



**Libraries
Connected**



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Ebook lending in public libraries

Project summary report | February 2025

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Introduction

Libraries have successfully nourished public reading habits for 175 years, with their right to lend books most recently enshrined in the 1964 Public Libraries & Museums Act. Habits and technology change, of course; and the rise of ebooks in the last 15 years means libraries have adapted to the growing digital needs of their contemporary customers.

Whilst libraries' right to lend books is covered by the 1964 Act, lending ebooks is not; their licensed availability and pricing remains at the discretion of individual publishers. Not unreasonably, publishers consider online, free access to their literature to be a potential threat to sales and have often balanced this with the 'frictions' of restricted availability and higher licensing costs for libraries. But the perceived risk to sales is only one aspect of a more balanced and positive picture. Libraries are able to promote writers and publishers to borrowers who also buy books, to borrowers who may buy different titles after trying out a new author; and to readers who would not otherwise buy the borrowed book anyway.

With over 3,000 branches nationwide, libraries present a huge opportunity for publishers to reach a wider reading public – which smaller, independent publishers have found to be a valuable commercial asset.

Arts Council England supports public library offers but also invests in the commercial resilience and development of publishers and writers. More than ever, in light of recently published research evidencing declining habits of reading for pleasure (especially amongst young people)¹, we are working with major national and independent publishers, booksellers and the library network to stimulate reading appetites. Young readers are publishers' and booksellers' customers of the future, and there is a strong consensus amongst libraries, publishers and bookshops that encouraging reading is intrinsically valuable, for the joy and entertainment, empathy and inspiration of immersing in great stories, as well as commercially valuable for supporting the business of writing and selling books. Libraries play a very strong role here. Besides investing up to £50m annually through stock budgets, they provide a wealth of activity, from book clubs to festivals and author events, that celebrate and promote reading, and generate sales.

1 The National Literacy Trust, Annual Literacy Survey (ALS), November 2024

We invested £300,000 into ebook stock during the 2020/1 lockdowns to help libraries meet surging demand when libraries and bookshops were physically shut. Lending ebooks has remained above pre-Covid levels, which is unsustainable for libraries to offer as a viable service at current prices. Lending ebooks is a vital part of the overall modern library service, developing access and choice for current, new and future readers, strengthening literacy outcomes and reading appetites; and supporting diverse communities and those most affected by cost of living pressures.

The Arts Council commissioned this pilot and survey to understand how ebook licence changes might mutually benefit publishers and libraries, writers and readers. There is no significant or reliable recent data on ebook borrowers' consumption habits. This new and timely research evidences the strong link between prolific borrowing and significant buying habits, among other things, which I hope offers some assurance to publishers of the value that libraries can add, with more flexible license arrangements, to increasing book and ebook consumption. Almost all publishers participating in the pilot said they were incentivised to work more closely with libraries in the future.

We hope this report will herald further experimentation, giving publishers hard data, insight and opportunity to experiment with different access and price models to stimulate new readerships. Greater collaboration and affordable promotion between public libraries and publishers is a net benefit. Lending ebooks should not be seen as a zero sum game for publishers, and collaborative promotion with libraries is a beneficial pathway to stimulating new reading communities.

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Project overview

➡ **Aim:** increase the affordability and availability of ebooks in public library services.

Ebook lending has been offered by British public libraries since 2008 but there have been consistent challenges around availability of stock, cost and licensing since it was introduced. William Sieghart addressed these challenges in his Independent Review of E-Lending in Public Libraries in England (known as the Sieghart Review), published in 2013. This set out a series of principles for ebook lending that would manage the balance of needs between all stakeholders.



Since the Sieghart Review there have been several changes in the lending ecosystem, notably the entrance of new ebook distributors, increased catalogues of ebooks, the dominance of two major lending aggregators (Bolinda and Overdrive), and the extension of Public Lending Right (PLR) to ebooks. The demand for ebooks in libraries has also increased steadily, notably since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite these developments, there has been little change in the relatively high cost to library services of purchasing some ebooks (in contrast to print books) and the selection of ebooks available to libraries remains small compared to print.

To explore how these frictions and frustrations could be overcome - and how ebook lending could be developed to the benefit of libraries, publishers, authors and readers – Arts Council England awarded Libraries Connected funding to lead a pilot project and undertake state-of-play consumer research. This summary report presents the key findings of these, along with recommendations and areas for development.

The problems

Cost

The cost of ebook titles compared to their physical equivalents is generally considered by libraries to be prohibitive, particularly in an environment of strict financial constraints. This means that ebook purchases often consume a disproportionate share of stock budgets.

Stock

The range and diversity of ebooks available to libraries can be limited. Some major publishers, most notably Hachette, do not allow their ebooks into the library system at all. (This is especially frustrating for libraries when a publisher is acquired by Hachette and their books suddenly become unavailable.)

Licensing

At present, the standard lending licence model is one-copy-one-user (OCOU) often on a time-limited licence (24 to 36 months). This can create challenges for library services in meeting demand for new and bestselling titles, resulting in long waiting times. The inflexibility of ebook licences – particularly time limits – is widely perceived as unfair by libraries (e.g. if a library buys an ebook on a 12-month licence and it isn't loaned out, the library will need to buy it again or lose the title from its catalogue). The lack of a standard language to describe

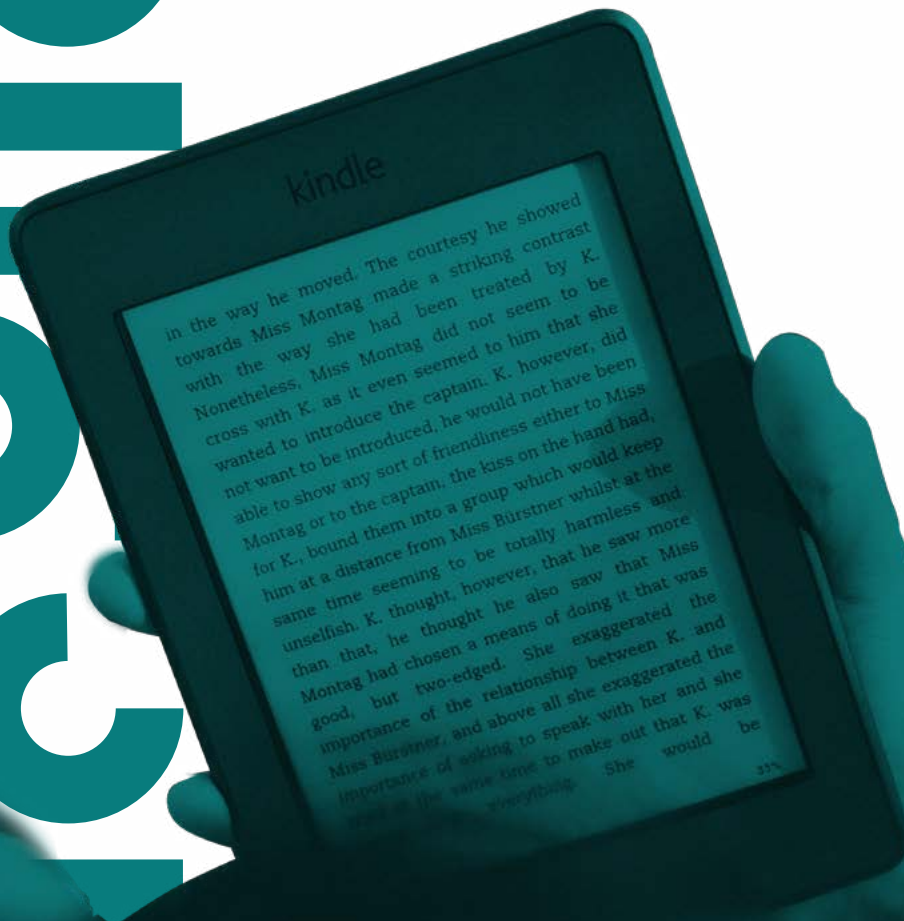
licences among distributors and aggregators can also cause confusion and frustration.

These barriers not only prevent ebook borrowers, many of whom use ereaders for accessibility (see panel), finding the titles they want. They also discourage them from reading a wider range of titles, particularly those from new and underrepresented writers. Another consequence is that libraries are limited in how they use ebooks in promotional and reader development activities - such as author talks, book groups and literature festivals – as the standard licensing model cannot meet a short-term increase in demand.

Ebooks and accessibility

Easy access to ebooks can be particularly important for those with vision and print impairments: most ereaders and ebook apps have settings to adjust font size, shape, colour, and contrast, as well as line spacing, margins and justification. Ebooks can also be used alongside assistive technology such as screen readers. And for those who find it difficult to visit a library – due to a disability, for example, or living in a remote location – ebooks open up a world of reading that they wouldn't otherwise be able to access.

Libraries value their relationship with the publishing industry and recognise the need for author and publisher remuneration for their work. Many of the barriers outlined above stem from an understandable concern that facilitating wider ebook borrowing could negatively affect sales. Libraries Connected and Arts Council England were therefore keen to work proactively and constructively with the publishing industry to address these frustrations and find solutions that work for libraries, publishers, authors and readers.



The pilot

A six-month pilot commenced in March 2024 with 28 library services across England and Wales, publishers and aggregators testing a range of new licensing models for e-lending in public libraries. The project was led by Emma House, founder of global publishing consultancy Oreham Group and former deputy CEO of the Publishers Association, with support from the Libraries Connected team.

In total 250 titles from 16 publishers were selected for the pilot. Some of these titles had not previously been available to borrow as ebooks, while others were released on different types of licenses. Some titles were issued by independent publishers who may not have been listed on public library catalogues before.

A wide range of publishers were approached to join the pilot with several titles that would be made available to both Bolinda and OverDrive on three different business models.

” – Library Stock Manager

“It gave us the flexibility to choose different models based on our needs ... It also allowed us to increase the number of licences for titles that we suddenly discovered we wanted to promote, e.g. author talk titles.”

<p>One copy, one user (limited by time and loans)</p>	<p>Title can only be borrowed by one person at a time. Expires after determined period or number of loans</p>	<p>Standard model</p>
<p>One copy one user limited by number of loans, no time limit</p>	<p>Title can only be borrowed by one person at a time. Expires only after set number of loans</p>	<p>Piloted model</p>
<p>Simultaneous access</p>	<p>Library service buys title for fixed number of loans, which can occur simultaneously</p>	<p>Piloted model</p>
<p>Cost per access (also known as transactional licensing, or cost per circulation)</p>	<p>Library service only charged when title is borrowed</p>	<p>Piloted model</p>

The choice of licences gave library stock managers much greater control over how they bought, used and promoted the titles. This flexibility was welcomed, with many services initially purchasing a title on one model and then buying the title again on a different model (e.g. they bought a popular new title on a simultaneous access licence and when those issues were used up, bought it again on a OCOU licence to ensure it stayed in the catalogue). Almost all libraries actively engaged in the pilot and bought upwards of 150 titles across multiple business models.

As part of the pilot, Libraries Connected organised two publisher showcase events, where publishers presented their pilot titles to library stock managers. Publishers also provided libraries with marketing materials for promoting the titles in their outreach.

” – Library Stock Manager

“The simultaneous use titles enable us to run countywide promotions of set titles, as well as allowing us to promote titles more generally safe in the knowledge that they’ll be available when people check ... This is what customers expect when they access a digital service.”

” – Library Stock Manager

“Being able to add multiple access titles for popular titles, or titles that we wanted to promote to customers was a great bonus, and we have seen an increase in the availability of titles under this business model during and after the pilot.”

Participating library services

Blackburn with Darwen	Lancashire	Sheffield
Bolton	Leeds	Stockport
Bury	Manchester	Surrey
Bromley	Merton	Tameside
Carmarthen	Newham	Trafford
City of London	Norfolk	Wandsworth
Dudley	Oldham	West Sussex
Greenwich	Redbridge	Wigan
Hounslow	Rochdale	Wiltshire
	Salford	

Participating publishers

And Other Stories	Charco Press	HopeRoad
Arachne Press	Epoque Press Ltd	Peepal Tree
Atlantic Books	Faber	Scotland Street Press
Bluemoose Books	Fitzcarraldo	Stairwell Books
Bonnier Books UK	Fly on the Wall Press	The Emma Press
Canongate	Hachette	

Participating aggregators

Bolinda
Overdrive

Title performance		
Collection impact	Independent publishers	Influencing factors
Pilot titles accounted for about 1% of collections but performed well in checkouts.	Titles from independent publishers generally performed well, leading to increased interest.	Promotions, author talks, covers, and local interest influenced checkout rates.



State-of-play research

Alongside this pilot Libraries Connected commissioned Independent Mind to undertake market and audience research into library users' book buying and borrowing habits with the **23 participating library services**. This included demographic mapping of active ebook borrowers using data from library management systems, and two online surveys (before and after the pilot) with over **27,000 responses** combined.

In addition to the quantitative surveys with library users, a small number of online or telephone interviews were conducted with ebook borrowers. The target audiences for these interviews were disabled people and those with long-term illnesses and mental health conditions, people from minoritised ethnic communities, and people living on low incomes.

Please see technical report for full methodology and results.

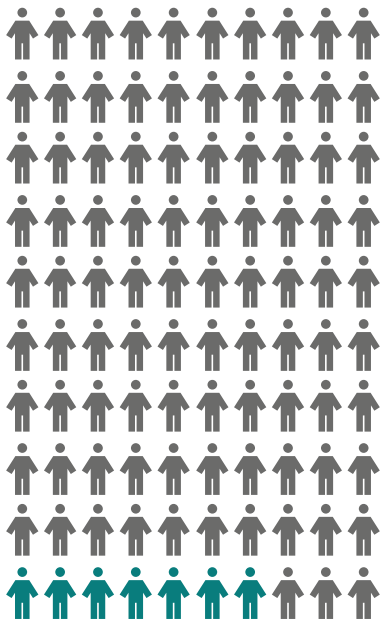
Survey respondents

Survey 1: 18,283

Survey 2: 9,188

Key findings

Eborrowing prevalence and activity



7% of registered library users are ebook borrowers.

Demographic of ebook borrowers

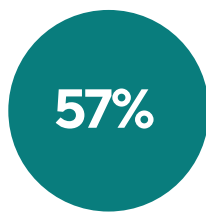


Ebook borrowers are more likely to be **women aged 45+**, particularly 55-74.

28% of ebook borrowers come from lower-income households, compared with **39%** of all library members.

Ebook buying vs borrowing behaviour

Those who borrow ebooks are more likely to buy them.



of borrowers bought ebooks in the past 12 months



of non-borrowers bought ebooks in the past 12 months

38% of those who borrowed 10+ ebooks bought more than 3 ebooks.



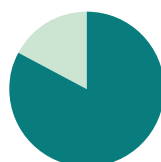
When ebooks aren't available



83% join a waitlist. **58%** borrow another ebook instead.

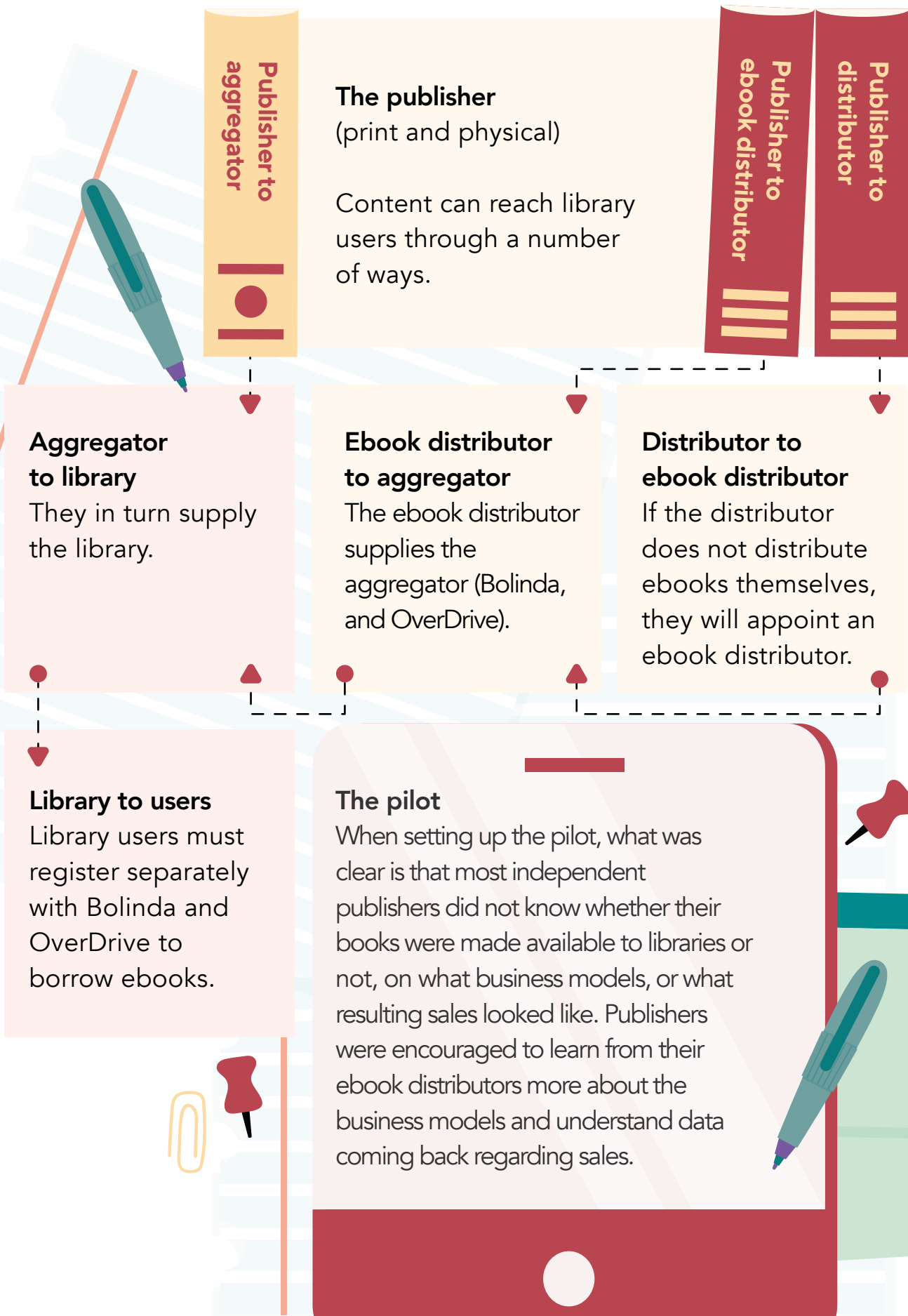


40% have to wait for an ebook every time or most of the time.



83% of borrowers wanted to borrow a title not listed in the app.

From publisher to library

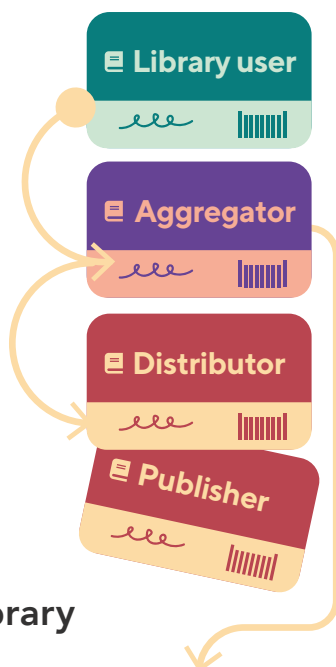


Recommendations and next steps

Data flow

The data of who is borrowing and what they are borrowing sits with the aggregator.

Data on book sales to libraries flows from the aggregator to the ebook distributor and back up the chain to the publisher.



Library

Data on number of loans is shared with the library, however demographic data on who is borrowing what is not made available.

Based on evidence and experience gathered through the project, we have identified the following areas for development. These have the potential to create new business opportunities for publishers, improve value for libraries and expand choice for readers.

📁 Support all three licensing models, especially simultaneous access with over 100 loans

The pilot showed that greater licence flexibility would be welcomed and valued by libraries. It also highlighted the promotional opportunities for publishers that new licences, particularly simultaneous access, can bring.


Aggregators have a role to play here too by offering all business models to publishers and providing more on ebook sales to libraries, while ebook distributors should ensure that it is technically possible for publishers to offer their ebooks under a range of different licences.

Align ebook prices more closely with print book prices


With many public libraries facing severe financial constraints, including cuts to book budgets, it is more important than ever to aim for cost parity between digital and print formats. Along with expanding licensing models, reducing the cost of ebooks would be a major step forward in opening up lending. Libraries should continue to monitor the financial outlay on ebooks and how this compares to the cost for physical stock.

Make a wider range of ebooks available for libraries to buy

Ebook borrowers are keen to experiment with new genres, authors and publishers - and libraries are eager to help them - but limited ebook catalogues hinder this. The pilot and survey data suggest that publishers could be missing out on profitable promotional and reader development opportunities by restricting availability of their titles.

**Provide authors, assets, and promotional materials to libraries more readily**

Libraries can find it difficult to access marketing and communications materials to promote books (both print and digital), and to arrange author visits or online events. Making these more readily available, along with advance reader copies (ARCs) for librarians, would offer new marketing avenues and opportunities to influence reading habits. In return the library sector could provide contact details of stock managers and outreach/reader development librarians for publishers to pitch to and work with.

**Seek funding for and roll out dedicated reader development work through the public library network to reach underserved communities**

Since the pilot began, various reports have been published showing the decline in reading for pleasure and the literacy gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers. The library network is ideally placed to help communities develop and maintain a reading habit, especially using the ebook lending system.



Develop links between libraries and independent publishers

The project demonstrated a clear opportunity for libraries and independent publishers to work more closely together. This could include regular presentations from independent publishers to library stock managers, opportunities for publishers and librarians to meet face-to-face and a shared contacted database to facilitate easier communications between them.

Increase understanding of e-lending and the opportunities it offers

It is important that the sector builds on the momentum generated by the project to ensure that it leads to new practices and approaches across the ebook ecosystem. This would include developing resources for library stock managers and publishers explaining how ebook lending works, particularly the pros and cons of the various licensing models, and ensuring publishers can access sales data of ebooks to libraries.



to their hearts as he left them. He gave them peace, but you see that's something that can only be truly experienced in the person of the Spirit.


Galatians 5:22-23
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

The apostles...
taught. Now...
most pay after...
people can't...
your work with...
spirit.

Have you not...
worry, fear and...
worry, fear and...
not be able to...
we must...
the operation of...

More...
work. Usually...
work. Usually...
work. Usually...

I think something wrong and you will lose your peace. If you get peace and...
I think something wrong and you will lose your peace. If you get peace and...
I think something wrong and you will lose your peace. If you get peace and...


 **Data and monitoring**

Libraries should work with aggregators and library management system (LMS) providers to better present data on library users so that the impact of ebook borrowing can be more clearly articulated. This should feed into the significant work that Arts Council England and partners are doing to improve data in public libraries.

Case studies

Wiltshire

Wiltshire Libraries was able to participate in the pilot because it had some additional budget to develop their lending offer. The motivation for taking part was to see whether new cost-effective and flexible models could be developed for lending:

 *“The main motivator was... trying to encourage publishers to see the benefits of working with library services and also being a bit more flexible with their lending models and pricing because that does hold us back quite a bit compared to physical stock.”*

Wiltshire was able to combine the lending pilot with an Arts Council England-funded project to develop author talks and “Reading Roadshows” in libraries around the county. Two titles – Louise Doughty’s *A Bird in Winter* and David Mitchell’s *Thinking About It Only Makes It Worse* - were selected from the pilot reading list for library users to read over the summer and discuss at four sharing events in October. Both titles were available on multi-access license models through the pilot which meant the library service was able to promote them widely.

“It’s the 100 checkout license that means we can do Roadshow-type promotions, otherwise if you’ve just got one copy you get a very long request list.”

The titles have been very popular both in ebook and physical format. Due to the promotion the library service has invested in more titles by Louise Doughty and bought more physical copies so that they are available across the county for reading groups to enjoy. Louise Doughty supported the Reading Roadshow through an author event.



”We’ve now got a much bigger selection of Louise Doughty than we would have if they hadn’t been involved in the pilot and they hadn’t highlighted that book in multi-access. We’ve promoted her in all our libraries and created posters about the book.”


The pilot titles were promoted via the Wiltshire Libraries social media accounts as recommended reads. They also promoted the pilot titles through the Libby app, creating a carousel of titles for the Reading Roadshow and another carousel highlighting titles from independent publishers. They monitored loans for the pilot titles and created an ‘Undiscovered Gems’ carousel for any titles that had not issued.

The library service considered the pilot a success: the titles constitute around 9% of the ebook catalogue that have issued since 1 March 2024 but have created 12% of issues, suggesting they are “punching above their weight”. However, they would have liked to see more titles by well-known authors, to help them meet the demand for ebook lending in the county and reduce waiting lists. They also reported that, while the majority of the titles were reasonably priced, the price of some titles were higher than they would normally spend with some one copy, one user titles costing more than £40.

Norfolk

Norfolk Libraries run a Big Read every year as part of their adult reader development work. In 2024 they ran a Big Indie Read, to encourage readers to try less well-known authors published by independent publishers.

They asked publishers to nominate titles to champion as part of the Big Indie Read, and to put forward authors who might be willing to take part in online events. The library service was pleased to discover that many of the nominated titles were available through the pilot. Staff attended publisher showcases, to help them understand more about the titles available and to support stock selection.

 *"It was quite exciting to find out that probably about 95% of the titles that we'd chosen for the read were available on Libby and we could buy them, which for one of our Big Reads is pretty rare that we get everything available in an e-format"*

They used the new licences available during the pilot, particularly the multi-access model, to tailor their offer around the author events and ensure that participants could read the titles immediately, instead of facing a long waiting list for OCOU titles. In total they held

15 online and two face-to-face author events, which were attended by 220 people.

“We were able to say you could read the book and then meet the author or equally meet the author and then instantly download the ebook. That was really, really exciting.”

Norfolk Libraries found that the independent publisher titles they purchased as part of the pilot issued well and were also a useful addition to their overall catalogue, because in many cases they did not hold physical copies.



“There were lots of indie titles that we hadn’t got, so it was really good to be able to add those.”

They conducted analysis of the purchased titles and promoted those that had not issued as well. They continue to feature them as “ebook of the week” and through carousels on the Libby app.

The pilot allowed closer relationships between library staff, publishers, authors and the public. In future they would be keen to see the new licensing models rolled out and expanded to other publishers and titles. They would also be pleased to see co-ordinated approaches to offering online author talks as a way of connecting authors to new audiences.

“A virtual event makes things much more accessible to people. Nobody has to travel...it’s just in your living room or on the bus or wherever you happen to be on your phone. And it was a really nice vibe about it.”

Acknowledgements

Libraries Connected would like to thank Arts Council England for their generous support of the project and all those who took part, including library staff, publishers, aggregators and library users.

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- Booksellers Association
- British Library
- CILIP
- Publishers Association
- Society of Authors
- The Reading Agency

Project board

- Julia Eccleshare, British Library
- Jane Ellison, former Libraries Connected trustee
- Stu Hennigan, Leeds Libraries
- Anthony Hopkins, Libraries Connected trustee (Chair)
- Tiina Hill, British Library
- Alex Kittow, Libraries Unlimited
- James Pearson, Kent Library Service
- Karen Pugh, Caerphilly Library Service
- Caroline Rae, Newham Library Service
- Julie Reid, Libraries NI
- Liz White, British Library

Lead consultant

Emma House, Oreham Group

Researchers

Katie Pekacar and Monique
Rotik for Independent Mind



About Libraries Connected

We are an independent charity that supports, promotes and represents public libraries. 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. 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.

While we mainly work with senior library leaders, most of our events, training, resources and support are available to all library workers.

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.

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