

Libraries – empowering literacy

At the heart of levelling up and education recovery



Changing life stories



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Public libraries (figures pre-COVID-19)

- 3,667 public libraries serve the communities of the UK ([CIPFA, 2020](#)).
- There are 7.3 million active borrowers at libraries in the UK ([CIPFA, 2020](#)) (NB 2m people participate in football annually).
- 214 million visits take place each year, with an additional 131 million total online visits ([CIPFA, 2020](#)).
- Libraries issue almost 165 million books a year ([CIPFA, 2020](#)).
- More likely to be used by minority ethnic communities than White communities ([DCMS, 2019](#))

The role of libraries in supporting reading

- Public libraries are the national reading service – a library card is a sign of everyone's entitlement to literacy and the nation's commitment to lifelong literacy.
- Early years – a core service of libraries are rhyme times and outreach to families with children in early years. These have been demonstrated to have a causal link with early language and literacy development (EPPE, 2004).
- Intrinsic motivation to read – strong evidence to demonstrate how libraries grow reading identities especially for school-aged children. A child who uses the library doubles their chances of reading for pleasure (Clark and Hawkins, 2011).
- Access to reading resources to poorest communities with lowest levels. 1 in 11 of the poorest children don't own a book of their own and are totally reliant on public and school libraries (Clark et al, 2021).
- Engagement of adult learners – the most important mechanism for engaging people with low levels of literacy.

Literacy attainment and using a public library

Reading levels	Public library users	Non public library users
Below expected level for their age	36.7%	63.3%
At expected level for their age	48.9%	51.1%
Above expected level for their age	64.5%	35.5%

Clark and Hawkins, 2011

The UK's literacy challenge

- 16.4% of adults in England, or 7.1 million people, have very poor literacy skills (Kuczera, Field, Windisch, 2016).
- Low levels of literacy are intergenerational and emerge well before a child starts school. The poorest children are already 11 months behind their peers when they start at primary school, with efforts to close the gap stalling, and evidence that the gap has started to widen once again in recent years (Sutton Trust, 2021).
- 42% of disadvantaged children leave primary school unable to read well (compared to 27% of more advantaged children (DfE, 2019) and only 40% achieve a good GCSE in English (compared to 64% of more advantaged children) (DfE, 2018).
- Low literacy is strongly associated with poverty. In the most disadvantaged wards up to 40% of the adult population have literacy challenges (DBIS, 2012).

The impact of literacy on lives and communities

- **The economy** - adults with functional literacy earn 16% more than those without; if every child read for pleasure this would add as much as £4.6 billion a year to the UK's GDP (British Land, 2021).
- **Employment** - adults with Level 1 literacy skills have a 6% higher probability of finding employment than those with Entry Level 3 (DBIS, 2012).
- **Crime** - Nearly two-thirds (62%) of people entering prison were assessed as having the literacy skills expected of an 11-year-old: more than four times higher than in the general adult population (Prison Reform Trust, 2021 & Skills for Life Survey, 2011).
- **Health** - *"people with low health literacy, compared with the general population are 1.5-3 times more likely to experience increased hospitalisation or death"* (PHE, 2015). The life expectancy gap between the wards with the highest and lowest literacy is 26 years (Gilbert et al 2018).

The power of reading for enjoyment

"Enjoyment of reading has a greater impact on a child's educational achievement than their parents' socioeconomic status."

OECD Reading for Change, 2002

"Reading for pleasure was found to be more important for children's cognitive development between ages 10 and 16 than their parents' level of education."

"The combined effect on children's progress of reading books often, going to the library regularly and reading newspapers at 16 was four times greater than the advantage children gained from having a parent with a degree."

"Children's leisure reading is important for educational attainment and social mobility."

Sullivan and Brown, 2015

The impact of the pandemic

- Lockdown negatively impacted the early language and literacy development of babies and toddlers from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who had no books and resources at home. 76% of schools reported that children who started school in autumn 2020 needed more support than children in previous cohorts (Bowyer-Crane et al, 2021).
- Lockdown disrupted the literacy of all school-aged children. By autumn 2020 there was a learning loss of up to 2 months in reading in both primary and secondary pupils (DfE, 2021).
- However, the learning loss for disadvantaged pupils was far worse. By the summer term in 2021 the reading learning loss was 2.2 months for disadvantaged pupils as opposed to 1.2 months for more advantaged pupils (DfE, 2021).

Libraries address the challenge

Challenge	The role of libraries
The attainment gap has widened – the most disadvantaged have suffered most	Libraries are a crucial reading resource for the 1 in 11 children from disadvantaged homes who don't own a single book.
Early language development and literacy has been damaged	Libraries boost the early home learning environment of disadvantaged children - library use at the age of 3 means higher literacy scores at KS1 (age 5-7) (<u>Clark and Hawkins, 2011</u>).
The pandemic has reduced levels of reading for pleasure	Library use doubles the chance of a young person enjoying reading and reading every day (<u>Clark and Hawkins, 2011</u>).

Libraries' approach to addressing the challenge

- **Targeted** – Libraries have a special mission to the socio-economically disadvantaged who are most likely to have lost out during the pandemic and are central to the levelling up agenda.
- **Holistic** – Libraries offer opportunities for social reading, play and activities linked to reading. Supporting the wider developmental challenges created by the pandemic. Focus on interests and the development of intrinsic motivation.
- **Sustained** – Libraries are a lifelong reading service, committed to addressing in the long term the challenges created by the pandemic.
- **Local** – The effects of the pandemic are unique to every community. Libraries are uniquely positioned to craft local strategic responses working with schools, settings and colleges.

