

Written evidence submission by Libraries Connected

The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion

March 2025

A. Introduction

1. Libraries Connected is an independent charity that has been supporting, promoting and representing public libraries for almost 30 years. Our work is driven and led by our membership, which includes almost every library service in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies. Across the areas we serve there are 176 individual library services with around 3,000 library branches serving over 61 million people.
2. Our unique approach is to bring the leaders of these services together to share experience, expertise and evidence – driving innovation and impact across the public library sector. As well as providing practical support, training and advice to libraries, we represent them to government and raise their profile in the media. We also develop and lead national library projects with cultural, academic and corporate partners.
3. As an Arts Council Investment Principle Support Organisation, part of our core funding in England comes from the Arts Council to help embed their Investment Principles across the library network.

B. About libraries

4. There are around 4,000 public libraries (static and mobile) in the UK, most of which are run directly by local authorities.
5. In England and Wales, [approximately 78% of the population are within a 30-minute walk of a public library](#). Across the UK, 87% of people know where their nearest public library is (poll conducted by Survation on behalf of Libraries Connected, 2024).
6. In England, 30% of adults aged 16 and over used a public library service at least once in the previous 12 months. That's around 13m adults, 27% of which brought a child to borrow, browse or return books ([DCMS Participation Survey 2023/24](#))

7. Libraries have a unique place in our communities: free, safe, universal spaces, often in prominent locations, with strong links to local civic and voluntary organisations. Their mission is to inspire lifelong learning, support health and wellbeing and enrich our economic and cultural life. Books, literacy and reading remain at the heart of the modern library service, which also offers a wide range of essential community support: free computing and internet access, family and early years activities, business advice, arts events, social clubs and much more.
8. For all these reasons, the library network is one of the most effective and efficient means of delivering services into communities. That is why public libraries frequently act as a "front door" to information and advice on a range of council services, with signposting to dedicated specialist support if required.
9. Libraries are a statutory service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. All upper-tier and unitary councils must, by law, provide a "comprehensive and efficient" library service for everyone who lives, works or studies there. Under the Act, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is responsible for ensuring councils fulfil this duty. Library services are largely funded, however, by local authorities through the Revenue Support Grant from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).
10. We have outlined below some of the ways in which libraries already contribute to community cohesion – and some suggestions for how these could be developed and harnessed in the future, with the right funding and support. We back calls for a more strategic approach to community and cohesion, to which libraries could make a significant contribution.

C. Libraries and community cohesion

11. Public libraries contribute to community cohesion and a variety of ways:

- acting as shared spaces for the whole community
- welcoming refugees and asylum seekers
- championing media and information literacy
- providing volunteering opportunities
- fostering local pride and shared celebrations

Acting as shared spaces for the whole community

12. Public libraries are one of the few public spaces left that are universal, open to all and free. [As the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration notes](#), this means they have particular potential to bring local people together and make connections. The role of libraries as a vital component of social infrastructure is now widely evidenced and recognised. Recent reports by the [Bennett Institute](#) and [IPPR](#) have identified libraries as one of the essential services and facilities that improve the overall wellbeing of communities. [As the sociologist Eric Klinenberg notes](#), "the library is among the most critical forms of social infrastructure that we have".
13. As mixed use facilities, public libraries naturally encourage social contact across socioeconomic and demographic groups. On any given day a public library may

welcome new parents attending a “rhyme time”, teenagers studying for exams, older people joining a book group, recently arrived refugees seeking support or entrepreneurs researching funding. This is in addition to the core function of providing an enormous range of books and information, all for free.

14. Libraries are trusted spaces where the public sector, charities and civil society organisations can interact with local residents. They are also affordable and accessible venues for community and friendship groups to hold meetings, events and workshops. This is a vital service that supports a thriving voluntary and community sector, particularly in rural areas.
15. The “warm spaces” movement, which began in 2022 as a response to the energy crisis that pushed large numbers into fuel poverty, is a striking example of libraries using their unique position to bring people together. Public libraries provided not only a comfortable heated venue, but social activities, entertainment, advice and information, often in partnership with other local organisations. Today, two thirds of warm spaces registered with the [Warm Welcome Network](#) are public libraries.
16. This unique mix of services, audiences and activities creates the conditions for routine intergenerational and intercultural encounters, which are essential to community cohesion.

Welcoming refugees and asylum seekers

17. Public libraries provide critical support to refugees and people seeking sanctuary in our communities. This could be through providing English language classes or conversation groups, dual and first-language reading materials, or information on local services such as education, housing and health. Many libraries also offer free food, toiletries, clothes, bedding and school essentials to those who need it, including refugees. As all public libraries provide free wi-fi and PC use, they are frequently used by new arrivals to keep in touch with family and friends.
18. Within days of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022¹, libraries were placing orders for Ukrainian books, ebooks and audiobooks, ensuring refugees would have access to materials in their own language. They formed alliances with local charities, council resettlement teams and refugee support groups so they could quickly respond to need: signposting refugees to local services, providing language support, helping with visa applications and giving access to mobiles, laptops, food and clothing. Most library services also offered welcome events and social activities for refugees, giving valuable opportunities to meet other Ukrainians and share experiences in a friendly and welcoming space.
19. Eight library services now act as UK Visa and Citizenship Application Services (UKVCAS) centres, making what can be a bewildering and intimidating process smoother and more welcoming. This also has the benefit of introducing new arrivals, and their families, to the library and all the other services and social connections it offers. Libraries now deliver in excess of 10,000 visa appointments each month, around 14% of the total.

¹ See <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/Ukrainian%20refugees%20briefing.pdf>

20. More than 20 library services are now nationally recognised as [Libraries of Sanctuary](#). To achieve the status they must provide extra support and participation opportunities to refugees and asylum seekers, and demonstrate a commitment to creating a culture of welcome for people seeking sanctuary.
21. The important function of public libraries in welcoming refugees is particularly significant in dispersal areas. As the [After the riots report](#), published by British Future, Belong and the Together Coalition, puts it: "Integration should be promoted in dispersal areas through welcoming hubs that create social contact between newcomers and receiving communities, offering activities such as English language conversation clubs and sport, advice and mentoring". Libraries are well placed to fulfil this role – and in many ways already do – but need the right funding and support, particularly when it could make them a target for criticism or even violence.

Championing media and information literacy

22. There is a growing consensus that mis- and disinformation foments social conflict and helps to create a "permissive environment" for disorder. As providers of high quality, accurate and well-sourced information to the community, libraries have a critical role to play in stopping the spread of false and inaccurate claims. This is reflected in our information literacy training module for frontline library staff, which helps libraries support users to find reliable and trustworthy information.
23. Recent projects aimed at tackling the spread of misinformation include:
- Libraries Unlimited (the library service in Torbay and Devon), which recently delivered a series of online and in person sessions on digital media literacy
 - The Guardian Foundation, which delivered its [Newswise](#) programme through public libraries in the West Midlands last year
 - Cambridgeshire Libraries, which worked with the Centre for Investigative Journalism to deliver in person [Access to Tools](#) training for people aged 17+. This led to an [Investigative Journalism Skills for Librarians](#) webinar facilitated by the Living Knowledge Network.
24. There is clearly huge potential to harness the knowledge and information expertise of the library workforce, as well as the reach into communities that libraries have, to combat the spread of misinformation. This could be particularly powerful on a local level when false claims, hoaxes and conspiracy theories could be fuelling community tensions. This is a highly sensitive and specialised area, however, and requires adequate funding and training.

Providing volunteering opportunities

25. The link between volunteering and social connection is well established. As the [All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration notes](#), volunteering can increase social contact between people from different backgrounds and can help to build empathy and mutual trust between groups.
26. Most library services have established volunteering programmes offering a range of opportunities from general library duties such as cataloguing and shelving to leading "rhyme times", providing digital skills support or running homework clubs.

Libraries are ideal venues for volunteering as they are safe and welcoming spaces, string community connections and with a wide variety of activities to get involved with.

27. The role of library volunteering in supporting social connection and integration has been clearly demonstrated through the recent DCMS-funded [Know Your Neighbourhood project](#). Designed to widen participation in volunteering and tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England, the programme has funded a wide range of activity targeted at groups most at risk of chronic loneliness.

Fostering local pride and shared celebrations

28. Public libraries have a long tradition of promoting shared heritage and celebrating the stories of local communities. This could be through talks, events and exhibitions on local history and heritage, or collaborative projects with museums and archives, all of which helps to foster local pride, belonging and shared identity, which are crucial to cohesion.
29. Libraries also facilitate local expressions of national events and commemorations, through cultural and community engagement programmes. Recent examples include the jubilee and coronation, Eurovision, the Women's World Cup and the Rugby League World Cup, alongside annual events such as Big Help Out and the Big Lunch. At other times libraries provide opportunities for reflection and contemplation, marking events such as Remembrance Day, Holocaust Memorial Day or Srebrenica Memorial Day.

D. Library funding

30. For public libraries to continue supporting community cohesion in the ways outlined above - and for that role to develop in line with a new national strategy - they must be funded adequately. In total, net expenditure by local authorities on public libraries has fallen by almost half (47%) in real terms between 2009-10 and 2022-23 (DCMS analysis of LA revenue expenditure and financing, MHCLG) and since 2016 there has been a net loss of 183 static libraries in the UK that came under councils' statutory services (BBC Shared Data Unit). Over 2,000 FTE library posts have been lost across the UK since 2016 (BBC Shared Data Unit).
31. There is evidence that poorer areas are disproportionately affected by library cuts and closures. Across the UK 7% of libraries in the most deprived decile have been closed since 2016 compared to 3% of libraries in the least deprived (BBC Shared Data Unit). This is particularly concerning as we know there is [a strong link between deprivation and cohesion](#); communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage have most to gain from the unique mix of services and experiences that libraries provide.

E. Conclusion

32. Libraries Connected welcomes this important inquiry. We would be happy to expand on any of the points we have made here, and to assist the commission in any way that would be helpful. We would also welcome the opportunity to facilitate a visit by the commission to a library service to see first-hand some of the work described in this submission.

F. Contact details

James Gray
Communications and Advocacy Manager
Libraries Connected

james.gray@librariesconnected.org.uk

Mailbox 1201
Maggie O'Neill Business and Training Centre
433 Liverpool Road, Huyton
Liverpool L36 8HT