

Arts and Culture for all in Public Libraries: reflections from the front-line

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I have worked in community library services for the past 27 years and have seen the role of libraries in promoting and supporting cultural activity change and develop significantly over the period. All libraries are generally defined as a physical space that holds specific resources for use by its members. A typical definition of a public library can be found at collinsdictionary.com: 'a building where things such as books, newspapers, videos and music are kept for people to read, use or borrow'. When I began working in public libraries, much of my role supported this simple definition. The majority of my work involved the maintenance and development of library collections and the ways in which they could be more easily accessed by users. Over the years, the priorities of front-line staff in libraries have moved away from a collection-centred approach towards an approach that is more community-centred. There have been a number of factors that have contributed to this change in emphasis but, from my perspective, they all have their roots in libraries adjusting to community demand.

Making books available to those who might otherwise be unable to access them has always been a key function of the public library. The ready availability of cheap books and accessible information that we presently enjoy in the developed world has led many to question the continuing relevance of libraries. Children's author Terry Deary has argued that the majority of books are affordable and readily available, and that public libraries foster a belief that readers are entitled to free books which reduces the income of authors, publishers, and booksellers.

[Libraries 'have had their day', says Horrible Histories author | Libraries | The Guardian](#)

Deary's argument contrasts with my experience of working with authors, small publishers and a local bookseller. All have been keen to work with the library service and extremely positive about the contribution of public libraries in their communities. My belief is that libraries are valued in the book industry because of the work they do in promoting reading and supporting reading communities. Historically, reading has been considered more of a solitary pursuit, but readers are now far more likely to want to share their opinions on the books they have read. This tendency has been turbo-charged by the internet and social media, where the keen book

lover can find book-related blogs, review sites, fan pages and online shops, all of which actively support interaction from users. Libraries clearly support reading communities through the provision and promotion of free access to books for all ages. They also provide enhanced support by organising and hosting regular book-centred activities for all ages, the most common examples being Bookbug (0-3 years), Storytimes (3-8 years), Chatterbooks (8-12 years), and Teenage and Adult Book Groups (12+ years). The benefits of reading for pleasure have been widely documented and include: *increasing understanding of self and social identities, empathy, knowledge of other cultures, relatedness, community cohesion and increasing social capital*. (The Reading Agency Literature Review: The impact of Reading for Pleasure and Empowerment June 2015)

Other studies have found that attending reading groups and other shared reading activities also reduces loneliness in participants and address issues of social isolation. <https://demos.co.uk/research/society-of-readers/> This became particularly clear during, and immediately after, library closures due to the Covid pandemic. During this period, we were regularly asked when library activities such as Bookbug and Reading Groups were going to return. Staff resolved this by using Social Media and Video Conferencing to deliver remotely, and providing activities outdoors. Whether these groups are being described as a society of readers or a community of readers, consistently promoting and supporting them helps to grow a reading culture in local communities. The library that I work in also collaborates in running a community book festival which is free to all. By providing high quality book-related events over a long weekend, this festival both supports a local reading culture and contributes to the social fabric of the community.

As the number of accessible public spaces have declined, public libraries are often the only public spaces that can be accessed by all ages and at no cost in our towns, suburbs and villages. This has led to an observable increase in people using the library as a place to visit - to hang about and socialise - particularly amongst new parents, children and young people. The use of mobile technology and the increase in working from home has further increased the numbers of people who use the library space for longer periods of time, in this case to work and study. More recently, public libraries have been designated as 'Warm Spaces', where people who are struggling to cope with massive increases in fuel bills can go to keep warm. In my view, this places public libraries in a key position as safe and welcoming spaces in the heart of our

communities - open to being used as accessible venues for a range of local cultural activities. *Forward, Scotland's Public Library Strategy 2021-2025* states with confidence that 'Public libraries are vibrant local venues which provide varied opportunities to access culture', and that public libraries should 'curate a diverse cultural offer which celebrates local and national heritage and encourages community led experiences'. [slic-public-library-strategydigital_final.pdf \(scottishlibraries.org\)](https://www.scottishlibraries.org/slic-public-library-strategydigital_final.pdf)

Over the past year, the library I work in has been one of the venues for the following local community led events:

- a Pride Festival
- a Community Art Festival
- an Environmental Festival promoting cycling
- a Book Festival

As well as providing free venue space, the library worked in collaboration with all these local groups, promoting the events through tailored book displays and social media posts. In the case of the Book Festival, library staff collaborate with community representatives at all stages, with staff supporting the distribution of tickets and the organisation of events outside normal library opening hours.

Each one of these events use multiple local venues, involve local volunteers, and explicitly identify themselves with the geography of the local community through the title of the event. As well as helping to combat loneliness and social isolation, these types of events encourage a feeling of connectedness and belonging in communities. At the same time, all of the organisations that I have worked with in my capacity as community librarian have an inclusive approach, looking to make new programmes and fresh ideas available locally. In my experience, events such as these are very well attended, and attendees' feedback is predominantly positive: it is not unusual for staff and volunteers to be thanked for supporting such events.

A shared awareness of the history of any place can contribute to a shared community identity, reinforce feelings of connectedness, and reduce feelings of social isolation. Public libraries will generally stock resources that have some focus on the history of the area in which they are based and are often the only accessible source of materials relating to the history of many

communities. Many libraries will further develop their commitment to promoting the history of their communities through maintaining links with local historians and host local studies events and classes.

From the earliest stage, the vision behind public libraries was that they would increase access to information and literature for all, and that they would do this by providing access at the lowest possible cost to the requestor. It quickly became established practice that books and written reference materials would be provided free of charge, and this would become the legal responsibility of local authorities. This provision of free resources, when coupled with the fact that visitors are not required to buy something to remain in public libraries (unlike, say, cafés), have led to libraries being particularly well used by those suffering from the effects of poverty and inequality. In my experience, the response of public libraries is to provide services that are tailored to support these people. It can follow from this that public library use increases during periods of financial crisis. Evidence shows that the current cost of living crisis has certainly led to increases in library use. A survey of heads of library services last year revealed that 'more than two-fifths of public libraries have already experienced increased demand for services related to the cost of living crisis'. [Libraries and the cost of living crisis - briefing note](#)
[| Libraries Connected](#)

Libraries have responded by working to support those experiencing poverty and hardship. Their role as information providers, combined with their position as venues in the heart of communities, makes them the ideal service from which to organise and host events where a range of organisations provide information on support available to families experiencing cost of living challenges. In my experience this works particularly well when child-friendly cultural activities – often organised and run by library staff - are added, providing free activities for the whole family. This merging of information with free and entertaining cultural activity works very well in modern public libraries, which are often characterised as both informative and fun. I have also seen libraries make a range of small adjustments that help to support individuals and families in the current financial climate. Libraries role as 'warm spaces' can be enhanced by the provision of games and magazines, and free hot drinks can be provided for visitors. Libraries can also be used as local donation points through linking with foodbanks and other charities that are involved in the redistribution of essentials. The library that I work in acts as a donation point for a foodbank and free nappy distribution.

A recent initiative, in which donated musical instruments are made available for children to borrow free from public libraries, is an example of how libraries can enable and encourage learning and creativity in the arts. This initiative has been clearly targeted to support families from the most deprived communities. I would always be in favour of those initiatives and adjustments that are designed to support those in greatest need. I firmly believe that public libraries, based as they are in the heart of communities, and already well used by vulnerable demographics, are ideally placed to provide this support.

As with all public sector institutions, community libraries have existed in some extremely challenging environments over the past fifteen years. Government austerity policies, followed by the pandemic and the recent cost of living crisis, have placed unprecedented pressure on public services. The Big issue recently reported that, since 2010, austerity policies have seen library numbers fall by over 17%, while 50 libraries did not reopen following the Covid pandemic. [Battle to save Britain's libraries as austerity leaves future uncertain \(bigissue.com\)](https://www.bigissue.com/news/battle-to-save-britain-s-libraries-as-austerity-leaves-future-uncertain)

It is perhaps understandable that libraries can be seen as a non-essential service when viewed against local authority services such as housing and education. I would argue that public libraries provide real benefits to communities that go well beyond their traditional definition of a building where books and other materials are stored and loaned to members and that public libraries also deliver these services at a relatively low cost. Figures released by CIPFA, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, show that in 2021/22 £9,982 was spent per 1,000 people on libraries by central and local government in England, Scotland and Wales. [Spending on British libraries falls 17% as in-person visits soar | Books | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/22/spending-on-british-libraries-falls-17-as-in-person-visits-soar)

In conclusion, public libraries provide resources and activities that enable people to discover a love of reading and develop and share that love throughout their lives. They act as a cultural hub for communities, making full use of their position as a venue and as an archive to support the growth of strong, creative, and confident communities. Public libraries are well placed to enable support for the most vulnerable through the provision of free public space, computer use, and cultural materials and activities. Public libraries will also actively work in partnership with organisations that have a remit to support those affected by poverty. This provision of free and accessible cultural activity for all increases community cohesion while decreasing isolation and contributing to individual wellbeing in general. This to me is the real value of the modern public library service in the UK.