

# THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN

SUPPORTING FRIENDS AND USERS OF LIBRARIES



SUMMER 2021  
No. 101



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# THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN – AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

To advance the lifelong education of the public by the promotion, support, assistance and improvement of public libraries through the activities of friends and user groups.



## The Library Campaign

27 Old Gloucester Street, LONDON WC1N 3AX

For general enquiries: call 0845 450 5946

Please note, calls will cost 2p per minute, plus your telephone company's access charge.

Alternatively, contact us by emailing [thelibrarycampaign@gmail.com](mailto:thelibrarycampaign@gmail.com)

[www.librarycampaign.com](http://www.librarycampaign.com)

Twitter: @LibraryCampaign

Facebook: The Library Campaign

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## THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN

maintains a

# FREE LIST

of local

# FRIENDS AND USER GROUPS

with their contact details, on our website.

If you know of a new (or old!) group that is not on our list, please notify:

[thelibrarycampaign@gmail.com](mailto:thelibrarycampaign@gmail.com)



As usual, we've sent you an extra copy of this magazine. Please take the time to pass it on, or place it somewhere people will see it...

## ELECTED OFFICERS

**Laura Swaffield** London

**Andrew Coburn** Essex

## MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

**Geoffrey Dron** Bolton

**Bob Goodrick** London

The following organisations send representatives to attend steering group meetings:

Unison,

Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals (CILIP).

## WHO'S WHO?

### Quick guide to some of the many things relevant to libraries ...

**1964 Act (Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964)** says all local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a public library service, which must be 'comprehensive and efficient' and available to all who wish to use it. Libraries are NOT optional. It gives the Secretary of State power to enquire – and intervene – if standards fall short. These powers have barely been used.

**ACE (Arts Council England)** now has 'responsibility for supporting and developing libraries'. As yet unclear what that means in practice.

**CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals)**: the professional body for librarians in all types of library.

**CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy)** collects figures on library performance and on user satisfaction.

**MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government)**: the central government department responsible for local government. It provides most of local councils' funding. It does not determine how much of it is spent on libraries.

**DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport)**: sets central government's policy on libraries (among other things), but does not fund them. It is headed by the Secretary of State, with one minister more directly responsible for libraries (among other things).

**LGA (Local Government Association)** lobbies on behalf of local government. Does some useful work on public libraries, but ultimately sides with councils, not library users.

**MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council)**: ACE's predecessor.

**NLT (National Literacy Trust)**: charity 'dedicated to building a literate nation' – which includes promoting reading for pleasure. Huge source of information, campaigns and projects.

**LIBRARIES CONNECTED** (formerly Society of Chief Librarians) advises LGA on libraries. Does a lot of useful work, including research and resources, but tends to stick to 'quiet diplomacy'.

**UNISON**: the trade union for most public library staff. Good research and promotional materials.

**TRA (The Reading Agency)**: charity to develop reading, especially via libraries. Dozens of projects to promote books, especially to key groups like children, reluctant readers, ethnic minorities etc.

**Taskforce (the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce)**: set up and funded by the DCMS to lead development following the Sieghart report 2014.

# Back to books!

**As we go to press, people – and libraries – are moving very cautiously back into real life. We can't predict how that will go. Fingers crossed.**

But the library world has not stood still. Behind the scenes, a tremendous amount of development work is going on. Much is still in the pipeline stage, so reporting it can wait for a bit.

Meanwhile, let's have fun. Libraries sure do have a central role in economic recovery and educational catch-up. But they are also about enjoying personal contacts. And books.

Children's services are brilliant at making reading the starting point for imaginings, adventures and solving the kind of problems that actually interest kids. This year the need for this refreshment is stronger than ever. The summer reading programmes fill the bill.

Curiously, the Prime Minister has even name-checked them – in one of those Commons set-ups where a loyal MP asks a question in order to get a government-flattering answer. 'There could not be a better campaign for the summer,' Boris asserted. 'We have put £1.9 million of support into the reading scheme that [the MP] mentions...' (Hansard, 14 July).

If he remembers what he said, and that he boasted about funding reading for kids, might he give further proof he meant it?

## Growing taste

Reading gives adults just as much fun. The growing taste for e-books and audiobooks got a big boost during lockdown, and shows no sign of waning.

But initial statistics, says Iain Moore at Libraries Connected, also show physical books are making a strong come-back where they get the chance. There's a long way to go, but the signs are promising. The reading dial might have shifted upwards for good.

So we need to think clearly about that much-used saying: 'Libraries are now about more than just books.' Yes, yes they are – but this must never be taken to mean that books are less important than they used to be. They are not. Books and reading are the foundation of what libraries offer.

They will add background and depth to almost any activity you carry out. But they also stand by themselves as a source of sheer enjoyment and wellbeing. The side helpings of increased knowledge and empathy don't hurt either.

Libraries stand for essential civic values that badly need defending. They are also nice places to find a book.



**Civic values: huge public support drowned out the attacks on footballer Marcus Rashford. The mural depicting him, defaced, became a public art work and visitor attraction. Manchester library and archives staff are doing the work to preserve it from Manchester's rain. Meanwhile, his children's book (co-produced with writer Carl Anka) shot to the top of the week's best-seller charts!**

## THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGNER SUMMER 2021, No.101

**EDITOR:** Laura Swaffield

**DESIGN & PRODUCTION:** Owain Hammonds

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Jake Alexander, the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, BookTrust, Carnegie UK Trust, the Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project, The Reading Agency, Freya Sampson, Laura Swaffield

**COVER PHOTO:** National Literacy Trust story trail in Manchester

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This annual campaign is a chance to publicise the importance of libraries – and Friends groups!

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This major children's reading charity plans to make a special effort to reach the most disadvantaged.

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Libraries nationwide will deliver BookTrust's ground-breaking new story time project.

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This year's Summer Reading Challenge will be extra important in helping children 'catch up' – and enjoy the natural world.

#### 13 SUMMER IS FOR READING – OUTDOORS

More than 20 organisations are working together to bring families lots of ways to enjoy reading, outdoors if possible.

#### 15 & 18 BOOKS!

A pull-out poster of thoughts and quotes about books...

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...back to back with another poster about libraries.

#### 19 RHYME TIME WAS MY LIFELINE

Freya Sampson was inspired by libraries to write her first novel – about an anti-closure campaign.

#### 20 A WORLD WITHOUT LIBRARIES?

Another debut, a children's story book by illustrator Jake Alexander, is also about an anti-closure campaign.

#### 21 LEVELLING UP? HOW?

Community resources such as libraries would do far more than the huge 'infrastructure' projects loved by politicians.

#### 22 READ, TALK, SHARE

All through lockdown, a £3.5m campaign had libraries working with The Reading Agency to combat loneliness and mental health problems.

#### 24 PAYMENT IN KIND

Libraries are a natural place to foster kindness, says the Carnegie UK Trust. Some cheap, simple projects found ways to spread the message.

#### 26 GET INVOLVED IN CRIME

Crime comes top of the most-borrowed lists. And there are ways to widen your knowledge and track down interesting new writers.

#### 28 LIBRARIES – DIGITAL LIFELINE

Libraries are the obvious place to combine digital access with the information and personal support that is often needed, says the Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project.

#### 32 JOIN US! The more TLC grows, the stronger we get.

# What has TLC been doing?

**As well as giving one-to-one advice to several groups and campaigns, our activities have included...**

- continuing work on our updated website
- regular meetings with the main library organisations, CILIP and Libraries Connected
- attending online conferences to keep up on developments such as the British Library's digital project
- sending evidence to Croydon's consultation on its (awful) library plans, which got extensive cover in the local press
- putting the Croydon campaign in touch with CILIP, who also sent a strong statement
- sending evidence against the Office for Students' plan to halve spending on creative subjects and librarianship (in vain)
- keeping the press updated on threats to libraries, which got us quoted in The Bookseller on 15 March  
<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/councils-urged-protect-libraries-cost-cutting-measures-proposed-1244033> and the Daily Express on 25 May  
<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1440899/library-closures-council-cuts-protests-croydon>
- and led directly to the Essex campaign getting a big feature to itself in the Daily Express on 21 June!



## • and we went Zoom!

We've all missed the regular Speak Up for Libraries conferences that TLC co-organised with Unison and librarians' association CILIP. We'll get back to them in time, we hope.

Meanwhile we tried an experiment. Would Friends and campaigners welcome a conference on Zoom? And, indeed, would we be able to lay one on without technical glitches?

The answer was yes and yes. People valued the chance to see others and share ideas. Organiser Andrew Coburn managed the whole thing well... and has put the recordings where anyone can see them. So TLC is now a presence on youtube!

## Zoom 1

Our first Zoom meeting was on 14 April. It was a success. People attended from all over the country (and Japan!). The guest speakers were Elizabeth Ash from Save Croydon Libraries and Liz Miles from SOLE (Save Our Libraries Essex).

There followed a wide-ranging discussion, with almost all present making a contribution. Among the points to emerge were:

- All Friends groups are valuable, whether they are fighting cuts or supporting a service that isn't in crisis.
- Many groups produce useful material that could be shared.
- The government (DCMS) has a legal duty to ensure good services ... but doesn't.
- National library bodies seldom do things that library users see as high priority – such as...
- Demonstrate that libraries are great value for money
- Run a publicity campaign for public libraries, perhaps centred on social media.

If you want to see what you missed – or refresh your memory – you can watch the recording of the meeting here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JptyzGMADAA>

## Zoom 2

The second meeting on 24 May was a follow-up to discuss ideas for publicity. It was a good session – plenty of clever ideas from library Friends and users. We'll be taking them forward.

First guest was Nick Poole, CEO of librarians' association CILIP. He packed in a lot of information on what CILIP is doing to update its

work and make it more diverse, more outspoken, more active in society.

It's well worth a watch. In fact, the recording gives you a chance to slow down and absorb all the ideas he presented!

The good news is that the library professionals are really getting their act together. They have initiatives we can use and support. And they are taking on board users' suggestions.

First on the list, we decided, is working together to make a success of Libraries Week in October (see page 5 opposite). People present thought Friends could benefit by putting a national stamp on their own publicity efforts.

Second guest was graphic designer Helen Anderson, a library assistant and post-graduate student. Here are some of her posters, based on her research into the things people value about libraries.



TLC hopes to work with her on her project and help develop it. The idea is to set up a poster/image bank for all to use – and contribute to.

Many Friends groups have done excellent work which deserves to be seen and used widely. Other groups are pressed for time and talent, and would welcome some practical help.

People present agreed it would be great to have free access to high-quality designs for posters and publicity. This would be a real time-saver for busy Friends groups. Helen posted links to two poster sites (not about libraries) which had inspired her – <https://www.postcardstoga.com> and <https://www.mateactnow.com>. You can follow her progress on Twitter – @StoryTheyTell.

You can watch the meeting here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnFptREPM4o>

## Zoom 3

We'll get back to Zoom meetings after the summer...

# October means Libraries Week...

**What exactly will your Friends group be doing in October? This nationwide campaign might be just the thing to give your efforts a boost.**

**We don't really know what will be going on in October, for obvious reasons. But we all hope that with luck, libraries will be open – and will be working hard to encourage people back through their doors.**

That's where Friends groups could really help.

Here's one idea. TLC is calling on Friends to back National Libraries Week, October 4–10. It covers England and Wales, and is organised by librarians' association CILIP with a long list of partners.

Some TLC members have already told us they would welcome the chance to demonstrate that their activities have national relevance.

## Let us know!

Send us your ideas.

- What are you planning?
- What we can do to help?
- What messages do you want to see us putting out to the national media?

**We know one group that is planning an event for local councillors and the council's decision-makers. Great idea!**

**Another group will use the posters to highlight its regular monthly author talk. Another group has asked us for a grant so they can print out multiple posters to create real impact.**

**What could your group do?**

**Email: [thelibrarycampaign@gmail.com](mailto:thelibrarycampaign@gmail.com), or phone 07914 491145.**

The week is a regular October fixture, billed as 'an annual showcase and celebration of the best that libraries have to offer'.

It is cunningly timed for the period when councils are starting to think hard about their next year's budget... That's more important than ever this year.

The choice of overall theme is also highly relevant. Each year has a different theme, and for 2021 it's 'Taking action, changing lives'.

The idea is to show what libraries (and Friends!) do to get people together – running events, working together on improvement projects, reaching out to overlooked people in the community, forming interest groups for anyone from knitting enthusiasts to gardeners or young parents.

That's a good message post-lockdown. Councils will be trying to build back badly-needed community support networks – many of which have been kept alive by libraries.

Nearer the time there will be a national publicity campaign by CILIP.

This year, for the first time, TLC will also run a national campaign with press releases and social media.

The exact content will be topical, so the details are yet to be worked out. But we'll certainly be saying that libraries need Friends...

It will be a good week to plan any kind of get-together. Or you could choose to highlight some activity your library is doing anyway! You can draw on some elegant graphics for free, to

## Resources

**The Libraries Week website (<http://librariesweek.org.uk>) has some useful tips on event planning, publicity and promoting your activities online.**

**You can register there to be kept up with developments.**

**You can download a range of promotional posters, plus banners and graphics for social media. All free, all in English or Welsh.**

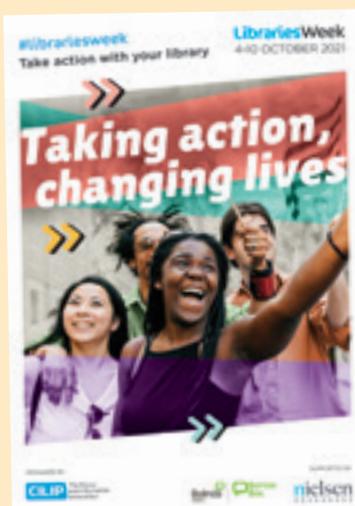
**Some of the posters have space to fill in your own messages before you print them. Or you can print them with a blank space to write in what you want to say.**

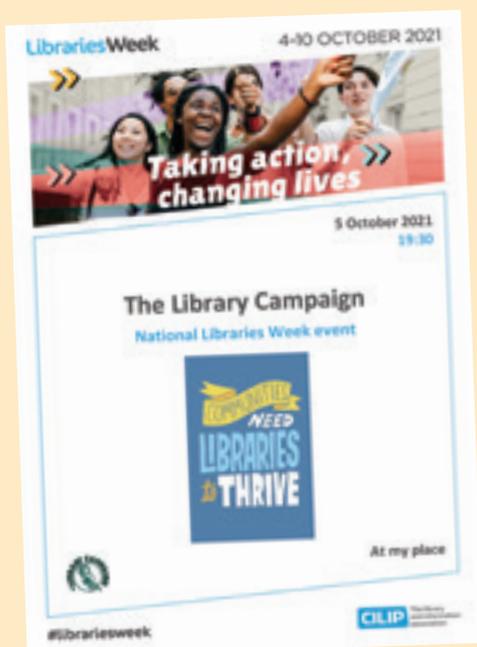
**On social media you can already start using @librariesweek and sharing your plans at #LibrariesWeek.**

**In October, join the #SharetheChange social media campaign to share your photos showing how libraries and groups are taking action and changing lives.**

smarten up your posters and press releases. You can take advantage of the national publicity blitz online.

You can turn those national messages into backing for your own actions. And – by letting both TLC and CILIP know what you're doing – you can be part of that national message yourselves!





You can also take an 'editable' poster and put in your own material before printing out – we found the instructions were straightforward and do-able. Or you can just print out posters with a blank space and write or draw or stick or stamp whatever you want in the space.



**LibrariesWeek**  
4-10 OCTOBER 2021



All four poster designs, in English and Welsh, are available to use on Instagram and Twitter, and there are logos too.

## To get you thinking...

How does your Friends group help the library service to:

- Provide a space for people to meet and connect
- Enable young people to read and learn
- Support young families
- Meet the diverse needs of individuals and groups
- Provide creative activities and enjoyment
- Encourage active citizenship
- Support economic recovery
- Help to build a stronger and more resilient community
- Encourage digital participation and inclusion
- Help to combat loneliness and improve wellbeing
- Help job seekers to find work or improve their skills
- Make a lasting impact on people's lives.

## One more thing TLC did!

In issue no 100, we outlined (page 23) a new venture – a possible replacement for the much-missed English Public Library Standards (obit 2008). These gave libraries a clear level of provision to aim for. Equivalents still exist in Wales, Scotland and N Ireland.

The new version is being organised by Libraries Connected, the chief librarians' association. A massive amount of thought and discussion has gone into it so far.

Those with a strong head can read the interim report: <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/accreditation-libraries>.

TLC has pressed the – rather obvious – case for users to be consulted. A pilot has now been sent for comment to library services. It was given a full test run by three – Northamptonshire, Reading and Suffolk. It is not available publicly.

We obtained a copy to show to library users – on a limited, confidential basis – in Northants, Bolton, Lambeth and Essex.

Opinions varied – of course. But common themes did emerge.

The pilot asks very big questions such as 'Does the service understand local needs?' or 'Does the development of your service take account of the unique values and ethos of public library practice?'

They are all excellent questions. Well worth asking. But how are they to be answered? The draft gives, for each question, suggestions for policy documents (etc) which will provide evidence. But the answers, surely, can only be rather subjective value judgements.

'User surveys' get some mentions, though few of us see many of these. If such surveys were highlighted as core evidence, it might at least incentivise services to carry them out regularly.

What the pilot does not ask for is cold facts on number of branches, PCs, books and so on. That's what the old PL Standards did. Our sample appreciated that crude bean-counting gives limited information. It does not show how a service affects people's lives.

But, most agreed, it is needed to buttress the value judgements that result from the questions. Objective data, surely, is essential for consistent evaluation and makes it much easier to pinpoint gaps in the service.

It is also the kind of information that the users most wanted...

# Campaign round-up

## Tower Hamlets

In Tower Hamlets, east London, a determined campaign led the council to scrap its library cuts. But there will be a 'review' next year, and staff posts are already threatened. All the local unions – Unison, Unite, GMB – backed the campaign.



Opposition began as soon as draft plans were aired last November. They included closing two (of eight) libraries, running down two others, sacking 35 staff (one-fifth) and reducing hours, to save £1m (from a budget of £4.4m). Another £600,000 was somehow to be saved through 'online provision'.

By March, concessions had whittled down the projected saving to just £365,000. It was obvious that the damage to services – and the council's reputation – wasn't worth such a small sum. In January an online meeting attracted 200 people. Then everyone piled in:

- Children, with help from the scouts, made a powerful video about their need for libraries.
- An online petition collected 2,300 signatures.
- Social media attracted support from celebs such as Alex Wheatle, Malorie Blackman, Michael Rosen, Stella Duffy, Patrick Gale, Kate Hudson and Vaseem Khan.
- The local paper covered the story, of course.
- Local author Kate Thompson got an article into the Guardian. Fortuitously, she has just published a book on how the local library (evacuated underground) helped East Enders survive the blitz...
- A powerful letter was sent to the mayor by Michael Rosen and local authors Kate, Louise Raw and Sarah Wise, plus professors at

Birkbeck College and local university Queen Mary's. The names were collected via personal contacts.

- A local MP, Apsana Begum, helped.
  - Apart from opposition councillors, a dozen from the ruling Labour party voiced their unease behind the scenes. An uncomfortable split developed...
- Read the full story: <https://librarycampaign.com/libraries-saved-in-tower-hamlets>

## Croydon

Croydon is in mid-consultation – for the second time. The borough is in deep financial trouble, being the second in England (after Northants) to declare itself effectively bankrupt. The 13 libraries, it decided, must save £500,000 a year (15%).

The first idea was simply to close five – unless 'the community' stepped in to run them at no cost to the council. Online consultation meetings shot down the idea in flames. It was clear that 'community managed libraries' cannot be run at no cost. Surprise!



Save Croydon Libraries worked hard at getting out the information. It has also pointed out some serious deficiencies in the consultation. A heated council scrutiny meeting concluded that the plan made little sense.

Revised options were being consulted on as we went to press, with real life meetings in libraries now added to the process. The good news is that Croydon has found £1.6m from the Community Infrastructure Levy to fund essential repairs that community groups had been expected to find. Save Croydon Libraries can be thanked for that.

The bad news is that the options are (1) outsource the whole service – with nothing known about how this would affect it (2) reduce service hours by 21% across the borough (3) reduction of two days a week at eight libraries, more at the original five libraries – with 'the community' still filling the gap. Staff cuts would be inevitable, with £650,000 set aside for Open+ technology to enable staffless opening.

<https://savecroydonlibraries.wordpress.com>

## Barnet

Barnet's libraries have already suffered major damage (see issue no 97, pp 15-17 and issue no 99, pp 20-23).



Now Hendon Library is at the centre of a massive council 'regeneration' plan to turn the town centre into something called the 'Hendon Hub'. It's a joint venture with Middlesex University, which locals say is getting a very good deal.

The rather bland looking 'hub' buildings would provide 583 student flats, some housing (just 63 units) and some community facilities such as a 'new library'.

This leaves the current grade II listed library to be gutted and turned into the university's business school. Leaving it alone was not an option in the public consultation.

The plan is moving steadily through the council's processes – despite 88% of the public being against it. Noisy protests outside – and inside – the most recent meeting (plus holes in the 'business plan') show this story has a long way to go,

Scroll down for some excoriating background comments: <https://www.brokenbarnet.blogspot.com>

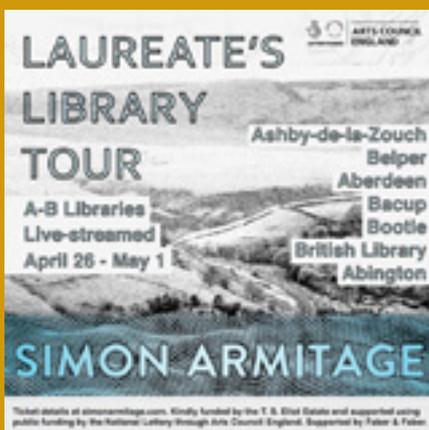
## Stockport

In Stockport, Cheshire, plans are afoot to close the Carnegie library and transfer the service to Merseyway, a new shopping centre.



Campaigners point out that the current consultation process is in two parts. The closure of the library comes only in part 2 – although it would be inevitable if the public approved the shopping centre plan in part 1. There is no reason, they say, why all the delights promised for a facility in Merseyway could not equally be provided in the Central Library. A 7,000+ signature petition agrees.

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community-Organization/Save-Stockports-Historic-Central-Library-107756144437020/>



## Peripatetic poet

Poet Laureate Simon Armitage has finally been able to start his planned 10-year poetry-reading tour of the UK's libraries.

'I want to pay my respects to these unique institutions, he said. 'By planning readings up to a decade in advance I'm being optimistic about the future of our libraries, and challenging those authorities who would consider closing them down.

'It would have been easy to stream these events from my office or garden shed. But at a time when libraries are under threat and have been out of bounds during lockdown, reading from inside their physical structures feels like an act of solidarity – with books, with poetry and with communities.'

Every spring, he will tour libraries large and small, in alphabetical order. This year was for A and B.

Each session will be live-streamed, with guest poets. If your library starts with C or D, contact: [hawkridgeagency@gmail.com](mailto:hawkridgeagency@gmail.com)

## £1m in Wales

Five libraries in Wales (Maesteg, Neath, Pembroke, Rhiwbina and Treorchy) will share with three museums a £1.1m government grant for improving community facilities.

## £5m in England

ACE (Arts Council England) has announced a £42m fund that libraries can bid for. This is not new money. It was first announced in 2019, but clobbered by Covid. It is split into three: £18.5m for 'cultural development', £18.8m for museums – and £5m for libraries...

# How to be death positive...

It has, alas, never been more relevant to encourage people to talk about death.

But three library services have in fact been developing 'conversations around death, dying and planning for end of life' since 2018.

They are Redbridge, Kirklees and Newcastle. Funding came from Wellcome Trust, The Wolfson Foundation and Carnegie Trust UK as part of their 'Engaging Libraries' project.

Activities – all online recently – have included a booklist, a book group, a 'death café' for discussions led by a specialist, and a virtual gallery of artwork and words from patients at the Marie Curie Hospice in Newcastle.

Redbridge Library Service has coined the phrase 'death positive library' to describe its project. Anita Luby, Head of Cultural Services, says: 'In the last year alone, over 5,000 people have attended our digital events.

'Individuals have valued a safe place to connect with others, to share their experiences of loss and to have normal conversations about death.



'By using books, film and the arts we have created a gentle and accessible way to start conversations about a challenging subject, with over 60% of participants saying they felt more comfortable exploring this topic in a library space than they would have done anywhere else.'

Libraries Connected is now devising a 'national framework of support' to enable all UK libraries to take up the idea. It includes regional champions, pilot projects, toolkits, training and 'partnerships with relevant organisations and services'.

LC says: 'Libraries are uniquely placed to be a centre for bereavement support, as well as a trusted space where conversations about death and dying can take place with caring staff on hand to help.'



## Library work is 'lower value'

Library and information science will be among the higher education subjects to suffer a 50% subsidy cut from next year.

The Office for Students is to increase funding for 'high-value' courses such as science, engineering and medicine. But it will halve support for a huge list of creative subjects – including all the arts, music, drama, design, media, cinematics and more.

These are seen as 'high cost but lower value'. The cuts even even target learndirect courses (available through libraries), which are aimed at upskilling adults in employment.

The consultation attracted massive opposition – to no avail.

CILIP said: 'Pitting sciences versus arts is bad economics. A strong economy is a creative economy and a competitive industrial base depends on the flow of ideas and creativity.'

Many others made the same point, including TLC. We said the cuts would cause 'huge damage to the whole cultural sector, in which the UK is an international leader...

'Hardly irrelevant is the fact that this sector is also a major contributor to the country's income.'

# Oct 7, poetry heaven



7 October is this year's National Poetry Day – neatly placed in Libraries Week! A good day to have a poetry event. This year's theme is choice. As we go to press the resources on the website need updating – but will be worth checking out. Already there's lists of recommended new 2021 poetry books for adults, children, young adults and book groups (with handy reading notes).

<https://nationalpoetryday.co.uk>

## Reading group resource

14 September is National Reading Group Day – the annual celebration of reading groups. Maybe a good time to join Reading Groups for Everyone, the UK's largest reading group network. On offer: book recommendations, free books to review yourself, and competitions to meet authors and take part in 'great giveaways'.

<https://readinggroups.org>



Libraries Connected is supporting a theatre tour by the Sonia Sabri Company. It is visiting 26 libraries and spaces in England up to 26 August. The show, 'Same, Same But Different' mixes Kathak and contemporary dance with live music, beat boxing and physical storytelling to create 'a playful, colourful world, exploring curiosities and fears, the times we feel different and when we belong'. [https://www.scco.org.uk/tour\\_calendar/calendar.php](https://www.scco.org.uk/tour_calendar/calendar.php)

## Information quality matters...

It has never been more obvious how dangerous bad information can be.

CILIP is increasingly taking seriously its full name – Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals.

It is now a co-founder of a new body called Media & Information Literacy (MIL) to 'promote media and information literacy in the UK as a fundamental building block for a healthy, inclusive and democratic society'.

It has a public libraries section, which lists good library projects addressing digital and health literacy.

Meanwhile, CILIP has taken a swing at the recent much-criticised 'Sewell report' on racism (Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities).

It says: 'We live in an age in which misinformation is undermining public trust and confidence in our civic institutions.'

'It is essential that independent processes, such as the Commission, model best practice in their use of evidence.'

'Unfortunately, the use of evidence by the Commission... appears to be very limited in nature, drawing on relatively few and in some cases contested sources and without drawing sufficiently on independent third party research...'

'Instead of starting from a position of neutrality and drawing conclusions from the evidence presented, it manifestly starts with an agenda – to demonstrate that race is less of a mechanism for inequality in "modern Britain" than class, family or geography – and then retrofits the evidence to this argument.'

CILIP calls for a new 'fully-independent Commission'.



Digging through the... er, archives, we came across this old poster, from the days when TLC distributed its own. In almost every respect, as relevant as ever...



Simple but effective: as lockdown slowly eased, Friends of Tate South Lambeth Library commissioned a banner to improve the message conveyed by the library's firmly closed door...

# BookTrust sharpens its focus



This major children's reading charity has decided on a new strategy – prioritising the most disadvantaged (while still serving all children)

**We're the UK's largest children's reading charity. Each year we reach millions of children and families, inspiring them with our books, resources and support to get them started on their reading journeys.**

Over the past decade, the lives of children and families have changed. Family structures, routines and priorities are evolving, and their time is increasingly facing competition with technology.

Millions of children face disadvantage and inequalities in their lives. Local services are transforming. The pandemic has seen the disadvantage gap grow, threatening the wellbeing and prospects of a new generation.

There's never been a more urgent time for us to focus our efforts, redefine our approach, and set out how we will inspire and encourage a new generation of children on their reading journeys.

## **Ambitious**

Over the next five years we'll prioritise support for disadvantaged children and families, and children from vulnerable family backgrounds for whom the benefits of reading can be even more transformative – whilst retaining our commitment to all children through our universal activities.

This is a new and ambitious direction for us. We will draw on our research, evidence and our long and successful history of delivering engaging and impactful reading support to millions of children and their families.

By adapting our existing resources and developing new and exciting ways to engage children and families on their reading journeys, more of our reading tools, resources and support will be targeted to meet the needs of families facing economic disadvantage and those from vulnerable family backgrounds.

Many of our activities will remain universal, reaching children in every community across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and inspiring families to cultivate a reading habit from birth up to the age of 13.

**BookTrust is a massive resource. It covers children's reading from babies to teens. It runs crucial national schemes including Bookstart, Letterbox Club and the Children's Laureate. It supports librarians, teachers, parents and children with reading tips. It administers five awards. It campaigns and does research. Its website is a treasure chest of news, advice, games, quizzes, competitions, rhymes and stories, features by writers and illustrators – plus endless book reviews, with a Bookfinder to track down the right book for any age or taste. <https://www.booktrust.org.uk>**



This way we can ensure our activities are truly universal, with all children getting the support they need.

Reading is finding meaning in text or images, independently or with others, and making sense of an idea through focus and concentration.

Whether it's through graphic novels, picture books, stories, poems or rhymes, paper based or digital.

More than functional literacy, it's a creative act that takes you somewhere and opens up new possibilities.

Many people don't know about these benefits. With millions of children facing disadvantage and inequalities in their lives, there is an urgent need for us, our partners and professionals who support children and families to advocate for the

role of reading in a child's life so a new generation of children can enjoy these life-changing benefits.

Achieving our aim of getting every child reading regularly and by choice means supporting families to adopt or change behaviours that enable them to create and cultivate a reading habit.

We have a new theory of change that will transform our approach, providing children and families with

the opportunities, confidence and motivation to initiate and maintain a reading habit that lasts.

## **The key ingredients to forming lifelong reading habits are:**

- Start early and provide ongoing support to help build longstanding habits
- Give children a choice of books to increase their motivation
- Provide age-appropriate books, tools and resources
- Curate and recommend diverse and inclusive books so children can see themselves in the books they read
- Provide access to high-quality and diverse books
- Support families to engage their children in reading
- Encourage a safe and secure environment for reading

## **Our network:**

- Skilled delivery partners including local authorities, health visitors, schools, libraries, social workers and early years practitioners
- A diverse community of children's authors, illustrators and publishers
- National agencies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and book gifting organisations around the world

## **Universal**

Thanks to our network of partners, we have the unparalleled opportunity to reach all children – including those living in deprivation – whether that's in rural areas or urban developments.

We will design our universal activities so they respond to the needs of children and families in economic disadvantage who face greater barriers on their reading journeys.

# Libraries to pilot story scheme



BookTrust is piloting a new 'national library experience' called BookTrust Storytime.

**The project is for disadvantaged families with children aged 0 to five, encouraging them into libraries to enjoy stories and develop a reading habit. It's an obvious fit with BookTrust's new strategy to focus on the most needy.**

It will also help libraries to reconnect with their communities after a year of closures, kick-start visits and support disadvantaged children.

More than 2,500 libraries across England are taking part in the national pilot, which launches this autumn. BookTrust is 'exploring how we can pilot BookTrust Storytime across all regions we work in, including Northern Ireland and Wales'.

Pilot activities have been designed in collaboration with librarians and families across the UK. The pilot will test their effectiveness and feed back the findings to inform further development. The aim is to 'make sharing stories a regular part of family life'.

'Sharing stories is invaluable for children in their early years,' says BookTrust. 'It creates lifelong positive impacts on health, wellbeing, creativity and education.'

'Yet children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face the biggest barriers to reading.'

A recent BookTrust survey of 1,000 families in poverty with a child under five (in England, NI and Wales) revealed that less than half (49%) are registered with a public library.

Families are more likely to return to the library if their first experience is fun and they can see the enjoyment and benefit experienced by their child. Librarians and families have worked together to co-design content that reflects their experiences and meets their needs.

This includes breaking down off-putting preconceptions – such as libraries being solely a

place for reading books quietly. Clear signage and a welcoming, friendly environment will be important.

The programme will also incorporate the existing BookTrust Storytime Prize, which celebrates the best early years children's books. This year's shortlist will be used to encourage families to make repeat visits to the library to read the books and join in activities.

**The pilot will have three levels of library engagement:**

- National tier: every library in England will be invited to take part and receive a pack of the Storytime shortlisted books, plus access to a range of digital resources.
- Learning tier: more than 300 libraries will receive multiple Storytime shortlist packs, plus toolkits and digital resources. They will run Storytime sessions and get families to vote for the Storytime winner – to be announced in early 2022.
- Pilot tier: a further group of 10 libraries have been selected to work intensely with BookTrust to test a range of additional ideas, materials and activities. These are in Luton (Leagrave Road library), Lancashire (Nelson library), Cornwall (Camborne library), Rochdale (Balderstone library), Bradford (Laisterdyke library), Cambridge (Wisbech library), Rotherham (Rawmarsh library), Hackney (Dalston CLR James Library), Bristol (Junction 3 Library) and Sandwell (Stone Cross library).

Library partners include ASCEL (Association of Senior Children's & Education Librarians), Libraries Connected, CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals) and YLG (Youth Libraries Group). Funding comes from ACE (Arts Council England).



Diana Gerald, CEO of BookTrust said: 'Through this pilot, we will test and learn how families can be best supported to engage with their local public library and make sharing stories a regular part of family life.'

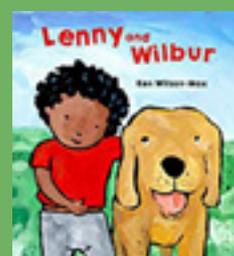
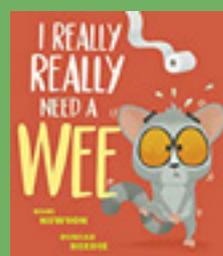
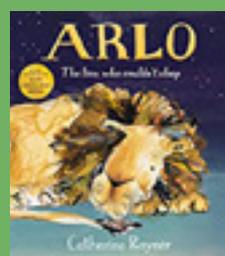
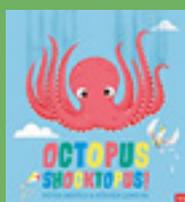
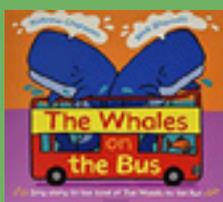
Annabel Gittins, Vice-Chair of ASCEL and Library Development Manager, Shropshire said: 'The resources will enable libraries to play a key role in Covid-19 recovery – supporting local authority priorities around early years speech, language and communication skills, and enticing more families to recognise libraries as their space to explore, with opportunities for all age groups.'

Sir Michael Morpurgo, President of BookTrust, said: 'I first walked into a library when I was about three, I think. It lent us the first books I ever loved, and I'll never forget that. Every library is a pathway to enjoyment, knowledge and understanding.'

'To me, every librarian is a hero because they pass on what they love to children, making readers and writers of them, and bringing joy to their lives.'

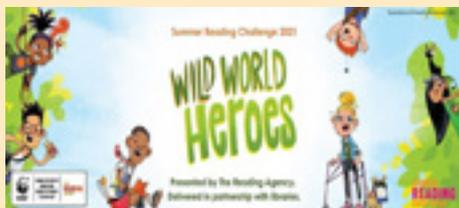
'It is wonderful that BookTrust and libraries are working together and using their invaluable expertise to do something new and different to support more families to discover the joy of reading.'

## The BookTrust Storytime prize shortlist:



# Wild ideas for kids

The Summer Reading Challenge is a mainstay of the library service for children. This year it is even more important than ever...



**Libraries are getting used to a new type of demand following lockdown – ‘hybrid’ services that make heavy use of online as well as physical spaces. Although, of course, whether funding follows is a big question...**

Meanwhile, summer will (we hope) enable libraries to make good use of a third option – the great outdoors. This is, of course, as Covid-safe as it can get.

So well done The Reading Agency (TRA) for choosing an outdoorsy theme for this year’s Summer Reading Challenge – Wild World Heroes.

This popular library programme encourages reading for pleasure over the holidays. This builds reading skills and confidence, and helps to prevent a ‘dip’ in skills while children are out of school.

With school life disrupted, this year’s challenge is more important than ever. It will help parents and carers to find family-friendly activities and create a safe space for children to connect with their peers. It’s vital that ‘catching up’ should be fun...

TRA aims to increase its reach this year from the usual 700,000+ children to a million. A new digital platform helps children find books they



will like, chat about them, find out about authors and illustrators, access activity sheets and competitions, play games and more.

Libraries, of course, have their own free packs to give out in the real world. Plus medals and certificates for children who read six books (there’s a reading list, of course).

The theme has been developed in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund. With ideas from WWF, it focuses on taking action for nature and tackling real-world environmental issues, from plastic pollution and deforestation to wildlife decline and nature loss.

Children can join six fictional characters – ‘wild heroes’ – to help solve some of these threats, learning about the environment and helping to restore nature in an imaginary ‘Wilderville’.



Karen Napier, CEO of The Reading Agency, said: ‘We are really delighted to announce WWF as a partner. We have seen first-hand, via our children’s programmes and our work on the 500 Words writing competition, that climate change and the environment are subjects that children are keen to explore.

‘We hope that this year’s theme of Wild World Heroes, chosen by children and public library colleagues, will help to open up important conversations and inspire children and adults across the country.’

<https://summerreadingchallenge.org.uk>



# Summer is for reading – outdoors

**The Reading Agency hasn't just set up another Summer Reading Challenge. It has also brought together over 20 partners in a massive 'Summer of Reading' campaign.**

**The partners are organisations working across the whole reading, literacy and cultural sector. It's 'a collaborative effort to help ensure that children who need the benefits of reading most have access to summer reading activity as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to be felt acutely by children, parents and carers'.**

This ought to encourage the government to grasp what libraries offer – and their amazing ability to get the most out of a wide range of partners. The partners duly include the DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport).

Culture minister Caroline Dinenage paid tribute to this 'brilliant network of libraries and other organisations... [providing] fantastic reading events and resources helping to reach those who need support the most.'

Other partners include Arts Council England, ASCEL (Association of Senior Children's & Education Librarians), Authors Aloud, Book Clubs in Schools, BookTrust, Bookmark, Calibre Audio, CILIP, Coram Beanstalk, Libraries Connected, National Literacy Trust, Open University, publishers Peters, Pop Up Projects, Read for Good, the School Library Association, The British Library, The Reader and World Book Day.

The project builds on the success of TRA's Reading Together Day last year. This, says TRA, 'showed the power in collaboration and the appetite across the country for summer reading events and resources'.

New goodies are announced every week through to 17 September, including digital activity, in-person events at libraries as they re-open – and a whole lot of outdoor fun.

The last Monday of each month is dedicated to libraries with a Library Spotlight Day.

The sheer scale and variety of what's available is dizzying. There is even provision for adults here and there. Many offers take the form of real life activities at local level – and libraries have been quick to catch on to the possibilities.

Find the latest news on the website, which is updated weekly.

[readingagency.org.uk/SummerofReading](https://readingagency.org.uk/SummerofReading)



## **Meanwhile, here's just a few examples...**

There is a huge resource bank including read-along videos, printable activity packs, a choice of online book clubs, book recommendations for all ages and tastes, online games and blog posts with advice for parents and carers. The bank will be regularly expanded through the summer.

<https://readingagency.org.uk/news/blog/summer-of-reading-resources.html>



A new magazine by Bookmark, The Story Corner, has been distributed to schools, foodbanks, pupil referral units and children's hospitals across England and Wales. Or you can read it online or download it.

<https://www.bookmarkreading.org/the-story-corner>

The National Literacy Trust has developed 'story trails' for ages two to five, which start with a special book. These are taking place in local parks, with a book tailored to each locality.

NLT is working with a variety of partners including, of course, libraries. Locations in 12 areas: Birmingham, Sandwell, Cornwall, Croydon, Doncaster, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, North Yorkshire, Peterborough, Swindon and The Wirral.

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/news>



**National Literacy Trust story trail.**

The Open University has games and ideas for running a 'Booknic', including a book character quiz.



<https://ourfp.org/2021/06/10/booknic>

School Library Association has a 'Recreate the Book Cover Challenge'. Participants can use photos, film, art, papier-mâché - 'whatever you have at your disposal to get creative' and can share their efforts

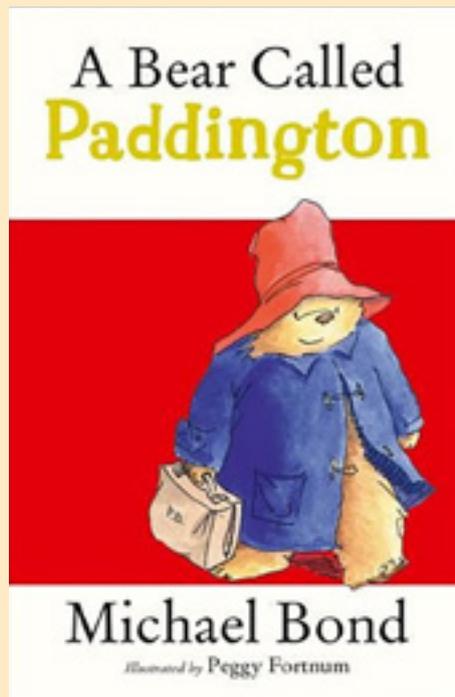
[www.sla.org.uk/summer-of-reading](http://www.sla.org.uk/summer-of-reading)

World Book Day has devised some Scavenger Hunt activity sheets, available for three different age groups, plus quizzes, games, a youtube channel to hear short stories read by your favourite authors and illustrators, and more...



<https://www.worldbookday.com/2021/06/get-ready-for-a-summer-of-reading>

The British Library has a family-friendly exhibition, 'Paddington: The Story of a Bear', running until 31 October. Online, children can see how to make a suitcase for Paddington, and pack it with whatever they think he will need.



<https://www.bl.uk/childrens-books/activities/pack-your-suitcase-with-paddington>

The Calibre service, for people who have trouble accessing print, is running its own version of the Summer Reading Challenge, with adult and children's titles.

[www.calibreaudio.org.uk/information/summer-challenge](http://www.calibreaudio.org.uk/information/summer-challenge)



Hertfordshire Libraries have set up special 'walking' versions of their reading groups and their family activities. Leicester Libraries have joined up with local organisations The Spark Arts for Children and Upswing to lay on 'Seasons', a story told through acrobatic performance. Aimed at families, it is performed with the audiences sitting in tents, with one family bubble to each tent.



**Open University**

Children who read for fun will **do better** in school, even in subjects like maths



#TimeToRead



**READING**

*is to the*

**MIND**

what

exercise

*is to the* **BODY.**

By Richard Meade

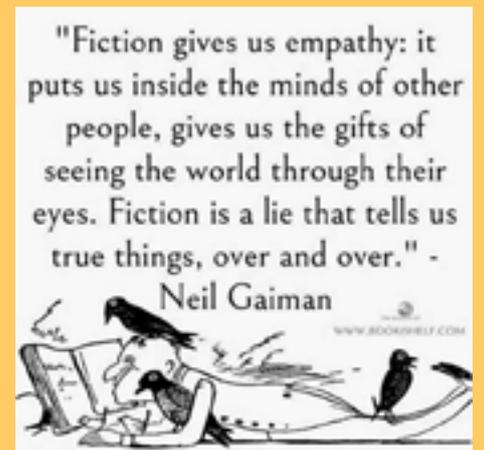
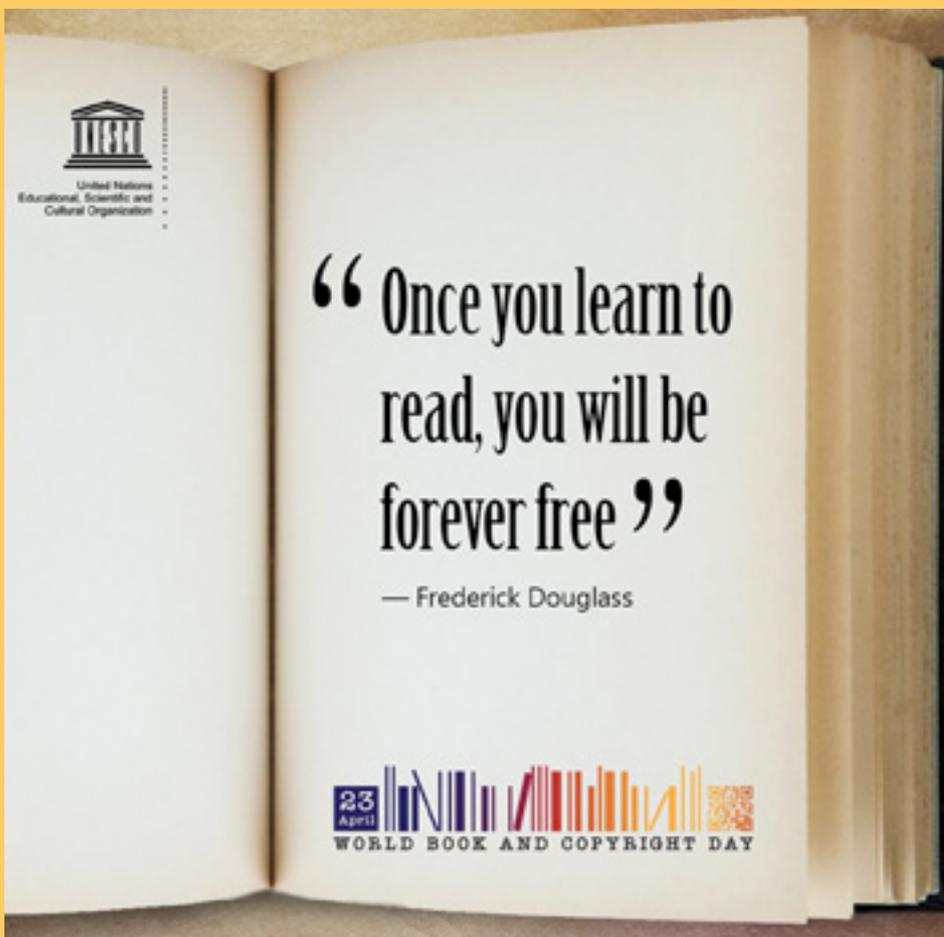
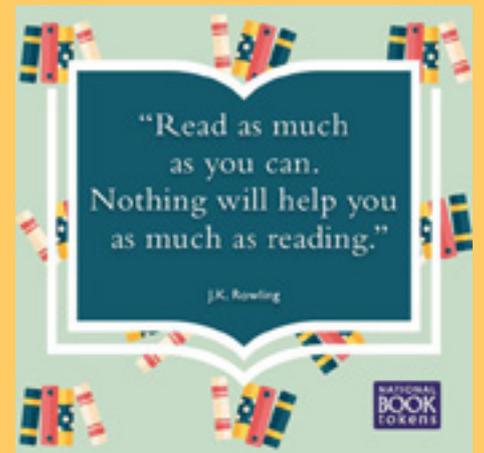


A child who reads will be an adult who thinks.



You're never too old, too wacky, too wild, to pick up a book and read to a child.

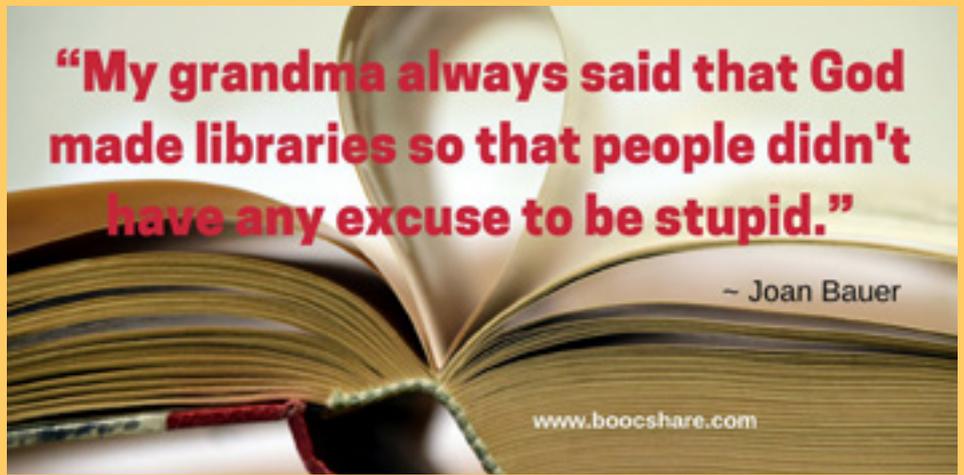
-Dr. Seuss





CUTTING  
LIBRARIES  
IN A RECESSION  
IS LIKE  
CUTTING  
HOSPITALS  
IN A PLAGUE.

ELEANOR CRUMBLEHULME



COMMUNITIES  
NEED  
LIBRARIES  
to THRIVE



*“When you are growing up, there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully — the church, which belongs to God, and the public library, which belongs to you’.*

Keith Richards

The three most important documents a free society gives are a birth certificate, a passport, and a library card.

—E. L. Doctorow

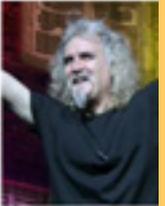
**“We may sit in our library and yet be in all quarters of the earth.”**

– John Lubbock

www.FutureLeadersReadAndWrite.com

“... for me, the library is the key. That is where the escape tunnel is. All the knowledge in the world is there. The great brains of the world are at your fingertips.”

BILLY CONNOLLY



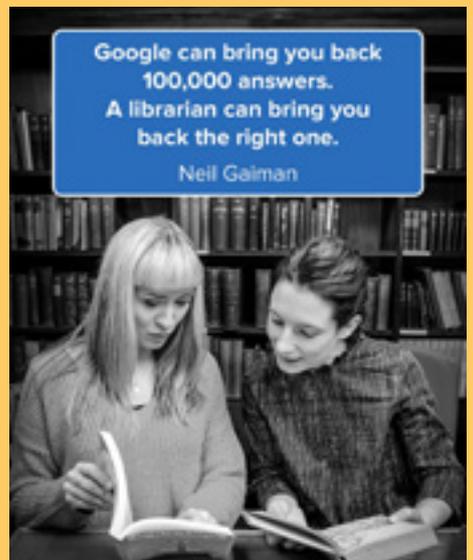
**SAYING YOU DON'T NEED A LIBRARIAN BECAUSE YOU HAVE THE INTERNET IS LIKE SAYING YOU DON'T NEED A MATH TEACHER BECAUSE YOU HAVE A CALCULATOR.**

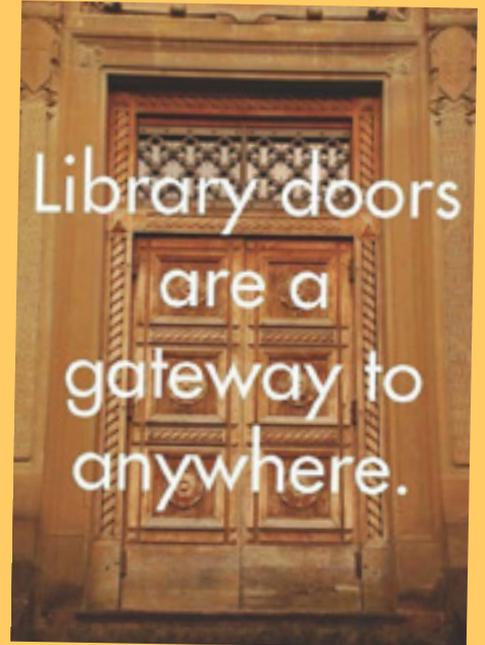
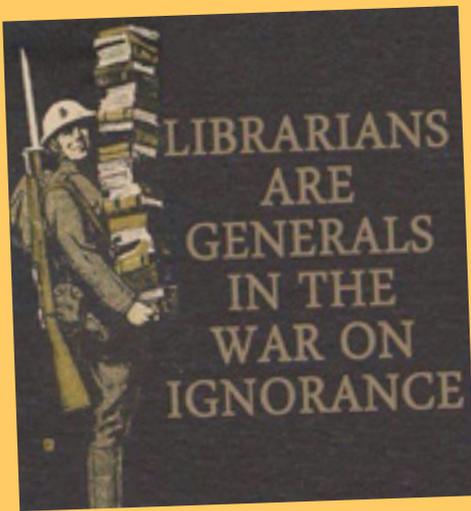
*“If there’s a library in your town and you’ve never been, well you’re missing out on a whole lot of stuff!”*

Dolly Parton

Google can bring you back 100,000 answers. A librarian can bring you back the right one.

Neil Gaiman





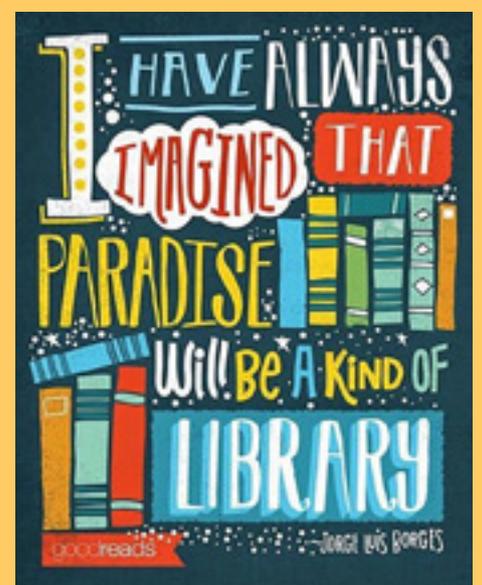
Civilized nations  
build libraries;  
lands that have  
lost their soul  
close them down.

Toby Forward

meethills.com

*“A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.”*

Andrew Carnegie



"Books are the training weights of the mind"

- Seneca

"When I think of all the books still left for me to read, I am certain of further happiness."

- Jules Renard

"To acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the miseries of life."

— W. Somerset Maugham .



THEY SAY IN EVERY LIBRARY THERE IS A SINGLE BOOK THAT CAN ANSWER THE QUESTION THAT BURNS LIKE A FIRE IN THE MIND.

-LEHONY SNICKET

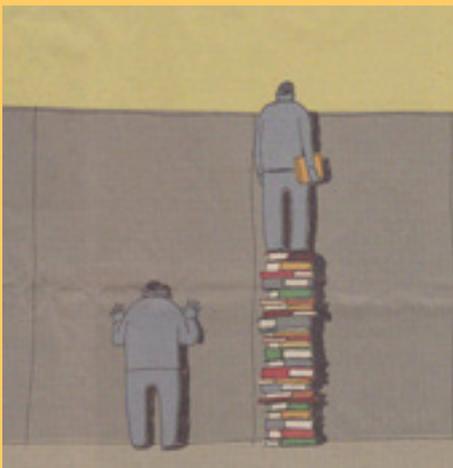
"A MIND NEEDS BOOKS AS A SWORD NEEDS A WHETSTONE IF IT IS TO KEEP ITS EDGE."

-TYRION LANNISTER

When I want to travel I don't need an airplane train or bike. Just give me a comfortable seat, a cup of Tea and a really good **Book**

You can borrow a book,

but you get to keep the ideas.



# Rhyme Time was my lifeline

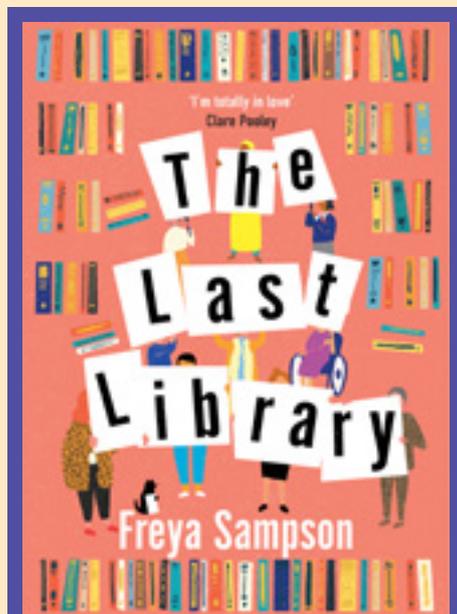
**Freya Sampson works in TV and was the creator and executive producer of Channel 4's *Four in a Bed* and *Gogglesprogs*. Her experience as a young mother inspired her to write her debut novel, *The Last Library*, out in September.**

**I've always loved libraries. As a child, I would go to my local library every week and take out the maximum number of books. As a student I spent many a late night squirrelled away in the university library, trying to hit an essay deadline.**

But it wasn't until my early thirties, and the birth of my first child, that I began to appreciate just how important libraries really are.

Despite living in a bustling city, I found the early months of motherhood isolating. I didn't know many other people in the area with babies, and I was too nervous to go to cafes alone in case my colicky baby started to cry, disturbing paying customers.

When I finally plucked up the courage to leave the house with my daughter on our own, the first place I went was to the library.



**The Last Library by Freya Sampson, published by Zaffre on 2 September in hardback, ebook and audio, £14.99. It tells the story of (ahem) a shy librarian whose life changes when a Friends group is formed to fight the library's closure – bringing together a disparate group of people with this one very important thing in common...**

We'd only lived in the area for a few months at that point, and I hadn't been to my local library yet. It has large floor-to-ceiling windows at the front, and through them I could see what was clearly the children's room.

I remember pausing in front of the window, wanting to go in but nervous in case my daughter was too noisy and we were asked to leave.

Then I took a deep breath and walked in. It soon became apparent that a nursery rhyme session was underway. I felt a bit self-conscious being there with a newborn who couldn't yet smile, let alone sing Baa Baa Black Sheep, but nobody batted an eyelid as I sat down.

## AFICIONADO

For the next 20 minutes, I listened to small children tunelessly shout the words to nursery rhymes, as happy as if I was in the front row of a concert at Wembley Stadium. And my daughter, who up until then had seemed to view sleep as some form of torture, slept happily in my arms.

From then on, Rhyme Time became my lifeline. I measured my growing confidence as a new mum by the increasing distance I'd travel to different libraries.

I became an aficionado of nursery rhyme sessions, walking three miles to a particular library because the librarian who ran that one was especially brilliant. I arranged 'library dates' with other parents I'd met there. And my daughter began to clap her hands with delight every time we walked in.

The more time I spent visiting my local library, the more I began to realise how many people came not just because they liked the library, but because they needed it.

There was the teenager who'd clearly been excluded from school, and used to hang out in the library when it rained. The man who came in dressed in a suit and tie, job hunting on the computers. The mum who lived in cramped accommodation, for whom the library provided space and distraction for her small, energetic kids.



PHOTO: ANDY KOEEN

There was one particular older gentleman who caught my eye. He liked to sit in the same spot, reading the newspaper. He'd often try and start conversations with other people, but most avoided eye contact and ignored him.

One day, I watched as a library worker stopped by his table for a chat. I didn't hear what they talked about and the conversation couldn't have lasted more than two minutes. But when she walked away, I saw the man smile, and I realised that that brief moment of kindness from the librarian was possibly the only conversation he would have all day.

## THREAT

It was during this time that I came up with the idea for my debut novel, *The Last Library*, about a library threatened with closure and the group of patrons who fight to save it.

I wanted to show how essential libraries are to communities, and how many people go there for more than simply borrowing books.

I also wanted to highlight the threat that so many libraries face from funding cuts and closure.

I honestly don't know what I'd have done if I hadn't been able to visit the library when my daughter was born. And if the past 18 months of pandemic have shown us anything, it's how many vital services libraries provide.

So I hope that when readers pick up *The Last Library*, it will remind them just how important libraries are, and why they're worth fighting for.

# A world without libraries?

**Jake Alexander is an illustrator. In 2019 he won both the Macmillan Prize and the Creative Conscience Gold Medal. His new picture book – for ages three to five – follows children fighting to save their local library. It is his first book. This is why he wrote it.**

**Growing up, when my parents would go and do their weekly shop at the local supermarket, I would ask them to drop me off at the library opposite. Because a) a food shop can be really boring as a child, especially when it's not entirely made up of doughnuts, and b) because I loved to read.**

It's true that the library smelt kind of weird, a mixture of old books and carpet cleaner. But for however long it took my parents to do the shop, I would sit perched on an oversized bean bag, absorbed in a random book – one that I had found myself or one that a librarian had pointed out to me.

These books ranged from series like Goosebumps to a wide variety of non-fiction about art and history that kick-started my love of those two subjects. I also read a ton of children's picture books (my favourites were Judith Kerr's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and *Mog*) and a lot of Spike Milligan's poetry.

## EXPLORING OTHER WORLDS THROUGH READING

This small library introduced me to wider reading, allowing me to get lost in different worlds and to find stories that I would never have come into contact with otherwise. We didn't find out about my dyslexia until college, but reading more and more in the library made it easier for me to read at school, and I found it so much easier to keep up with my classmates.

And while I was at school, it was really rewarding to apply the things I had learned and the new ways of thinking I had gained from the local and school libraries. Access to a wide variety of free books cultivates a love of reading and enriches the lives of the local community.

Without this extra foundation and the head start I achieved by reading in my local library, I'm convinced that I would not be where I am now.

I get to do what I love for a living, and for that I feel incredibly fortunate and thankful.

It's devastating, then, that we are living in a country where we won't have to imagine a world without libraries. It's becoming reality.

## WHY WE NEED TO FIGHT FOR LIBRARIES

Since 2010, 850 libraries have closed across the country – there was even an attempt to close the library I went to as a child, and it was only saved thanks to a community-led effort.

Countless children have now been deprived of free access to read for pleasure; exposure to books that could inspire them to be more than they thought was possible; and the support, which I enjoyed when I was younger, that a wide variety of non-fiction provides in schooling.

Libraries aren't just places to read free books, even though that is obviously a big deal. Neil Gaiman wrote that 'Libraries are one of the few places you are allowed to exist without the expectation of spending money'.

Nearly all libraries provide free access to computers and the internet. Not everyone has a smartphone, and not everyone has a computer. Not everyone has wifi!

I think it's easy to take these things for granted



when they feel like such an integral part of our lives in contemporary society.

This past year, however, has reinforced the fact that everyone, regardless of wealth or background, should have free access to the internet. Pupils' entire education depended on it this year. Some kids missed out on a lot, because they simply did not have free access to this.

A world without libraries will have deep lasting ramifications within our society – and it will become a reality if we don't fight for them.

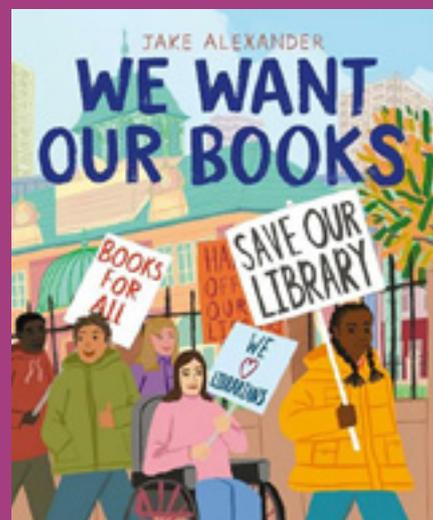
Reprinted by kind permission of Book Trust.

**We Want Our Books by Jake Alexander, out now, published by Two Hoots (PanMacmillan), £12.99, print and audio.**

**Rosa wants a book. But when she gets to the library, she finds it is closed.**

**What could be the end of the story is just the beginning, as Rosa and her sister Maria try everything they can think of to bring their community together and fight to get back their precious library.**

**Aimed at a surprisingly young age group – three to five – this picture book aims to 'feature big subjects in a child-friendly way' – including the power of protest and the importance of books. A discussion starter for curious children...**



# Levelling up? How?

**'Levelling up' is a key government election promise. What this actually means in practice has yet to emerge. Here are some ideas...**

**'Social infrastructure' – from pubs to libraries – is just as vital to levelling up as big capital projects, says a new report for the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge University.**

'There is an ingrained bias in government towards large-scale infrastructure projects. But interventions that seek to restore dilapidated town centres or support local initiatives may be far more socially and economically beneficial than many policy-makers appreciate,' it says.

'So much of the policy debate around levelling up in the UK has focused on headline-grabbing projects like HS2, the extension of 4G and 5G networks and upgrades to major roads.

'However, these projects represent only one mode of infrastructure, and their efficacy depends to an important - and often unheralded - degree upon the capacities, health and productivity of the communities and citizens they are designed to connect.'

That's where social infrastructure comes in. The report defines it as 'the physical spaces and community facilities which bring people together to build meaningful relationships'.

**The report is duly peppered with references to libraries.**

They are, obviously, singled out as key to 'boosting local skills and lifelong learning' – providing essential resources like books, IT and study space, but also programmes working with people, from family literacy through to CV workshops.

**In a complete chapter, this economic value is spelled out in terms that most library supporters could write for themselves.**

But in a current culture that seems to value 'the economy' over much else, it is worth doing.

More broadly, the report notes that 'leading economic figures, like [former Bank of England chief] Mark Carney, have begun to critique the implications of an approach to market-led growth which neglects the social and civic foundations that functioning markets require'.

**Elsewhere, the amazing work that libraries did during lockdown is listed,**

**from new online services to providing personal support to individuals.**

The report also points out that 'many public libraries operated as contact centres for health and social care services during lockdown – a simple, but important, illustration of the variety of social purposes to which publicly funded infrastructure facilities can be directed, and of the important role they can play in relation to the goal of making communities more resilient'.

**Throughout the report, libraries are also cheerfully lumped in with the whole range of vital community resources – pubs, cafes, local football teams, community centres, museums, theatres, green spaces, playgrounds, and so on. It's a good fit.**

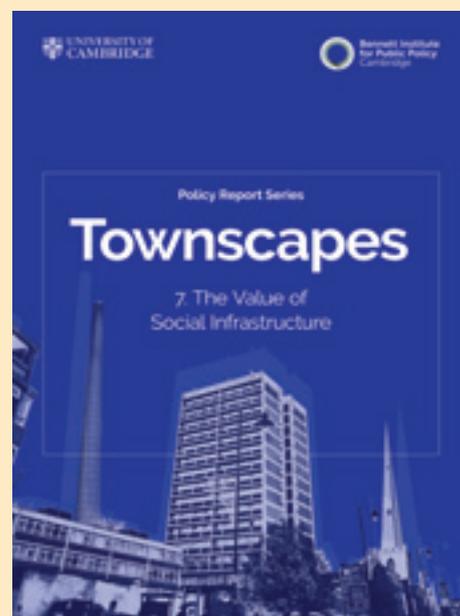
All these facilities, it says, contribute to public health, community cohesion, civic engagement, busy high streets, employment, people's satisfaction with where they live and their general optimism and willingness to work together.

It all creates 'greater levels of trust and cohesion between the diverse sections of a community and can help to ameliorate tensions across generational, ethnic, class and religious boundaries.

'Bridging these divides helps to create local economic opportunities, as well as stronger communities.'

**But there's a darker side to the picture – as we know.**

'The decline of some of these pillars of community life is, according to some recent research, one of the driving forces behind the sense of decline and disempowerment which has



**Townscapes: The value of social infrastructure**  
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure>

broken the political surface in recent years...

'There is, we suggest, good reason to see a connection between the protection of a community's cultural amenities and social spaces and the likelihood that an area will prosper in economic terms...

'Particularly when other local amenities, high street brands and public services have been lost, these institutions take on additional meaning and emotional significance as the last vestiges of the identity and heritage of a town and its community.

'The social, symbolic and emotional importance of these places is reflected in the readiness of communities to defend them when they are threatened with closure...

**'Their value, however, often only emerges as an issue of concern when they are – for whatever reason – under threat.**

'We need to find a way of expressing and measuring the civic value of these shared amenities before such moments arise.'

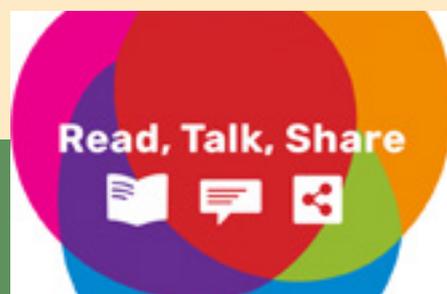
**Yes!!!**

## MORE REPORTS

- Designated 'left behind' areas receive less than half the charitable grants of other equally deprived places, and often have fewer community spaces – meaning that they may lack the 'skills and capacity' to bid for official 'levelling up' funds, <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/APPG-Community-Data-Dive-Report-for-APPG-S7.pdf>
- Local involvement has been 'largely absent' in decision-making and design of local economies. Result: £50bn investment has contributed to 0% average change in the most deprived areas. <https://icstudies.org.uk/insights/blog/why-dont-they-ask-us-role-communities-levelling>
- Levelling up may well entrench inequalities by making funding contingent on councils' capacity to compete in bidding, failure to ally the policy to existing useful work such as the (abolished) industrial strategy – and political interference in making allocations. <https://www.cipfa.org/policy-and-guidance/reports/addressing-regional-inequalities-in-the-uk-levelling-to-where>
- Massive report measures institutional, economic, and social wellbeing across the UK's 379 local authorities – look up yours! <https://li.com/reports/uk-prosperity-index-2021>

# Read, Talk, Share

A special £3.5m scheme ensured that even during lockdown, books and libraries could continue to help people feel less lonely. Karen Napier, chief executive of The Reading Agency (TRA), explains.



## The impact of loneliness on the mental and physical health of people across the UK has been well documented as a public health concern.<sup>1</sup>

Feelings of loneliness have increased for many people – especially for those already most at risk of experiencing loneliness, such as older adults, young people and those living alone.<sup>2</sup> These feelings have a big impact on mental health and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

The Reading Agency's mission is to 'use the proven power of reading to tackle life's big challenges'. It was perfectly placed to offer a solution, enabling public library services to step up to tackle loneliness and support mental health.

In December 2020 DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport) awarded TRA £3.5m to work with public libraries across England in taking on this challenge through a new campaign called 'Read, Talk, Share'.

This expanded two already successful programmes run by TRA: Reading Well and Reading Friends\*. Read, Talk, Share launched in February 2021.

Together we and our library partners mobilised to reach those most in need of social connectivity. We had to overcome the challenges of delivery in a pandemic, including the closure of library buildings and the difficulties of distance engagements.

The flexibility, commitment and support of library staff and management to deliver this has been amazing.

In numbers:

- Three Reading Well collections rolled out to every branch library in England



- 311,783 books, e-books and e-audiobooks provided to 2,975 public and community managed libraries
- 70,248 books from the collections borrowed between January and May (about half through digital e-lending services)
- Over 750 partnerships delivered Reading Well in local communities: working in schools, primary care networks, social prescribing sites etc
- Funding, training and resources provided to the 102 library authorities who participated in Reading Friends
- 69,485 social engagements between 28 January and 31 May for those who felt lonely or who were at risk of experiencing high levels of loneliness
- Three 'Read, Talk, Share' ambassadors
- Over 40 regional print, radio and digital pieces of coverage
- Landing pages for Read, Talk, Share, Reading Well and Reading Friends viewed over 200,000 times
- #ReadTalkShare on social media reached 14m people, with more than 35,000 click-throughs

## The difference we've made

There is a strong link between mental health and loneliness. Evidence shows that improving emotion regulation and increasing social support

are important first steps to take in reducing the negative impact of Covid on mental health.<sup>4</sup>

Our evaluation into the impact of these programmes will be published later in the summer. But we already know that they have made an incredible difference to people's lives.

A librarian said: 'It has been amazing to see the appreciation and positive feedback we've received from members of the public of all ages who previously felt lonely and isolated. 'They have told us that we've made such a difference to their lives, and literally kept them going.'



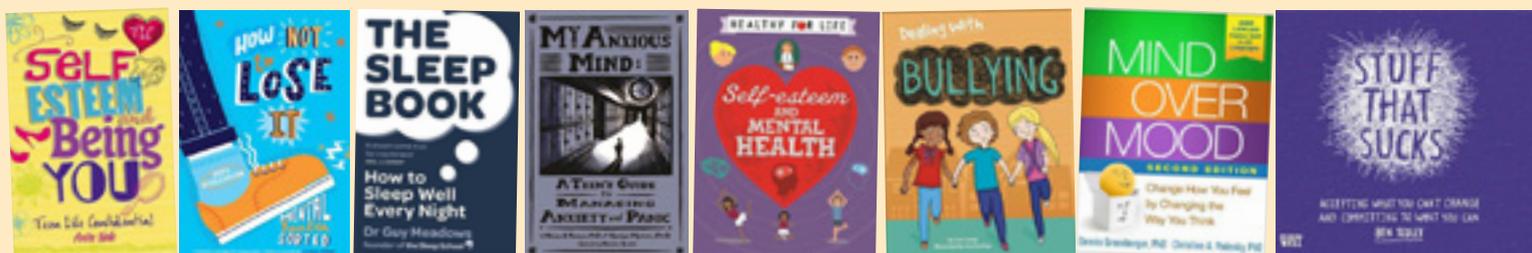
## Reading Well

Accessed both digitally and via 'click and collect' services over the funding period, when library buildings were closed, books from the Reading Well collections help to support children, young people and adults to better understand and manage their mental health and wellbeing.

By extension, this reduces their likelihood of experiencing debilitating loneliness.

One library user said: 'These books are truly amazing and will be a godsend in my local area, especially as people's mental health is so poor at present due to the pandemic.'

Libraries have been working with other local partners to deliver Reading Well: schools, primary care networks, social prescribing sites and more.



Health support in public libraries, amplified through partners, can create real systems change in public health and wellbeing.

This creates a clear legacy for libraries, helping them embed their health offer as a vital part of community public health provision.

### Reading Friends

With thousands of social connections made, Reading Friends met a huge need. Half (49%) of Reading Friends participants indicated that they had felt lonely often/always or some of the time since March 2020.

Over three-quarters (76%) agreed that they had felt lonelier more often than before the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

The programme also proved its flexibility by reaching a broad and diverse range of audiences including new and expectant parents, young carers, older people and those living with dementia.

After participation, more than four in five (83%) agreed the programme helped them feel more connected to other people; 72% agreed it had helped them feel less lonely.<sup>6</sup>

One participant commented: 'The group has been a life saver after a silent 12 months.'

We also found that it wasn't just the participants who experienced positive changes – over three-quarters of Befrienders (77%) also agreed that Reading Friends had helped them feel more connected to other people.<sup>7</sup>

### What next?

Our work with DCMS to support wellbeing and tackle loneliness in partnership with public libraries does not end here. It is needed more than ever as the UK recovers from the pandemic. The legacy of these programmes will be essential to this recovery.

The Reading Well collections will remain in place, continuing to provide access to quality assured advice and support.

We are also working to expand and embed Reading Friends into public library services across the UK, offering a lifeline of social connections and support to those who need it most.

### <https://reading-well.org.uk/books/books-on-prescription>

**Reading Well** helps people to understand and manage their health and wellbeing using helpful reading. The booklists are chosen by people living with the conditions covered and by health experts at national level.

They include everything from graphic novels and non-fiction to novels and poetry, to ensure there is something for everyone.

People can be recommended a title by a health professional, or they can simply visit their local library and take out their own choice from the display.

Many of the titles are available to borrow as e-books and audiobooks.

Over 2.6 million Reading Well books have been borrowed from local public libraries; 91% of people surveyed found their book helpful.

For the Read, Talk, Share campaign, every library in England was supplied with books from the three mental health lists – for children, young people, and adults. (There are also collections on dementia and long-term health problems.)

TRA also worked with publishers and e-lending partners to offer copies in e-book and e-audio format, to make the books available to as many people as possible.

### <https://readingfriends.org.uk/what-we-do/>

**Reading Friends** brings people together. Reading – books, magazines, newspapers, or anything else – is used to start people chatting in libraries, prisons, care homes, community centres and recovery cafes.

Launched by TRA in 2017 with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, Reading Friends was co-created with older people and tested with local project partners.

As part of Read, Talk, Share 102 public library authorities were funded to set up Reading Friends groups and one-to-ones by phone, online and some socially distanced activities.

Between January and May 2021, there were almost 70,000 individual engagements in Reading Friends activities.

Library partners included co-ordinators and reading 'Befrienders' working with older people, home library service users, new and expectant parents, children and young people, refugees, visually impaired people, carers, LGBTQ+, BAME and ESOL groups, isolated farming communities, people affected by domestic abuse, mixed ability and multicultural groups.

The Reading Agency will continue to work with vulnerable and hard to reach communities, tackling loneliness and supporting mental health through the proven power of reading. We welcome the opportunity to work together with libraries and others to deliver this important work.



### References

- 1 <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/>
- 2 What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2020) How has Covid-19 and associated lockdown measures affected loneliness in the UK?
- 3 British Red Cross (2020) Lonely and Left Behind: Tackling Loneliness at a Time of Crisis; <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/coronavirus-mental-health-pandemic/key-statistics-wave-8>
- 4 Groarke et al. (2020), 'Loneliness in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional results from the COVID-19 Psychological Wellbeing Study', PLOS One
- 5 Renaisi (2021) Analysis of data collected as part of Reading Friends rollout, unpublished
- 6 Renaisi (2021)
- 7 Renaisi (2021)



# Payment in kind

**We can all agree that kindness is a good thing - and we need more of it. There's a role here for public libraries, says the Carnegie UK Trust.**

**Over the past five years, we have been looking at what can be done to encourage kindness in communities, in organisations and in public policy.**

We know that public libraries play a key role in providing space for communities. Indeed, many people already consider public libraries to be 'kind places'. So we sought to bring the two together.

In February 2020 we invited interested library staff in Scotland to join a conversation about kindness in libraries, to develop ideas and – crucially – to do something.

We provided a series of workshops to develop ideas that might enhance public libraries' contribution to wellbeing in their communities through the lens of kindness. We also offered a small amount of funding (up to a few hundred pounds) to test out small initiatives.

## **IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH**

Twelve out of Scotland's 32 library services responded with ideas. These included: creating designated 'kindness areas'; engaging the community about how the library space could help encourage acts of kindness; foregrounding kindness in learning programmes; supporting community art themed on kindness as a touch point for engagement and discussion about kindness.

Most services planned to work with partners and people from outside the service, including care experienced young people, local groups and school children.

The small experiments reveal that it doesn't take much to do something impactful – but it does require time and freedom to think and be creative.

Naturally, the nature of the kindness initiatives changed as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. Libraries were significantly limited in the extent to which they were able to provide a place for kindness to flourish.

Despite this, the collective learning highlights the value of creating space to talk about kindness – within services, with particular beneficiaries



and users, and with communities more broadly.

This process of adapting (and readapting) projects to work during the pandemic demonstrated the ability of library staff to respond creatively to changing circumstances and to provide opportunities for little moments of connection that contribute to community wellbeing.

Beyond the creativity and inspiration of particular interventions, it is this commitment to a conversation about kindness that we hope will sustain and grow across the public libraries sector.

Most initiatives were focused on creating a moment for pause and reflection.

One service reported how creating this space for kindness proved uplifting for people using the library. It also proved a point for reflection about what kindness means to staff which proved, in some instances, to be powerful...

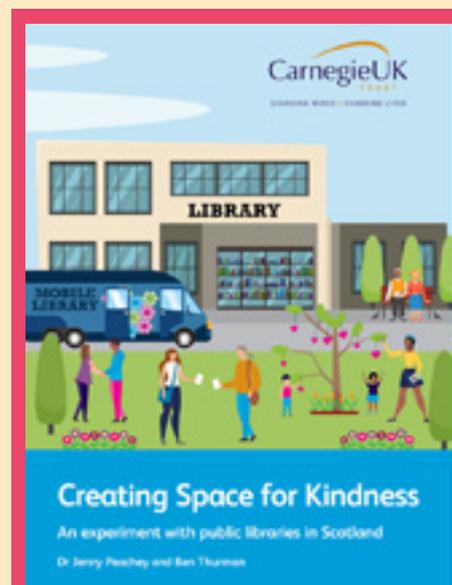
One service reported how their initiative had enabled staff to reflect on the relationship between kindness and belonging, the importance of kindness in a healthy library service, building and forging relationships with individuals and communities and the role of staff in creating kind services.

Embedding kindness into organisational systems and processes, and into public policy decision-making, is challenging and radical. However, at a more local level we have found that

the things that you might do are relatively simple.

We have distilled this learning into three core themes.

- Welcoming places: The places we have to gather or even just bump into each other have an impact on our ability to connect and to form relationships. Physical design matters hugely. So too do the attitudes and behaviours of people.
- Informal opportunities: Low level interactions – for example, a greeting or chat at a checkout – can make a big difference to the quality of daily life for people who might be isolated and/or lonely. Opportunities don't automatically promote kindness. We need to be able to take risks to engage informally.
- Values of kindness: Creating space to talk about and notice kindness, and building shared narratives about the things we value as a community, can help to shift attitudes, change behaviours, and build kinder communities.



**This article is adapted from a Carnegie UK Trust report, *Creating Space for Kindness: an experiment with public libraries in Scotland*:**

**<https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/creating-space-for-kindness-an-experiment-with-public-libraries-in-scotland>**

# Kind thoughts

**Most of these ideas came from library staff. But Friends groups might find them useful...**



● **Origami kindness garden, Aberdeen City**

Staff created a small display of paper origami flowers on a pillar, with messages of kindness for people to read. Some flowers were kept separately for people to take away. The aim was to get people thinking and talking about kindness.



● **Kindness conversations, Clackmannanshire**

A series of online chat sessions were held to open up dialogue on kindness. A kindness information sheet was used to publicise the sessions. Also developed were a '28 days and 28 ways to be kind' calendar for the month and a short reading list of fiction that highlights kindness.



● **Connecting communities, City of Edinburgh**

A postcard exchange between local schoolchildren and older people (housebound library members and care home residents) was set up to share messages of kindness and support, to build empathy, promote the idea of kindness in the community and build cross-generational relationships.



● **Story Cafés and Women Making It, Glasgow Women's Library**

An online Story Café on kindness engaged women in stories and poems, providing a route into discussing experiences of kindness and how kindness shapes communities. A kindness reading list was shared. Women Making It was a craft workshop to make things for others while discussing kindness. The library posted out 'kindness craft bundles' in advance, so women had everything they needed to participate.



● **Inverkind: kinder communities, Inverclyde Libraries**

Inverkind involved creating a logo as a visual reminder of kindness. This was added to merchandise and launched with virtual Chatty Cafés to encourage togetherness. The branded merchandise was given to housebound and shielding people using the Books on Wheels service, and they also received messages from young Library Club members.



● **Kindness tree, Midlothian**

A cherry blossom tree was crafted with heart-shaped leaves on which staff, local groups and library users could write messages about what helped people get through a tough day and acts of kindness they had experienced over the past year.



● **Kindness garden space, North Ayrshire**

The library worked with their local Men's Shed organisation and local growing and gardening groups to create an outdoor space for enjoyment and to grow produce. The space enabled people to make connections and capitalise on the mental health benefits of gardening and being outdoors.



● **Library letters, Perth & Kinross**

Books on Wheels library customers were paired with staff volunteers as pen-pals. Chatty letters were exchanged via the delivery and pick up of books. The benefits were mutual: boosting the wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable customers throughout lockdown, whilst enabling staff, especially those who were furloughed, to feel they could still be of service.



● **Kindness & wellbeing packs, South Lanarkshire**

300 kindness and wellbeing packs were created for distribution, to be explored in a series of informal Chatty Café sessions. The packs and sessions were launched during a 'Kindness Week'.



● **Kindness tree, West Lothian**

A kindness tree was installed in each library. Library users could write messages of kindness to others on the leaves. Bookmarks bearing a quote about kindness were also designed to share with library users.

# Get involved in crime ...

**Library users love crime. They are always among the most popular titles borrowed. It's a genre that takes in a huge variety of styles, from noir to downright cosy. There's an amazing variety on offer.**

**Nothing can really replace browsing the shelves to find something that feels exactly right, so library re-opening can't come fast enough. But there are also other ways to explore the genre further, so you can order promising titles and expand your range... for yourself or your reading group. From in-depth information online to live events, here's TLC's selection.**

## What's popular?

The latest loans figures from Public Lending Right (July 2018 – June 2019) show thrillers continuing to dominate the list of most borrowed print titles – a long-established trend. James Patterson was most borrowed author, for the 13th year running.

For the first time, the loans data includes e-books. This coincided with a huge surge in e-book borrowing (which has since surged even more, of course, as physical spaces closed during the pandemic). Here the trend isn't quite so clear – but it's there.

NB: you can have a lot of fun with the PLR figures. They cover print, e-books and audio-books, with lists for different regions and different genres so you can compare trends... <https://www.bl.uk/plr/popular-loans>

### Most borrowed – Adult titles

- 1 The Midnight Line: (Jack Reacher 22) – Lee Child
- 2 NYPD Red – James Patterson
- 3 Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine – Gail Honeyman
- 4 Past Tense: (Jack Reacher 23) – Lee Child
- 5 Dead if You Don't – Peter James

### Most borrowed – ebook titles

- 1 Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine – Gail Honeyman
- 2 The Midnight Line: (Jack Reacher 22) – Lee Child
- 3 This is going to Hurt – Adam Kay
- 4 Circe – Madeline Miller
- 5 Origin – Dan Brown
- 6 Still Me – Jojo Moyes
- 7 Into the Water – Paula Hawkins
- 8 Normal People – Sally Rooney
- 9 Blood Road – Stuart MacBride
- 10 Killing Floor (Jack Reacher 1) – Lee Child

## Looking Daggers...

**There are several crime book awards, but the genre's Oscars are the Dagger awards from the Crime Writers' Association. A great place to spot interesting new titles.**



**The Daggers are the oldest awards in the genre. The CWA itself was founded back in 1953 by John Creasey. Its aim is to 'support, promote and celebrate this most durable, adaptable and successful of genres and the authors who write within it'. UK-based, it attracts many members from overseas.**

Most of the 11 Daggers are nominated by publishers and judged independently of the CWA by industry professionals.

Good for real aficionados is the Debut Dagger for a writer who doesn't have an agent and has never had a traditional publishing contract. Worth watching the names to see what happens to them.

Hunting grounds for finding something different include the Dagger in Translation award (this year's winner is Icelandic) and the Historical Dagger.

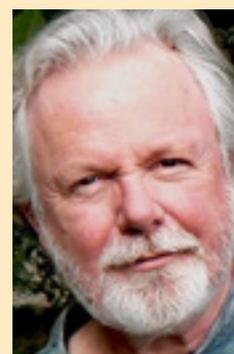
Then there's the Dagger in the Library. This is for an author who has been writing crime novels for over 10 years, is popular with library users and who in turn supports libraries. Authors are nominated by librarians from a longlist supplied by the Dagger judges.

Up to three staff from any UK library can nominate, and the judges are also librarians. They have proved to be real talent-spotters – previous winners include Mari Hannah, Elly Griffiths, Christopher Fowler, Sharon Bolton, Alexander

McCall Smith, Stephen Booth, Peter Robinson, Lindsey Davis, Martin Edwards, Kate Ellis and Christopher Brookmyre.

This year's judges were a good mix: Sue Wilkinson (chair), events and engagement manager at the Library of Birmingham; Jennifer Stewart, service development librarian with Fife Cultural Trust; Marleen Kennedy, branch librarian for the Cavan Library Service; Kay Easson, librarian at the Lit & Phil in Newcastle upon Tyne; Ian Anstice, locality librarian for Cheshire West & Chester and editor of the invaluable [www.publiclibrariesnews.com](http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com); and Mirka Duxberry, library development manager for Shropshire Libraries.

This year's winner is Peter May. The Scottish author is recognised for his work both as a novelist and in film and television. His books have sold several million copies worldwide and have won awards in the UK, the USA and France.



**Peter May**

Sue Wilkinson said: 'Peter May infuses his books with a real sense of place, whether it be China, France or the Hebrides. His books are tense, atmospheric and complex but always utterly absorbing.'

“I was delighted to win the Dagger in the Library this year, not least because of my long and fruitful association with libraries – as a borrower.



When I was a child the whole family went to the library every Friday night, returning laden with books for the week's reading ahead.

As a young, aspiring writer in my late teens and early twenties, I haunted my local library, devouring the books I could not afford to buy.

Back then we took it as a given that we would always have free access to books and learning. It is only now, as government cuts force libraries to close down all over the country, do we realise what a precious social resource is being squandered.

What the great philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, realised more than a century ago when he funded the creation of more than 2,500 libraries worldwide, was that free access to books for all is one of the fundamental cornerstones of a civilised society.

To remove, or even chip away at that, is to fatally undermine our society, depriving the next generation of the resources it will require to build the future. »

*Peter May, winner of the CWA Dagger in the Library 2021. <http://www.petermay.co.uk>*

«One of the great pleasures and privileges of this job is doing library events, where I find many of the warmest and most receptive audiences.

It is one of the things I have missed most during the pandemic, which makes it particularly gratifying this year to feel the warmth from libraries reflected in this way. »

*Christopher Brookmyre, winner of the CWA Dagger in the Library 2020*

Martina Cole this year won the most prestigious Dagger of all, the Diamond Dagger, for a lifetime contribution to crime writing (nominated by CWA members). The writers' writer!

**To see all the shortlists and winners, go to: <https://thecwa.co.uk>**



**Christopher Brookmyre**



**Martina Cole**

# CRIME FESTIVALS

You're never far away from one of these enjoyable events. As well as the specialist events we list, many local book festivals have crime days or crime sessions – so look out for them (one of the websites usually has a very useful guide).

The crime world is quite a cosy one: the authors know each other – not least because they keep turning up at the same festivals – and have a culture of encouraging new talent through organisations such as CWA.

The festivals offer a friendly environment where it's pretty easy for readers to mix with writers.

2021 has been a thin year so far, thanks to Covid-19. But a number are hoping to go live in the autumn. And plans are being made for 2022...

Here's a run-down of what's coming up, plus three festivals that very decently let you view online their most recent events – free!

## 2021–2022 LIVE FESTIVALS

<https://noirwich.co.uk> – Norwich, 9–12 September 2021

<https://perfectcrime.uk> – Liverpool, 13 November 2021

<https://www.crimefest.com> – Bristol, 12–15 May 2022

<https://gwylcrimecymrufestival.co.uk> – Aberystwyth, tba 2022

<https://harrogateinternationalfestivals.com/crime-writing-festival> – Harrogate, July 2022

<https://www.capitalcrime.org> – London, dormant for now but worth chasing up

## FREE ONLINE FESTIVALS

<https://noirwich.co.uk>

<https://perfectcrime.uk>

<https://gwylcrimecymrufestival.co.uk>

## WEBSITES

Two from publishers, with regular e-newsletters, reviews, book offers, competitions etc:

<https://www.thecrimevault.com> (Hachette)

<https://www.deadgoodbooks.co.uk> (Penguin Random House)

One compiled by writers with news, reviews (TV and film as well as books) and – in a good year (not 2021!) – a very useful listing of crime sessions within general book festivals: <https://crimefictionlover.com>

And one dedicated to members of the CWA (the largest such association in the world):

The Crime Readers' Association is the sister organisation of the CWA. Subscribers receive a

bi-monthly online magazine, Case Files, plus articles from CWA members, plus the monthly CRA & Debuts newsletter listing special

events, crime reading (and writing) opportunities, book launches, author news, competitions and giveaways. <https://thecra.co.uk>

**Perfect Crime**  
Liverpool, Saturday 13th November 2021



# Libraries – digital lifeline

**Does your library have volunteer ‘digital buddies’ to help people use the internet? Are you one? It’s an important job that needs personal as much as digital skills. For the people they help, it’s a lifeline. But libraries need their own lifeline - far more support, to enable them to cope with rocketing demand.**

## DIGITAL DEMANDS

Bridging the ‘digital divide’ needs more than just access to a PC. It needs personal help from a human being. So said Dr Kira Allman from the Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project in our issue no 100 (pp 7-8): ‘Human connectivity is what we need’.

Now a new report (see box below) from this project spells out the message. It does so by looking at exactly what help new users of the internet needed. This often went well beyond conventional ‘digital skills’ training. People had personal problems to solve.

Most new users had an immediate digital need, such as applying for a benefit or a new job, rather than a desire to become ‘computer literate’.

The immediate need was not easily met. The task might demand that beginners already have a smartphone, an email account or – often without explaining exactly what was needed – an informed understanding of digital processes.

The study examines the role of the 80 ‘digital helper volunteers’ working in Oxfordshire

libraries before the pandemic (January to June 2020).

It found that library staff could not possibly spare the time to deal with the complex needs of new internet users. The volunteers were invaluable.

The volunteers could offer an uninterrupted 30-minute appointment. But they also struggled to deal with the demand.

Kira, the report’s lead author, says: ‘As a result of the government’s digitisation drive, people on the margins of society increasingly need to go online to access their basic rights and perform basic life tasks.

‘But they are also the least likely to be online, or to be digitally literate.

‘Libraries across the UK have seen demand for digital help go through the roof. They are struggling to service the digital needs of the public.’

Dr Grant Blanks, a co-author of the report, says: ‘Libraries continue to be trusted and safe spaces, with the public turning to libraries to provide digital assistance and access, especially

as more services have gone “digital by default”.

‘This demand will only increase nationally as we begin to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

‘We believe libraries can become the digital inclusion hubs of the future across the UK, bringing together social support and technological access under one roof.’



## CASE STUDY: HOW IT FEELS

Giles can’t remember exactly when he started volunteering as a digital helper, but everyone says he’s been involved since ‘the beginning’. He’s retired. When we asked why he volunteered, he emphasised that he’s not a technology expert.

Instead, he said, he remembered what it felt like to be in the dark about computers. During his career at the BBC, he said, ‘you rang up the IT department, who sent somebody around who looked at you as if you were a complete idiot, and proceeded to do a whole lot of things very quickly on your keyboard.

‘You would have no idea what they’d done or whether you’d done anything wrong or whether you would do it again, because then they rushed off to someone else.

‘Imagine how off-putting this would be to someone with no knowledge of computers.’

Like most of the digital helpers, Giles isn’t motivated by his ability to show others how to use technology. Instead, he is motivated to make them feel that he is listening to them, that they could develop the confidence to do things on their own.



## LIBRARIES ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

<https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-and-subject-groups/oxfordshire-digital-inclusion-project/2021-project-report>

The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) is a multidisciplinary research and teaching department of the University, dedicated to the social science of the internet.

<https://www.oii.ox.ac>

## A different vantage point



### Kira Allman learned a lot by volunteering...

After two years of volunteering as a digital helper, I have seen first hand that ‘digital help’ is hard to define. It certainly is not confined to what we might consider to be ‘digital’.

Wide-scale digitisation across all sectors and facets of everyday life means that digital needs are not isolated needs.

And they are not merely about computers or internet connections – they are about being able to live an ordinary, well-rounded life.

Understanding digital exclusion in our digital age requires meeting digitally marginalised people where they are, and glimpsing what everyday life looks like from their perspective. Libraries are a good (but certainly not the only) place to do this.

From this vantage point, it is clear that dealing with the challenges of a persistent and pernicious digital divide means dealing with people as much as dealing with technology.

I started volunteering as a digital helper as a private citizen, not as an academic researcher. I simply wanted to offer some hands-on support in an area that I worked on intellectually in my day job.

But it quickly became apparent that digital exclusion didn't look quite like what existing theory and policy on digital inequality or digital skills reflected.

And surprisingly little research on digital literacy and skills had taken place in the real-life places where digital exclusion is most visible and critical.

# Vital bridges across the divide

## These are the main messages from the report

**Public libraries are trusted, accessible community spaces that people rely on to cultivate relationships, exchange ideas, and learn.**

Today, libraries provide essential access to digital equipment, services and skills training. They are vital bridges across the digital divide.

The impetus for this project grew out of observing the realities of the day-to-day digital offering in libraries.

With more and more essential services going online, many people are turning to libraries to help them access e-government platforms, banking and employment opportunities, among other daily activities.

This is a critical time to revisit and re-evaluate how to deliver digital inclusion and assess digital skills, because we are entering an era of compulsory computing.

### Under-resourced

People do not have a choice about whether to ‘go online’ or not. Many employers accept only online job applications. And the government’s ‘digital by default’ agenda means government services are increasingly accessible only online.

As a result, people are compelled to use digital devices and the internet in order to participate in everyday life.

It is a very different environment from the digital world that existed even a decade ago.

Governments should be obligated to ensure that citizens can access and understand the digital world - while recognising the complexity and challenges of the digital world that people of all levels of digital fluency encounter today.

The UK government’s digital strategy papers have consistently labelled public libraries as

## BASIC MESSAGES

**Existing ‘digital skills frameworks’ do not adequately account for the complexity of the digital world that digital novices experience.**

**People with limited digital access and skills are motivated to go online to reach specific goals, rather than to develop digital literacy in general.**

**Divides in digital literacy exist for all ages (from children to adults) for different reasons.**

primary providers of digital access, training and support for local communities.

But despite their prominence in public policy agendas, libraries are chronically under-resourced and under-appreciated sites of stop-gap digital help to people living in digital poverty.

In Oxfordshire libraries, staff reported spending up to 50–70% of their time addressing digital help requests. In 2019–2020, digital helper volunteers provided over 800 hours of assistance, but staff reported that this was not at all sufficient to meet the level of need.

In this report, we present findings from our research in Oxfordshire County Libraries, focused on two themes:

(1) Exploring the day-to-day role libraries are playing in our digital world;

(2) Understanding the lived experience of digital exclusion, through observations and data on library computer users and digital help seekers.

Based on our findings about who uses libraries

## WHO NEEDS LIBRARY COMPUTERS?

- **Nearly a third of library computer users (31.3%) don't have a smartphone.**
- **Three in 10 library computer users (30%) have no computer at home.**
- **Nearly a fifth of users (19%) have no internet connection at home.**
- **Over half of library computer users (58%) have low incomes (£20,000 or less).**
- **Over half of users (51%) say they use library computers because they are convenient.**
- **Nearly a third of users (31%) say they use library computers because the library is safe.**
- **The most common request for help is printing documents (58% of users).**
- **Only 1% of users report using e-government services such as paying council tax bills.**

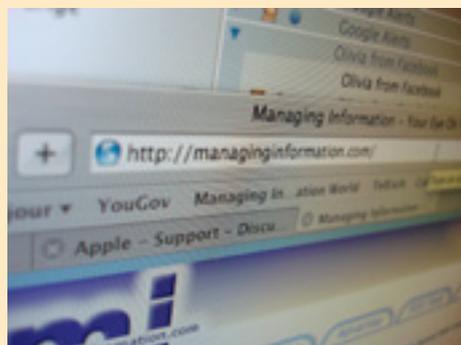
for digital needs and what libraries are doing to address those needs, we make several recommendations about how to better address digital exclusion and enable libraries to fulfil the role they are already performing:

(1) There is a need to improve the digital skills of library staff, meaning that staff need to be digitally fluent themselves in order to address the high volume of digital help requests from customers;

(2) Government and local councils must recognise and support what libraries deliver with funding to hire more staff, acquire more hardware, and support a digital learning volunteer programme that can supplement staff expertise and time;

(3) We need to shift the focus of digital inclusion agendas from digital skills to digital wellbeing. Any digital inclusion programme should be embedded in a wider social inclusion agenda, because digital marginalisation is often bound up with other forms of social, economic, geographic, and educational marginalisation;

(4) Libraries must work to increase community outreach and awareness of the services they offer by reaching out to communities that might not know about their offerings, making libraries true community hubs for a diverse set of users.



## CASE STUDY: JUST A CHANGE OF ADDRESS

A retired man had recently moved into an assisted living facility. He needed to notify the Post Office that his address had changed.

He was informed in his local branch that the mail forwarding form can only be completed online. To fill it out, he needed to register for an online account on the Post Office website. But he did not have an e-mail address.

The library volunteer spent the whole digital help session setting up an e-mail account. There was no time to submit the mail forwarding form.

## It's about people...

**Digital exclusion is a mass problem but the solutions are individual, says the report.**

**The challenge of digital poverty and exclusion exists at scale. At least 10 million people in Britain lack adequate access or skills.**

But the most widespread and, arguably, effective solutions are small. They are context-specific and operate on an individual level.

Studies like this one, on the 'front lines' of the digital divide, illustrate why: the digital landscape today is complex. First-time users or people with limited skills face myriad hurdles unique to their personal situation.

This complexity is often taken for granted by technology designers, policymakers and educators, who – like many of you reading this report – are digitally fluent.

Digital helping is less about the 'digital' than it is about people.

This was, by far, the most repeated theme in interviews with digital helpers and library staff.

Although digital helper volunteers are tasked with assisting with technical enquiries, technical expertise did not often factor among their essential characteristics or qualifications.

Most digital helpers explained that their main task is to quickly identify someone's needs and help them in the span of the 30-minute session. Given this time constraint, volunteers are more concerned with helping people achieve their specific goals than with teaching abstract digital skills.

Library staff and volunteers identified the essential qualities of digital helpers to include: patience, empathy, listening and good communication.

## Skills for life...

**Access to a PC is only the start, says the report**

**A digital footprint – starting with a personal email account – is often a pre-requisite for using other digital services.**

Just to set up an account on an e-government platform, a user will likely need a personal email account, understanding of passwords and awareness of data privacy (as they will be engaging with both commercial and government platforms), not to mention basic keyboarding and motor skills.

Digital gaps are both conceptual and physical from the very start.

It is not realistic to teach people digital skills for life by following existing government frameworks without considering the goal-driven nature of digital needs.

Instead, the acquisition of digital skills for life needs to start with strategies that allow people to achieve their immediate goals and then encourage them to expand their interests toward greater general digital competence.

Regardless of the task a limited or non-user wants to complete online, engaging with the digital world can almost never be a one-off event. A digital footprint entails a long-term commitment to managing it.

Users must be able to return to the accounts they have set up for basic services, like the Post Office, and they must check their email inboxes for important alerts.

Failure to do so can result in greater disadvantage, such as government benefits being reduced or revoked. This is complicated if people don't have internet access at home or don't have other skills, like being able to type.

## It's not just 'access'...

**Public libraries are the obvious place to fill the complete support gap, says the report**

**Many people had been referred to the library as a digital access and help point by Job Centres, GP surgeries and even the train station. The last internet café in Oxford has closed, putting even more pressure on libraries.**

Despite the conversion of many services to digital-by-default, the government has not provided a systematic means to ensure that people who lack digital skills can actually access services.

A number of charities and community organisations, including libraries, have stepped up in many localities across the UK to help bridge this digital divide.

What many policy papers on the digital divide and digital inclusion fail to adequately acknowledge, however, is the central role of social, interpersonal support in getting and staying online.

Our findings from the Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project indicate that digital inclusion is only about the 'digital' insofar as that is where everyday life takes place – so it has become an essential domain of engagement.

Inclusion is about the entire social context in which people lacking digital access and skills live, work, and play.

Therefore, funding and resources for digital inclusion are best invested in people and the institutions that strive to provide digital skills assistance for all: public libraries.



## CASE STUDY: IT TAKES TIME

Daniel is recently unemployed due to mental health issues. He has booked a 30-minute session. He is anxious and chatty, apologising constantly for having so many questions and thanking the digital helper repeatedly. He is determined to get his life back on track, he says.

Daniel had an email account and phone through his job, so has never had to set up accounts or devices on his own. He says it takes him longer to do things these days, due to his mental health. Today, he simply wants to set up an email address to access his GP records online.

He is familiar with keyboard and internet browser, and easily navigates to the Gmail sign-up page. He wants to use Gmail because it's the one he's heard of.

After choosing a username and password, Daniel is asked for a mobile phone number to enable authentication (a code will be sent to the phone, which he must enter on the screen). He does not have a mobile phone. Getting one is on his to-do list, he says. He suddenly looks dejected.

After some time trying to find an email provider that does not require a mobile number, Daniel's 30-minute appointment has nearly run out. The digital helper suggests he come in another day.

Will he actually come back? Many people who book digital help sessions do not.

# View from the front desk

## Library staff told the research team that digital access is a core role for libraries – but hard to fulfil

**Nearly all library staff and digital helpers see digital access and assistance as a logical extension of the library's services and role in the community. As information providers, libraries are evolving to provide access to digital information. With that comes an impetus to offer community support.**

*Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project*

**Freedom of information – that is the bottom line, really. We want to give people free information. That's a human right.**

*Meg*

**Libraries are where people come, and they trust people at libraries. I think people like coming to me because it's free. And also because I haven't got any agenda. There's always something behind what people have been told in a [computer/ phone] shop.**

*Ian*

**If they need to fill out a form to apply for a bus pass or parking permits, or anything that hasn't got public facing staff any more, it's just us in the library. We're the only face-to-face contact that the public have with the council. Most of the services you need to apply for, you have to apply online, which foxes quite a lot of people.**

*Emilie*

**I see it as helping people with problems that often involve the computer, although sometimes it might be something completely different. You might actually be showing the person how to find out on the computer how to get help with those problems, be they financial or other sorts of advice they might be seeking.**

*Anonymous staff member*

**A lot of the help the people require on computers is extremely intensive one-to-one. It's simply not possible for staff to give that level of support. You can't really take time off from the front desk, doing all the other jobs, when you need to sit down for 45 minutes to an hour – and sometimes it really does take that long – and go through something with somebody who has very limited or indeed no digital skills. It just isn't possible.**

*Graham*



## CASE STUDY: APPLYING FOR A JOB

A woman came into the library wanting help applying for barista jobs at cafés. She had been told to apply online, and the cafes did not offer any support.

'It all came it came down to a number of gaps,' Bela, her digital helper, explains. 'But the key one that absolutely blocked her was understanding that she had to create a new account on each of the café sites, with different login credentials (including a new password) for each application. She had been trying to use the login details for her personal email account on all of the forms.'

Bela says: 'That's not at all clear. You need to already know that's how it works. She wouldn't have realised how confusing a prompt as simple as "enter an email and password" might be.'

'Realistically you don't need to know about all that to work in a coffee shop. It's like a test for youth. And I think that that's really disturbing.'

