

Debate on public libraries

House of Commons

11 July 2019



Key messages

- Public libraries are an important part of our communities. In 2014/15, public libraries were visited 225 million times, which was more than visits to Premier League football games, the cinema and the top 10 UK tourist attractions combined.ⁱ In 2017/18, this increased to 233 million visits.ⁱⁱ
- Whilst libraries continue to serve as a book-lending and learning service, they are increasingly becoming community hubs, bringing people together and giving them access to a greater breadth of services and support. This has included initiatives supporting public health and helping people into work.
- Library services have also seen the benefits of technological and digital innovation, giving them opportunities to offer new services, bring in new customers and extend their reach into communities. This has included libraries offering facilities such as 3D printers, coding clubs and support for start-ups and small businesses.
- As demand for services such as adult social care increases, resources available for councils to provide comprehensive library services are reduced. We are calling on the Government to provide a long-term funding solution for local government services in the Spending Review.
- The LGA provides support and improvement resources for councils with responsibilities for libraries. This includes a guide for councillors and bespoke library peer challenges in partnership with Arts Council England, which act as a sector-led improvement tool for local authorities.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The LGA welcomed the opportunity to be a co-sponsor of the Libraries Taskforce in 2016. The Taskforce has achieved notable success in bringing together partners at a national level, but support now needs to be directed at the frontline. We are looking forward to working with Government to develop plans for future public library funding beyond 2020.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Libraries are trusted spaces, free to enter and open to all. They provide people with the opportunity to read and learn with a range of books, digital and other resources. The way people use libraries is changing, and councils have a key role in their development as these changes take place, including exploring alternative models of delivery such as trust or community-run libraries.

With their central locations on high streets, Government has a chance to recognise the contribution of libraries to creativity and innovation by placing them at the heart of the planned festival of innovation and creativity 2022.

Opportunities and challenges for library services

Libraries across the country have demonstrated they can bring communities together and keep up with changing public demand. Despite this, libraries are facing significant financial pressures. In January 2019 it was reported that council funds for libraries, museums and galleries were cut by nearly £400m over eight years^{iv}.

To keep up with demand, upper-tier local authorities now spend an average 65 per cent of their budgets on adult social care and children's services.^v This has meant that councils have had to re-route funding from other services, including libraries, to properly fund care for the elderly and vulnerable.

While libraries should not be kept open if they are not serving a purpose in a local community, it is more challenging to re-open a library once it has closed. Councils have done their best to find alternative solutions to closing libraries, but in some cases, closure is the only option.

Libraries' traditional role of a being a book-lending service remains important, but our case studies have proven they can offer a more diverse range of services. It will be impossible for libraries to continue developing their role in providing economic and public health benefits without long-term, sustainable funding. This is why we are calling for the Government to fully fund the £8 billion funding gap councils will face by 2025.

Support for library services

The LGA has produced a guide for all councillors who have an interest in supporting the development of public library services. The handbook set out the ways local authorities can help their libraries excel and meet the needs of local residents. Councils also provided case studies to illustrate how they had utilised their library in a way which benefitted their community:

- **Public health benefits**

Nottingham City Council raised awareness of the 'Reading Well Books on Prescription' (RWBoP) service available in all city libraries. Through public libraries, RWBoP provided a scheme in which patients could be given prescriptions by GPs or other health professionals for self-help books from an

approved list of titles. In order to reduce potential barriers to lending, reduce any stigma associated with mental health and increase access to high quality self-help materials, reservations and overdue fees were not part of the scheme.

Libraries have a significant part to play in the prevention agenda for public health and tackling loneliness. Health commissioners need to be supported to understand this, as do the NHS link workers announced by Government. Knit and natter groups, community choirs, and yoga classes all take place in libraries and promote local public health.

- **Economic benefits**

Somerset Library created a free to use community digital space in its busiest library. The 'Glass Box' offers facilities such as digital skills training for business start-ups, activities such as code club, robotics and 3D printing, and a café with exhibition space and bookable meeting rooms. Local businesses have supported the project through sponsorship and volunteering, which has enabled initiatives such as a digital maker in residence, two code clubs and an open innovation challenge for college students.

Peer challenges

In early 2019, the LGA commissioned nine library peer challenges, which have been funded by our contract with Arts Council England. Each challenge is tailored to local needs, but also addresses three core questions:

1. Is the council getting best value from its library assets?
2. Library service contribution to cross cutting agendas of other services
3. What is the role of library service and council in the local community?

A peer challenge is not an inspection. It provides the council with expert, neutral advice from a team comprising a peer challenge manager, an elected member, and a head of service or equivalent. They meet with councillors and the senior management team, key partners, and staff to provide a constructive analysis of the service and the council's plans for it, identifying any opportunities for still further improvement or innovation.

Following the visit, councils receive a confidential report that sets out the key findings, provide recommendations and practical advice. At the end of the programme, the reports will be assessed for trends in the sector to inform future improvement support. So far the peer challenges undertaken have been a success, and we are hoping to work with Arts Council England to commission more peer challenges in the future.

ⁱ LGA, Delivering local solutions for public library services

(https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.6_LGA%20Cllr%20handbook_Delivering%20local%20solutions%20for%20public%20library%20services.pdf)

ⁱⁱ CIPFA, Public library statistics

(www.cipfastats.net/uploads/CIPFA%20Public%20Libraries%20Statistics%202017.pdf)

ⁱⁱⁱ LGA, Culture and libraries peer challenge (<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/peer-challenges/peer-challenges-we-offer/culture-and-libraries-peer-challenge>)

^{iv} The Independent, Council funds for libraries, museums and galleries cut by nearly £400m over eight years, figures reveal (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/libraries-museums-arts-galleries-funding-recourses-county-council-network-cnn-social-care-a8741271.html>)

^v Open Access Government, £400 million funding cut to libraries, museums, and arts

(<https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/400-million-cut-to-libraries/57706/>)