library Service customers during his delivery and she was telling him about all her struggles ... her boiler wasn't working and she didn't know how to get it fixed, her Sky TV had gone off and because her hearing aids were also misbehaving she didn't know how she was going to get any help as she couldn't hear on the phone. John rang our local Disability Action Group who then facilitated getting Specsavers out to her house to sort her hearing aids. They also organised a reputable boiler engineer as well as a TV technician and everything was solved within two weeks so when John returned on his next visit she was over the moon! Well done to John for understanding she needed more than just a conversation, and for his local knowledge of where help could be found.'

Books may have been the original reason for using the library but in this instance, and as is so often the case, the library offered her so much more.

Another area which should be looked at is a potential partnership with the Ministry of Justice and HM Prisons and Probation Service. There could be scope for libraries to be included on the list of those organisations used for 'unpaid work', also known as 'community payback', one of the 13 requirements available to add to community orders and suspended sentence orders.

The vetting and checking process would need to be worked through carefully but this could prove to be beneficial not just to libraries but to those on a community order, potentially opening the door to new opportunities be that through skills training, employment advice or simply the type of non-judgmental support that only a library can offer.

Any expansion of the volunteering network should consider the involvement of community managed libraries (CMLs), organisations which have provoked controversy but are now an established part of the library landscape.

As of 31 December 2022, there were 427 community libraries in England; 49% remained part of the statutory service with the remaining 51% operating outside of the statutory network although many library services provide some support in the form of professional advice.¹⁶

There are around 1,600 volunteers in CMLs but as Chris Neath, Manager of the Community Managed Libraries Network, pointed out, there is often community fatigue after about four or five years.

*The **Community Managed Libraries** (CMLs) I visited were clearly well-used and much-loved cornerstones of the community. In the Deepings, Lincolnshire, they had thought the library would be most popular with children or those of retirement age. In fact, it is working people in their forties who use it the most. In Castle Cary, Somerset, which has an older demographic, The Reading Agency's Reading Well scheme is linked to the local carers' group. Just as with other libraries, CMLs are constantly innovating and adapting to meet the needs of their users. Meanwhile, the Community Managed Libraries Network is an excellent source of information, guidance and support. However, as they become more established in terms of their infrastructure, I agree with others who worry that CMLs could be used as a back door to closure with initial funding from councils to support them tapering off over time.*

When suggesting ways to strengthen the volunteer network more generally, it's important to remember that recruiting and managing volunteers still requires expertise and resources. As part of its broader interests in volunteering, DCMS may

¹⁶ [Supporting libraries | Arts Council England](#)

want to consider encouraging the sector to establish a volunteer management and development plan to share best practice. I am grateful to Dr Bidy Casselden, Assistant Professor at Northumbria University, for sending in her research in this area which contains many valuable insights.

“Libraries are the great equaliser. No one asks if you’re homeless or a millionaire.”
Redbridge

6. The creation of a Libraries Minister and a more joined-up approach within government

Within government the job of advocating on behalf of libraries falls to DCMS. By following the principle of the Ambition report to think ‘Libraries First,’ the team there champions the role of libraries and encourages other departments to see them as a natural first choice to provide information and services within local communities. Our roundtables were themed around the seven outcomes identified in the Ambition report that libraries contribute to:

- cultural and creative enrichment
- increased reading and literacy
- improved digital access and literacy
- helping everyone achieve their full potential
- healthier and happier lives
- greater prosperity
- stronger, more resilient communities

However, when officials from the relevant departments attended – and for which we were extremely grateful – they were often surprised to hear about the number of ways libraries contribute to their specific policy area.

While DCMS is the sponsor department for ACE, core funding for libraries is provided by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The work of libraries can support the priorities of several departments from health to education to the Department of Work and Pensions and the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs but is often not seen as a core delivery channel for any of them. As a result, despite the assiduous efforts of the DCMS team, it can be difficult to gain traction across government.

At the same time, arm’s length bodies (ALBs) and outside organisations such as ACE, the LGA and Libraries Connected also need the channels to build better contacts across government, not just with the sponsor department.

It should be remembered that prior to the MLA, from 1995-2000, there was the Library and Information Commission (LIC), a national source of expertise which advised government on all issues relating to the library and information sector.

In the absence of such a resource, and with the size of the modern-day library's offer spanning so many different departments, there needs to be a mechanism within government to allow better communication between departments - and for those departments to have better relationships with the different sector organisations.

While not a cure-all, one way to improve the situation would be the creation of a Libraries Minister. As the current Minister for Arts and Heritage, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay has responsibility for libraries; altering the role to the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Libraries would not just be a change of name, it would be an acknowledgement of the important role libraries play which could in turn raise their profile within government.

If the Libraries Minister were to commit to a programme of three roundtables a year to be attended by sector organisations and officials from the relevant departments, depending on the agenda, it would help break down the government silos which are currently such a challenge to the library sector.

It is not for me to dictate those agendas but I will mention three areas that libraries are currently focusing on and which would benefit from further cross-government cooperation and discussion.

Digital Inclusion¹⁷

According to the Lloyds Bank's Consumer Digital Index (the UK's largest measure of digital and financial lives) nine million people cannot use the internet without help.¹⁸

Thanks to the unique way in which libraries bring different groups of people together, they have been at the forefront of tackling digital exclusion for decades.

They have the infrastructure be that computers, Wi-Fi, tablets or free data for those on low incomes (through The Good Things Foundation) and more importantly they have the people to help.

Entering the digital arena for the first time can be an intimidating experience, particularly for the elderly, while others may be embarrassed that they do not have the skills or the means to access the internet.

¹⁷ The terms digital inclusion and digital exclusion are often used interchangeably. For clarity, digital inclusion is about ensuring the benefits of the internet and digital technologies are available to all. Digital exclusion refers to the lack of access, skills and therefore confidence which precludes many from accessing the internet or digital devices.

¹⁸ <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.html>

“Our ‘Tech Thursday’ sessions helped a customer install new employment apps last week and he already has a new job.” Somerset

And as the number of tasks moving online increases – be it booking a GP appointment or a train ticket, dealing with the courts or making a job or housing application – it is becoming virtually impossible to function without some level of digital know-how.

As such, digital inclusion has become a big part of what libraries do and it will remain that way for some time to come. Leeds, for instance, has 300 frontline staff in the city trained as digital champions, but all libraries are currently having to rise to the challenge as nearly 80% have reported seeing a constant or increasing volume of requests for digital skills support.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in rural areas, where there is a lack of digital access, libraries offer a lifeline if only as a place to work.

Two recent reports – ‘Digital Exclusion’ by The House of Lords Digital Communications and Digital Committee²⁰ and ‘Digital Inclusion in Libraries in England’ by Libraries Connected and the Good Things Foundation²¹ have both called for a new digital inclusion strategy. I support this call but in relation to libraries, there are things that could and should be looked at now. These include an assessment of the Wi-Fi network across libraries. When the Living People’s Network was rolled out just over 20 years ago, it was at the leading edge but we have been told time and again that the network is now patchy and sometimes unreliable.

Work should also begin on LC’s call to establish formal links between ‘digital by default’ public services, to ensure that those who are unable to access online services can be formally referred to their library or other online centre for one-to-one support.²² This is work that will involve a number of different departments and can only be done via a joined-up approach across government.

Finally, there were calls to make sure that the work of libraries is recorded in any new data model. As one person said: ‘We still talk a lot about physical footfall, loans, etc but we don’t hear the digital equivalent tripping off the tongue very often.’ Given the essential work of libraries in supporting digital inclusion, and the fact the government will inevitably need to do more in this area, it is imperative that the contribution of libraries is properly recorded and underlines the need, once again, for an efficient data hub.

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-digital-strategy/uk-digital-strategy>

²⁰ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40662/documents/198365/default/>

²¹ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/digital-inclusion-in-libraries-in-england/>

²² <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/119033/html/>

“It’s really good you are doing the iPad loan for the Home Library Service. In a world of anxiety, depression and mental health issues, it is a really positive thing and makes me feel supported.” Somerset

Health and Wellbeing

From their inception, libraries have helped improve the health and wellbeing of their users as a matter of course. In recent years, different services have expanded their offer in numerous ways.

A nurse based at Yeovil library, Somerset

“A lot of people get white coat syndrome in a surgery so they find it easier here. I also get a lot of people coming in after a bereavement. They’ve maybe buried their head in the sand a bit about their own health and so they’ll pop along here. If I was operating in a pharmacy or a surgery, say, I just don’t think people would come along in the same way. And the great thing about being here is if there’s an issue around weight, say, or just not knowing what to cook I’ll often suggest they have a browse in the cookery book section or I’ll gently direct them to some of the books on general health.”

To take just a handful of examples, the health and wellbeing pods at Leeds Central Library are used by perinatal teams and midwives who were struggling for space at their local surgeries. They have also secured funding from Health Education England to work on a health literacy programme for libraries.

East Riding Libraries have introduced Boditrax units – medically-approved analysers which complete a full-body composition scan. A trained advisor/member of library staff uses the results to provide a personalised path to better health and wellbeing. The scan also provides 20 different measurements of health and fitness which can be tracked on the free Boditrax app while members meeting certain criteria will have access to Oviva, a bespoke 12-week weight management and nutrition service.

Many libraries now have nurses on site for a number of days a week while Suffolk Libraries has a dedicated mental health and wellbeing team. It has also undertaken valuable research into social value and the ways in which libraries can help support the NHS’s preventative health agenda.

It was clear from our roundtables that libraries are keen to deliver on health as a properly recognised partner and for other parts of the system, particularly social care, to recognise the value of the holistic service they offer on a daily basis.

“One lady comes in regularly to weigh herself and take her blood pressure as it is convenient, private and she doesn’t feel judged.” Somerset

With better coordination across government, there is scope to do this, particularly as the NHS is increasingly focusing on population health - a place-based approach that focuses on promoting wellbeing and reducing health inequalities across the board rather than a system-based approach which focuses on those people coming through their door.

Makerspaces

In keeping with their core purpose of improving people’s lives through access to knowledge and information, libraries have been keen to create new, digital, learning spaces or ‘makerspaces’.

“The library is like a warm hug, an essential element in the community and massively important for reducing social isolation. Some weeks it’s the only place I have a conversation.” Manchester

I visited the Glass Box in Taunton Library which has helped thousands of children, businesses and start-ups to develop their digital and creative skills. It has everything from Raspberry Pi, a device that enables people to learn computer engineering and programming to a 3D printer which was used by a man over lockdown to make a prosthetic foot for his child which he had made to his own design.

In 2022, StoryTrails, an immersive storytelling experience using augmented and virtual reality, toured 15 libraries in towns and cities across the UK. It engaged with approximately 1.4 million people. As part of the programme’s legacy, the lead partner, StoryFutures Academy, was gifted 400 virtual reality headsets by Meta and is now putting them into libraries to help introduce young people to potential new skills and opportunities.

StoryTrails Creative Director Professor Will Saunders, from Royal Holloway University, explained during one of our roundtables: *“We purposely chose libraries for StoryTrails as we wanted to meet audiences who might be new to these rapidly emerging technologies. Going forward, there is so much possibility but that needs government support. By way of example, StoryTrails was part of the Unboxed programme which was allocated £120 million of public funding. Of that, nowhere*

was it prescribed that public libraries needed to be part of that project. Why not say 10 percent of the activity had to involve public libraries? Government has it within itself if it chooses to.”

With increased attention on STEM learning and the government’s new vision for the Creative Industries Sector to grow creative industries by an extra £50 billion, there is potential for libraries to introduce people to new educational software and technologies and inspire and upskill young people on careers of the future.

“One customer said he had used our thermal imaging camera to evidence his house had cold spots and as a result the housing association was taking action.” Somerset

7. The establishment of a Libraries Laureate

Libraries are fortunate in that they have a number of personalities willing to speak out in support of them from the author Neil Gaiman to the poet Lemn Sissay to the CILIP Library Champion, Bobby Seagull.

The Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, and the Children’s Laureate, Joseph Coelho, are also passionate supporters of libraries.

Simon Armitage is currently undertaking a 10-year A-Z Libraries Tour in which he will give readings, every spring, at libraries across the country.

Joseph Coelho is also part way through his ‘Library Marathon’ in which he will join a library in every local authority in the UK – more than 200 libraries in total.

When I met up with him earlier in the year, Joseph was clear that it was his local library that gave him his start in life. *“I struggled with my literacy and it was the library that helped me overcome that. What if I hadn’t gone to the library? I was the first in my family to go to university but I think I would have slipped out of the system if it wasn’t for the library. Libraries changed my life. I wouldn’t be a writer now without them. That’s why I’m calling for a library laureate.”*

It is precisely because of this support that I think it would be possible to create a laureate role for libraries in their own right.

There would be tremendous value in a high-profile, distinct, voice for libraries; someone who the media could automatically turn to and who could advocate on behalf of libraries.

The interesting thing about libraries is that given the breadth of their offer it could be an author but it could just as easily be a successful entrepreneur who started out using the BIPC.

Libraries are full of surprises, if you only go and look for them. For instance, one of the co-founders of Postmates, an American food delivery start-up which was bought by Uber for \$2.65 billion, launched his career out of Wimbletech, the technology and start-up hub established by the entrepreneur and consultant, David Fletcher on the first floor of Wimbledon library.

Whatever role the library has played in a potential future Laureate's life, it needs to be someone who is able to speak freely and has the authority to influence the public debate.

The Children's Laureate role was born out of a late-night conversation between Ted Hughes and Michael Morpurgo and its first holder, Quentin Blake, was appointed in 1999. Nowadays, we'd need to take a more structured approach but the process of determining the right person could, in and of itself, create an interest in our public libraries.

8. A change to the timing of Libraries Week to better involve politicians nationally and locally

Libraries Week is an annual showcase of all that libraries have to offer but also focuses on a different theme each year. Last year's theme was lifelong learning and this year it is green libraries.

Run by CILIP, I visited a number of libraries during last year's Libraries Week and was impressed by the different events and activities it inspired. However, it was a shame it took place during the first week of October when Parliament was in recess and MPs and local politicians were mostly away from their constituencies attending party conference.

As we know, libraries are one of the most valuable community assets we have yet it seems to me that the links between MPs and their libraries are not always as strong as the ones with their local schools and hospitals for instance.

This is a personal observation based purely on anecdotal evidence. It is obviously not the case for every politician but having been struck by the disparity, I have raised it with MPs and library staff and have been told, on a number of occasions, that the relationship could be better.

One simple way to address this would be a change to Libraries Week so that it falls within the parliamentary term. The timing is in the gift of CILIP but were it to agree to a change, government should look at the possibility of introducing a parliamentary debate to tie in with Libraries Week. It should also use that week to lay its annual report, so creating a cohesive moment in the parliamentary calendar.

A change in timing would also allow for more events to take in Parliament, something that has proved successful with other initiatives. This year's Summer Reading Challenge event was attended by 88 parliamentarians. The Reading Agency links every MP with their local library, providing press packs and photographs, so that they can help promote the Challenge.

Similarly, World Book Day, which is organised by The Publishers Association, had 136 MPs attend its last event.

Given the myriad ways that libraries can help an MP's constituents – be that through employment advice, skills training or language classes – raising awareness of the services they offer would be of huge benefit to libraries and parliamentarians.

Conclusion

We talk a lot about the different services that libraries offer and rightly so but I want to end this review by focusing on the one thing that defines a library and it is of course its books.

According to the DCMS Taking Part Survey 2019/20²³ and the Participation Survey 2021/22²⁴, the vast majority of people visited their library to borrow a book or access some kind of reading or audio materials.

In 2019/20, 73% of respondents who had used a library service in their own time or voluntarily, did so to borrow books, newspapers, music, CDs, DVDs or audiobooks. 26% went to use a computer or printing facilities and 20% to take their child or someone else's child to an event.

In 2021/22, the most common reasons for going to a library were browsing, borrowing and returning reading and media materials (72%) while 23% went to use free Wi-Fi, computer or printing materials.

Tim Coates, the founder of Waterstones and a passionate library campaigner, has argued that there is too much attention paid to other offers at the expense of library

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-libraries/libraries-taking-part-survey-201920>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/participation-survey>

book budgets which have been squeezed, compromising purchasing power and means libraries cannot always maintain stock in the way they want to.

While I don't entirely agree with his analysis, he is right to highlight the fundamental importance of a vibrant and refreshed book stock.

"During Covid the library has been wonderful at getting in new titles, something that has kept me going through isolating alone." Surrey

Books can spark your curiosity or calm an anxious mind. They can break down barriers, build up confidence and improve your understanding of the world. Even if you're not an avid reader, the simple presence of books creates a sense of reassurance. There is perhaps a reason why libraries have endured when other community initiatives and institutions have not.

As one would expect, I have spoken with a number of organisations that passionately believe in the power of books and reading and all the benefits this can bring.

***Bracebridge Library** is based in a small, slightly shabby, but instantly welcoming, room attached to the local church in a rundown area on the outskirts of Lincoln. There is a printer, a photocopier and a couple of bookable PCs but essentially people come here for the books, often when they are going to the foodbank in the church next door. Run by nine volunteers, but managed by GLL, they get books on the day of publication and stock is rotated every six months. They have approximately 200 issues a month and 30 active users including a 12-year-old boy who can be found every Wednesday waiting outside to get his books. Luke Burton, from ACE, says if libraries just do books, sometimes that is enough. It is here; and of the many libraries I have visited, this is the one that has stayed with me the most.*

The National Literacy Trust is an independent charity which works with schools and communities to give disadvantaged children the literacy skills to succeed in life. Their CEO, Jonathan Douglas, is particularly concerned about disadvantaged children's access to books – 1 in 11 don't have any at home.

To address the challenge, the charity is leading a campaign to ensure that all primary schools have a library (one in seven don't). In two years, they have established 500 new libraries, reaching 150,000 pupils and are on track to have doubled this by the end of 2024.

While school libraries are not part of the remit of this review, the National Literacy Trust has recognised the importance of bringing school and public libraries into closer partnership. To that end, each new school library is twinned with their local public library with the aim of creating new membership and developing an integrated local network of school and public library provision.

In a bid to improve early language development, a particular post pandemic challenge, the Trust is also launching an early years campaign in the 17 communities with the lowest literacy levels delivering support for families and parents so that children start school able to learn and read. The scheme places libraries' skills, resources and rhyme times at the heart of the support programme which aims to reach 250,000 children from the poorest communities over the next five years.

It is not just children that we should be concerned about. According to the Adult Literacy Trust more than seven million adults in England are 'functionally illiterate', lacking basic skills beyond a primary school level or below.²⁵ The trust aims to break this cycle of exclusion by providing personalised support in basic reading skills delivered through a network of trained volunteers. They too would like to extend their reach within the library service.

Founded by Her Majesty, the Queen's Reading Room, which began as an online book club, is now a charity which is working to provide opportunities to help more people find and connect with books. Still in its infancy, the organisation is keen to work with libraries and also to look at ways of bringing attention to the work that librarians do.

The Reading Agency is a UK charity which empowers people of all ages to read because of its proven ability to transform lives. As well as the Summer Reading Challenge, and in partnership with Libraries Connected, they have developed the successful Reading Well programme which helps people understand and manage their health and wellbeing using reading. Their Reading Friends programme tackles loneliness and isolation by starting conversations through reading, while their Quick Reads programme commissions well-known authors to write short books to engage people who struggle with reading.

The Reading Agency is already deeply embedded in libraries but they are also looking at ways in which to facilitate improved connections between libraries and authors and independent booksellers through shared promotions and high impact campaigns that get the nation reading.

²⁵ <https://alt.org.uk/our-beneficiaries/>

While independent bookshops have flourished in recent years the Booksellers Association told us, at a roundtable, that libraries rarely buy from them any longer and the relationship has deteriorated over time.

Meanwhile, there was a desire to strengthen the relationship between libraries and authors, particularly emerging authors who may not have the same freedom to engage with libraries as more successful, older, writers do.

The Society of Authors said it would be keen to improve its engagement with public libraries but will need to work in collaboration with others.

There might be potential here to work with the Hay Festival, an independent charity best known for its annual festival in Hay-on-Wye but which also runs events all over the world, reaching a global audience of millions. Alongside these events, it is particularly interested in free outreach and education programmes and would like to work with public libraries to improve the connections between its authors and local communities across the country.

Finally, it was pointed out that libraries hold the data on what the nation is reading at any given time. With the creation of a national data hub, more thought could be given to how this could be used to the mutual benefit of libraries, publishers and authors.

The relationship between publishers and libraries hasn't always been a happy one, particularly with regard to ebooks. Libraries Connected is already working on this and, more generally, there is a readiness on the part of the Publishers' Association to work more collaboratively.

This isn't unique to the Publishers' Association. Despite the challenges, there has been an overwhelming spirit of optimism in all our discussions about the importance of libraries and the ways in which they improve our lives.

I have concluded with reading because that is the foundation of every library from which every other offer springs. And because it's clear that with the right support and encouragement, there is so much potential here to create new and imaginative partnerships.

During an early meeting as I embarked on this work, Nick Poole of CILIP told me: *"We have a brilliantly innovative service in a fabric that isn't working."*

I hope that the recommendations made in this report will go some way to improve that fabric.

A 'front door' for those wishing to engage with libraries, a proper bank of data with which to advocate, more join up across government, increased membership and access, a stronger physical presence; these suggestions are all designed to give the library service a greater coherence and bolster support.

Most of all, however, they are intended to heighten awareness of our libraries so that their role may be better appreciated and understood, both now and in the years to come.

Thank you again to all those who took part.

"After all these years, it still feels amazing to be able to borrow books for free. What a wonderful resource. Free for all and incredible." Surrey

ANNEX A

Reflections for Local Authorities

This review is concerned with changes that government can make to strengthen support for public libraries in England. It is not within my remit, nor should it be, to make recommendations on behalf of local authorities who are ultimately responsible for delivering the service.

However, one of the main purposes of this exercise was to hear from the sector and rather than lose that learning, I want to put on record some of the themes that emerged and which might be of interest to local commissioners and decision-makers.

Fines Free

There has been a growing 'fines free' movement which was then accelerated by the fact so many libraries suspended fines during the pandemic.

Most of the people I spoke to supported going fines free. There was an understanding that some services rely on the income raised but there was also a concern about the barriers that fines create, particularly among those parts of the community that libraries most want to reach.

As one person said: *"Fines were only ever meant to be about getting the books back, not about making money. I'd rather have the person back, not the book back and a couple of quid. If the person thinks they can't come in because they owe money then that is a problem."*

A 2022 survey by Libraries Connected²⁶ had responses from 61 library services. It found that the majority of services are still charging people for overdue books. However, 33% of library services said they were considering removing library fines while another 40% said they might consider it.

Of those who had removed fines, 40% had seen an increase in adults using the library and 30% had seen an increase in families and people from disadvantaged areas. 18% said they had seen an increase in membership and 13% had seen an increase in overall loans.

Others said it was difficult to measure impact due to the service restrictions brought about by Covid-19. The sector may wish to consider doing further research. Libraries are rightly considered to be safe, non-judgmental, spaces but

²⁶ <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/library-fine-survey-results-and-summary-report-revealed>

barriers do still exist and fines seem to be one of the major disincentives to engaging with the library.

Workforce

I joined 40 years ago at 19 on maternity leave and never left. I do love people and even in a small way we do make a difference. We might be the only people they talk to all day and there is a lot of self-isolation. It's not just in older people but younger people too."
Librarian, York Library

The real value of libraries lies in the people who work in them. A lot of people thought their skills and their knowledge of their communities had been better understood during the pandemic. Staff were able to help other frontline services while within libraries, they were quick to adapt, nimbly moving Rhyme Times and other services online. Many felt empowered by the chance to try out new ideas and there was a concern that with the return of red tape, valuable lessons might be lost. People were keen to retain some of the flexibility that Covid allowed and to keep looking at how libraries might do things differently.

We had 11,000 calls over the first lockdown. We knew where people were, who needed help." *Bruce Leeke, Suffolk Libraries*

A very real worry was voiced on a number of occasions about the Heads of Service role. Many said that the position was disappearing and being replaced with people either too high up, or too low down, the council structure. As a result, people were anxious that libraries were not being given enough of a voice across their local authority and, where the role has moved higher, there was concern about the very large gap that has opened up between heads of service and frontline staff.

We heard about other services which have stripped back their development teams leading to a genuine anxiety about what would happen to the service in the future without that strategic leadership and thinking.

I completely acknowledge the difficult financial environment in which local authorities have to operate, and that all council services are experiencing workforce shortages. I understand that choices have to be made. However, I think it is worth pointing out that where local authorities have taken a wider view and found a way to invest in the library service, it has reaped significant rewards.

The importance of strong political leadership was cited as one of the driving factors as to whether a local authority decides to invest in its library service. Questions were

asked as to whether libraries need to get better at engaging with their local politicians.

***Merton**, a south west London Borough, has delivered a brand new library for residents in Colliers Wood, the result of a partnership between Rocco Homes, the developer of a wider site, and Merton Council involving a £2 million investment. Merton has also increased its library opening hours and built innovative partnerships ranging across nursery provision, arts and shared workspace facilities.*

***Surrey Library Service** has just secured £28.5 million in capital investment to modernise services and create flexible, innovative and inclusive spaces. This ‘Think Libraries First’ approach, places the library service at the heart of its wider 2030 Community Vision and the Hubs programme, which looks to deliver services in a joined-up way allowing residents to access multiple services in one location.*

*The **City of York Council** has committed to a £7.7 million investment in the city’s libraries which will include three new libraries across the city. Crucially, the Council has awarded the mutual, Explore York Libraries and Archives, a 15-year contract to deliver the service, enabling effective long-term strategy and business planning.*

*Over the last 10 years, **Manchester Library Service** has seen £80 million capital investment by the Council. This includes a £50 million transformation of the Central Library which reopened in 2014; and over 80% of libraries have moved into new or refurbished or co-located premises. Library opening hours have been extended over that time.*

Book Supply

I was surprised to learn that there are only two suppliers of library books in England. Askews and Holts provides the adult selections while Peters provides the children’s and education books. There were other suppliers previously but they went out of business during the pandemic.

Nearly everyone I spoke to about this, seemed accepting of the situation even though each service or consortium still has to go through a competitive tender process. And no one could give me an answer as to what would happen if Askews either ceased trading or decided to put up its prices in any significant way.

Part of the reason for this equanimity seems to be an acknowledgement that the supply of library books is a bespoke process and therefore it is not a competitive market.

It is certainly a bespoke process thanks to the way the book jackets, labelling and barcode systems differ from service to service. I have been told by someone who has visited Askews HQ that it is like stepping back in time. Because of the different requirements, every book has to be attended to individually.

To anyone from outside of the sector, such as myself, this seems frankly bizarre. It also seems risky. When pushed, a number of people said that it would make sense to have one standard specification that applies to all councils.

I do not know whether this would be enough to encourage people back into the market but it feels like something that should be looked at, together with potential changes to the local procurement process.

Working with the visually impaired and print disabled

Throughout the course of this work, I have met with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and Share the Vision, a coalition of UK organisations that work together to improve the quality, availability, and accessibility of library services for visually impaired and print disabled people.

Working in conjunction with Libraries Connected through the Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise, Share the Vision ensures that the almost two million blind and partially sighted people in the UK can benefit from a fully accessible library service.

I mention this at the request of Share the Vision who have asked that I flag their experience of how well the system can work when local authorities work in partnership with the third sector.

The RNIB is interested in sharing, more widely, their training toolkit which helps improve perceptions and understanding of modern-day sight loss which may be of interest to the sector.

In due course, there would also be merit in thinking how blind and partially sighted people could be recorded on a national data hub. With the exception of Leicester City and a handful of others, most authorities record blind and partially sighted people under disabled rather than in their own right. Having a better sense of the numbers would obviously allow for better stock management and a more targeted service.

Family Hubs

The Family Hubs Network (FHN) works with local authorities to bring together multiple organisations in a 'one stop shop' which is also connected to other local family support. The aim is to ensure that families with children and young people aged 0-19 receive early help to address problems which might otherwise escalate. Each family hub is bespoke to its local community and their specific needs.

The government is investing over £300 million in a flagship Family Hubs and Start for Life network and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Education (DfE) have led jointly on designing the programme which will fund 75 local authorities to provide more support to families.

It is of course for local authorities to decide how they wish to deliver a family hub in their area but I am raising here as libraries could play an important part in the network as the strategy matures. The neutrality of the library, as well as the breadth of its offer for children, young people and their parents or carers, makes it a natural partner for the local family hub network.

It also creates another route for libraries to reach those who could potentially benefit the most from their services. Some local authorities are already realising libraries' potential to be part of the family hubs network, and in terms of the different partnerships that may be suitable for libraries, this seems to have a particular synergy.

ANNEX B

During the roundtables our facilitator, Che, asked everyone to make a book recommendation as a way of introducing themselves. It became a much-loved part of the work of the review, with many excellent recommendations, a selection of which are included here.

The Romantic by William Boyd. A brilliant return to form. Boyd's best novel since Any Human Heart.

The Thief of Time by John Boyne. Another beautiful story weaving through history and across Europe.

Waterlog by Roger Deakin (Audiobook). A journey around Britain told through encounters with our rivers, seas, lakes and pools.

The Stranding by Kate Sawyer. A light read but very original in its portrayal of human frailty and capacity for bravery and renewal.

Join The Future: Bleep Techno and the Birth of British Bass Music by Matt Anniss. A vital history of how British dance music really began in the north, not London!

I love the bones of you by Christopher Eccleston. An autobiography about his family relationships and his career but equally about his mental health and body image issues. Really honest and raw.

Super-infinite: the transformations of John Donne by Katharine Rundell. A riveting portrait of a scholar of law, a sea adventurer, a priest, an MP - and perhaps the greatest love poet in the history of the English language.

The Murder Book by Mark Billingham. A fantastic thriller featuring DI Thorne, addictive, fast paced and brilliant.

National Treasures: Saving the nation's art in World War II by Caroline Shenton. A fascinating account of the dedication of unlikely heroes.

Scythe by Neal Shusterman. My 12-year-old daughter insisted this was up there with The Hunger Games; it is.

My Name Is Why: Quick Reads 2022 by Lemn Sissay. An inspiring true story of human resilience. Profoundly moving and deeply shocking, this bite size version makes reading the full book a must.

A Terrible Kindness by Jo Browning Wroe. A fascinating and deeply moving book about a young embalmer who volunteers to help after the disaster at Aberfan.

The Colony by Audrey Magee. Sometimes fun, sometimes moving, it thoughtfully explores different angles on the colonisation of Ireland, its people and their culture.

The Evidence by Christopher Priest. A fascinating 'post-detective crime novel' set in the near future.

Lessons in Chemistry by Bonnie Garmus. A story of hope, self-belief and 'quiet revolution'.

Shy by Max Porter. A wonderful work of poetic power, lovingly telling a troubled boy's story.

Clan of the Cave Bear by Jean Auel. The start of a journey delivered over 6 titles for a young woman brought up by Neanderthals – very descriptive and an unexpected favourite set.

A Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving. It's an unconventional hero's story and a reminder that life is miraculous.

Into the Void: From Birth to Black Sabbath - and Beyond by Geezer Butler. Amusing and eye watering tales warmly recounted by Sabbath's bass man and main lyricist.

The Pudding Lane Plot by Susanna Gregory. Politics, murder, and intrigue set in the streets of restoration London, many of which can still be walked today (now with reduced risk of murder).

How the Victorians Took us to the Moon by Iwan Rys Morus. Fascinating exploration of how the Victorians invented the "future", and how this thinking still shapes our attitudes to science and technology today.

Atonement by Ian McEwan. The ending ... speechless.

The Island of Missing Trees by Elif Shafak. It is a wonderful story about trauma, displacement, love and the need to call somewhere home – told from the perspectives of human characters and a very wise fig tree!

My name is Asher Lev by Chaim Potok. A journey of self discovery and the convictions of the individual over pressure from communities.

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo by Taylor Jenkins Reid. The tale of a retired actress in the golden age of Hollywood with a shocking twist.

Dolphin Junction by Mick Herron. Bite-sized thrills from the author of the Slough House novels, with excellent shivery twists!

ANNEX C

Contributors to this report

I have been overwhelmed by the support for this review but as a result, it has not been possible to speak to absolutely everyone. As well as thanking all those listed below, I would also like to apologise to those who I did not get a chance to meet but who generously offered their time.

Zoinul Abidin, LB Barking & Dagenham
Sadie Abson, Arts Council England
Barney Allan, Digital Content Associates
Kevin Allen-Khimani, Voluntary Action Leicestershire
Ian Anstice, Public Libraries News
Fiona Ashton, Bracebridge (Bridge Church) Community Hub
Katie Atkinson, Explore Tang Hall Centre
Kelly Saini Badwal, LB Sutton and The Libraries Consortium
David Ball, UK Electronic Information Group (UKeiG)
Catherine Barker, Family Hubs Network
Peter Barnett, Coventry City Council
Julie Bell, Lancashire County Council
Andrew Bentley, Storyhouse
Rebecca Blackman, Arts Council England
Erik Boekesteijn, National Library of the Netherlands
Baroness Boycott, The Hay Festival
Paul Bristow, Arts Council England
Steven Broomhead, Warrington Borough Council
Carol Brown, Worcestershire County Council
Marion Brown, Lincolnshire Libraries
Tony Brown, LB Islington
Luke Burton, Arts Council England
Hayley Butler, The Reading Agency
Sue Butterworth, Save Rainford Library Group
Samantha Callan, Family Hubs Network
Neil Churchill, NHSE
David Clarke, RNIB
Jennifer Cleary, Arts Council England
Tim Coates, Founder of Waterstones
Andrew Coburn, The Library Campaign
Joseph Coelho, Children's Laureate
Louis Coiffait-Gunn, The Publisher's Association
Dan Conway, The Publishers Association
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Alison Cork, BIPC network ambassador
Sue Crowley, Somerset Libraries
Sarah Crown, Arts Council England
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Valerie Denslow, Somerset Libraries
Sergio Dogliani, LB Tower Hamlets
Councillor Ruth Dombey, LB Sutton
Che Donald, facilitator
Jonathan Douglas, National Literacy Trust
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David Fletcher, Wimbletech
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Peter Gaw, Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries
Diana Gerald, Bookstart
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Robert Glick, Adult Literacy Trust
Cllr Peter Golds, LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board
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Felicity Harrison, West Berkshire Libraries
Nick Harrop, National Academy for Social Prescribing
Sarah Hassan, Norfolk Library
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Darren Henley, ACE
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Ayub Khan, Libraries Connected / Warwickshire Libraries
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Philip Marshall, The London Library
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Christine May, Bradford Libraries
Laura McCormack, The Booksellers Association
Mark McCree, Oxfordshire County Council
Keelan Meade, Digital Poverty Alliance
Sarah Mears, Libraries Connected
Lord Mendoza, Commissioner for Cultural Recovery and Renewal
Alison Millar, Leeds Libraries
Stuart Miller, Newcastle Building Society
Helen Milner, Good Things Foundation
Ian Money, Explore York Libraries and Archives
Iain Moore, Libraries Connected
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Gareth Morley, Vision Redbridge
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Jack Powell, BFI
Robert Powell, Explore York Libraries and Archives
Caroline Rae, LB Newham Libraries
Cllr Luthfur Rahman, Manchester City Council and LGA
Peter Ranken, Community Managed Libraries National Peer Network
Fiona Razvi, Wimbledon Bookfest
Lea Rickard, Stamford Library
Peter Rippon, BBC
Julia Robinson, South Tyneside Libraries
Jonathan Robinson, Civic
Nicola Rogers, Lincolnshire Libraries
Debbie Rolls, Author
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Will Saunders, StoryFutures & StoryFutures Academy
David Shelton, Deepings Community Hub
Cheryl Siddall, LiveWire Warrington
William Sieghart, Civic
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Darren Smart, Somerset Libraries
Hazel Smith, North Yorkshire Library Service
Simon Smith, Reading Libraries
Hollie Smith-Charles, Arts Council England
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Laura Swaffield, The Library Campaign
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James Urquhart, Arts Council England
Iain Varah, Vision Redbridge
Julie-Ann Vickers, Explore York Libraries and Archives
Sharon Wagg, The University of Sheffield
Holly Waugham, Explore York Libraries and Archives
Holly Webb, Society of Authors
Roger Weldhen, Somerset Libraries
Liz White, British Library
Jane Wilde, Somerset Libraries
Sue Wills, Surrey County Council
Andy Wright, Kirklees libraries
Sue Wright, Somerset Libraries
Alan Wylie, Library worker and Unison activist
Julie Zessimedes, Cornwall Council

Staff at Norfolk library service, Camden library service, Hampshire library service, Nottinghamshire library service and Staffordshire library service.

Government departments

- Lord Benyon, Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs, The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Guy Opperman MP, Minister for Employment, Department for Work and Pensions
- Officials at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Officials at the Department for Business and Trade
- Officials at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
- Officials at the Department for Education
- Officials at DCMS including the DCMS libraries team