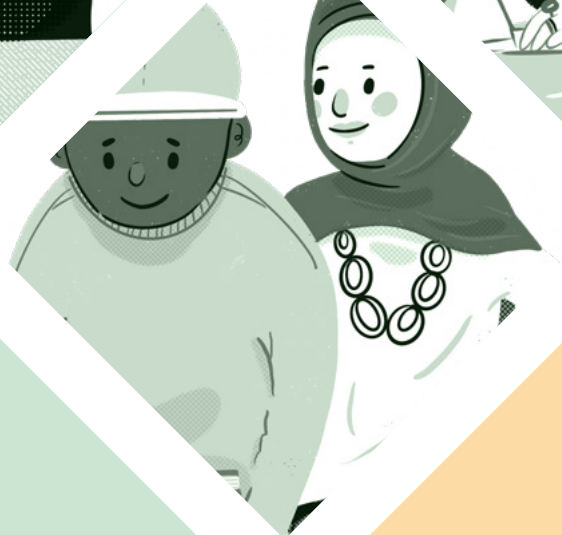# Libraries Connected

Library advocacy: a beginner's guide

How to use this guide

Use this short guide to find ideas and inspiration – gathered from experienced library leaders - to strengthen your advocacy efforts. You can read the guide in order, exploring each section in turn, or just dip in and out.

Every library service is different - not all of the tips and advice will be relevant to yours – so feel free to pick and choose what feels right for you.

If you have suggestions for a future edition of this guide please email:
info@librariesconnected.org.uk

Thank you to all the library leaders and other experts who contributed to this guide.

Graphic design and illustration by Buttercrumble

1. Introduction

"It is my belief that libraries whisper about what we do. To change perceptions we need to shout."

– Head of Service

At its most basic, advocacy is using persuasion and influence to achieve a desired outcome. For library leaders, that outcome is a higher profile and priority within their local authority, leading to more stable and longer-term funding. They want decision-makers to really understand what modern libraries do and the difference they make to people's lives.

The aim of this guide is to give your plenty of tips and ideas to help you do that. These are not strict rules to be followed but general principles that can help structure advocacy within your own unique local context. The guide is aimed primarily at new heads of service without extensive advocacy experience, or who may have libraries within their remit for the first time. We hope, however, that library leaders of all experience levels will find something useful here.

The advice comes from extensive conversations with experienced heads of service as well as experts from other areas of local government and the wider public sector. Throughout these exchanges, one theme became very clear: successful advocacy requires flexibility and adaptability, a willingness to try new approaches and learn from experience. The shifting political, social and economic landscape demands regular changes of emphasis and focus. And as each individual library service – and the community it serves - is unique there can never be a one-size-fits-all approach. But there are some basic principles and guidelines the underpin all successful advocacy - it is these that are outlined here.

Public libraries face an uncertain future. Years of underinvestment have left them highly exposed to the local government funding crisis and acutely vulnerable to cuts. Despite this bleak backdrop, they have continued to display incredible innovation, determination and resilience. They have pioneered solutions to some of our most pressing social and health issues, created extraordinary cultural and artistic experiences and developed exciting new approaches to reading, literacy and information.

But so often this incredible work is overlooked and undervalued. If our public library network is to survive and thrive, we must have the confidence and tools to make the case for libraries - to stop whispering about the good that they do and start shouting instead. We hope this guide helps you to raise your own voice.

Isobel Hunter MBE
Chief Executive, Libraries Connected

2. Objectives and targets

"We all want more cash for libraries. But you need a clear idea of how you're going to get it – and who you need to persuade."

– Head of Service

Set your objectives

As a head of service you are probably already overwhelmed by plans and strategies. You don't need yet more SMART targets. However, it is very useful to have objectives in mind as they can help focus your efforts and guide your thinking around advocacy. Of course, your ultimate goal is to increase the sustainability and resilience of your library service, so it is a good idea to base your advocacy goals on leading indicators: the conditions that, if in place now, make it more likely that you will protect your existing budgets or open up new income streams in the future.

Examples of advocacy goals include:

◆ Securing the support of prominent local businesspeople
◆ Increasing councillors' understanding of libraries' service delivery role
◆ Developing a high local media profile
◆ Making connections within other directorates

Pick your targets

In this guide we will talk about advocacy targets. These are the people you want to influence because they can help you achieve your advocacy objectives. The primary advocacy targets for most heads of service will be local councillors, particularly cabinet members or committee chairs, as these are key stakeholders able to make decisions and influence budgets.

While councillors with lead responsibility for libraries may be your primary target, you should also think about those whose portfolios cover education, social care, community cohesion and economic growth as libraries make positive contributions in all these areas. Ward or division councillors are important too, particularly if they have a library in their ward – they may sit on relevant scrutiny committees and could one day become a cabinet member or committee chair themselves.

Advocacy targets will not always be councillors, however. They might also include:

◆ Senior council officers and heads of other services
◆ Funders
◆ Local business leaders
◆ Potential partners
◆ Local journalists

Library leaders say...

"Develop a stakeholder map to prioritise who to target. We use ours to identify who we need to involve, and how and when to engage them. It helps us understand where we should focus our energy."

3. Build relationships

"When meeting new councillors or officers never forget that they will have a preconceived view of the library. This is often based on what library services did 30-40 years ago."

– Head of Service

Successful advocacy depends on strong relationships based on mutual trust, credibility and respect. This means getting to know your targets, taking the time to understand their role and their personal priorities. It also means finding the best way to communicate with them – clearly, consistently and respectfully - and involve them in your service. With time you will establish yourself as an expert in the

many areas where libraries make an impact: digital inclusion, literacy development, social isolation and much more.

Good ways of starting - and developing - relationships with your targets include:

◆ Signing them up to the library. (You may be surprised how many are not already members!)

◆ Inviting them to library events or giving them a tour of a library (let your comms team know if there might be a photo opp – see section 7)

◆ Sharing success stories and case studies (see section 6)

◆ Working with your democratic services team to identify opportunities for councillors to get involved

◆ Scheduling regular catch-up meetings, ideally in a library

◆ Adding them to your email newsletter list (with permission)

◆ Sending a monthly bulletin of library activity

◆ Sharing media coverage of your service and relevant national stories about libraries

Don't assume they will know anything about how a modern library service works. For early meetings it can be useful to have a crib sheet or slide deck with the basics about libraries, such as the fact that they are a statutory service. Explain what makes them unique – they are safe, welcoming, non-judgmental spaces in the

heart of their communities – and include some key data from your own libraries ([see section 6](#)).

Grasp every opportunity to find out more about your targets. Are there any aspects of the library service they would like to become involved with? Do they have a personal connection to any of your libraries? What are their concerns about the local area? What are their hobbies and interests?

Library leaders say...

"We prepare a monthly newsletter which is then sent by the executive member to all their party's councillors. The newsletter provides highlights from across the library service, covering themes that reflect corporate priorities. We've found this an extremely powerful internal advocacy tool - a simple way to guarantee buy-in from the executive member while raising awareness of libraries among other members."

Finally, be prepared for people to come and go: councillors lose their seats and senior officers move on. This is why it's important to keep a high profile ([see section 7](#)) and not to focus all your energies on just one target.

4. Understand priorities

"It's worth taking the time to understand what motivates a councillor. If you can recognise and reflect their own priorities, you'll have much more influence."

– Head of Service

Your advocacy will be more effective if you can demonstrate how your library service contributes to wider priorities. It is particularly important to understand your authority's corporate priorities and how libraries can support their delivery. These can be found in your corporate or strategic plan and might include tackling poverty, supporting families, growing the local economy or protecting the environment.

Libraries have such cross-cutting impact that it's likely they contribute significantly to each priority. A useful exercise is to list your council's corporate priorities and write down how libraries help to deliver each of them. You should refer to local and national evidence where possible to demonstrate the links between library activities and these priorities ([see Resources and Further Reading](#)).

Corporate priority	Library activities
Tackling poverty	Warm Welcome
	Sanitary packs
	Coat racks
	Money management workshops
	Community pantries
	Holiday Activity Fund sessions
	Free wifi and PC access

It is just as important to understand your targets' personal priorities. These will often differ from wider corporate priorities, and might reflect political concerns, personal interests or external pressures. It's the nature of local government that these will shift and change over time so you will need to be flexible and adapt your approach when necessary.

Library leaders say...

"Seek out your council's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). This will highlight some key strategic priorities for improving health, preventing illness and reducing health inequalities – all of which libraries can support."

5. Stick to your message

"Councillors and commissioners are extremely busy so working out what you want to say in advance helps you make the most of the time you have with them."

– Head of service

You are more likely to influence your targets if your advocacy is based on clear, concise, consistent and compelling messages. Your messages should summarise how you want your targets to think and feel about your library service – and what action you want them to take. When people encounter an overdose of information they tend to switch off, so stick to one primary message with two or three secondary messages.
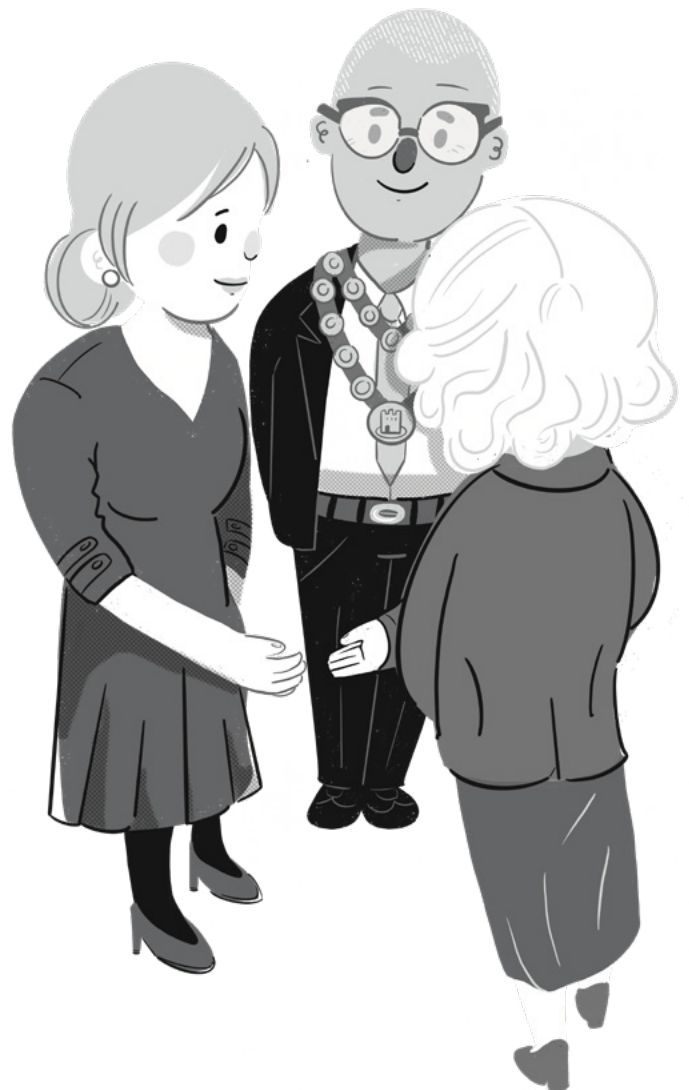
Your messages should be outcomes-focused – talk about what libraries can achieve and the value of it, but don't dwell on how they do it. The idea is not to memorise the messages and repeat them verbatim but to adapt and apply them in a range of contexts. They could be used to:

◆ Structure presentations and talks
◆ Help you stay focused when talking to the media
◆ Choose which activities to highlight in your comms
◆ Inform briefs for new photography or video content
◆ Decide what data and case studies you need to gather (see section 6)

Library leaders say...

"Your staff and volunteers are vital. They must be clear of your messages too and should be empowered to make connections and seek other opportunities to advocate."

Example messages

Primary message:

◆ Our libraries can save costs and simplify access for all the services the council wants to deliver

Secondary messages:

◆ Our libraries help deliver all the council's corporate priorities, particularly "tackling poverty" and "supporting families"
◆ Our libraries are at the heart of their communities, loved and enjoyed by local residents

Strengthen each message with evidence: key statistics, examples and case studies from your service (see section 6).

6. Show your impact

"It is not enough to keep saying, 'libraries are great'. We need to convince decision-makers that they make a difference to people's lives."

— Head of service

It's important to provide data and evidence to back up your messages. The most effective is a) local and b) closely tied to your corporate priorities and themes. Basic metrics include footfall, issues, event attendance and website visits but try to provide context by referring to local demographic, economic and health indicators. Where local data isn't available, it can still be useful to refer to national data - just try to demonstrate how it is relevant to your local context.

Remember: focus on the value of your service and the difference it makes to people's lives.

([See Resources and Further Reading for examples of important recent research](#)).

Get personal

Case studies and testimonies can bring out a powerful human element that's often hidden in hard data. Many decision-makers find personal stories much easier to relate to, so it's best to use both "stats and stories" if possible. At its simplest this could be a quote from a library user describing how important your services are. The most effective testimonies suggest what might have happened if the library hadn't been there, like this one:

> "This library is a lifesaver. I know that when I am short I can come to the library and the kids can have some porridge. If it wasn't for the library over the holidays I was scared that the kids would have gone hungry. They've come here and had a hot drink and something to eat and gone home with a full belly".

Ask your partners for endorsements

Testimonials from partner organisations – charities, community groups or clubs – are particularly valuable. Ask them to describe how working with your libraries has helped them deliver their service more efficiently and to more people. This will show you to be a trusted partner, a key part of the local community and a cost-effective way to deliver services.

Tell a story with numbers

People want to make sense of information quickly so consider using a chart, diagram of infographic rather than a table or spreadsheet to show your data - there are several infographic platforms which offer free plans. Even using icons or images to illustrate facts and figures can make them more memorable. Make it as easy as possible to understand what the data shows - use text to explain in plain English the lessons that can be learned from it and the actions you recommend.

Library leaders say...

"We produce an annual report with all the key facts, figures, testimonies and case studies for the year. It's a powerful internal advocacy tool and a good way to gain local media coverage."

The EVOLS tool was developed by economists at University of East Anglia (UEA) in partnership with Libraries Connected East. It helps libraries estimate the value of the services they provide and coordinate in their communities. For more information and to access EVOLS please email info@librariesconnected.org.uk.

7. Raise your profile

"We know that publicity makes us a harder target when it comes to difficult decisions regarding budgets. If you can make contact with your local media and develop a relationship this can really bear fruit."

– Head of Service

Maintaining the highest possible profile – both within your authority and with the public – will make your efforts at advocacy much easier. By regularly appearing in a range of comms channels you are more likely to be at the front of people's minds. Remember that your advocacy targets are also consumers of local news and community information.

Your corporate comms team are key here as they can help you reach a much larger internal and external audience. They will usually have control over resident and staff channels, good contacts with local media and knowledge of local advertising options, so it is worth building a relationship with them. Compared to other council activities, libraries are often seen as a "feel-good" service so comms officers will usually be happy to discuss promoting them to residents and staff. They can also provide advice on branding, design, and copywriting, and help set up photo opportunities with councillors.

If possible, put in a regular catch up with a comms officer – ideally there will be one who looks after the portfolio that libraries sit within – to discuss opportunities for sharing your service's activities and achievements through:

◆ Corporate social media and resident newsletters
◆ Internal comms channels such as staff newsletters and intranet
◆ Local and regional media stories

Use these channels to amplify and reinforce your key messages (section 5). Think strategically about your news stories - prioritise those that show your impact. Having a good relationship with your corporate comms team can also make it easier to respond to the national media requests that Libraries Connected shares via its member networks.

Library leaders say...

"Make use of internal comms - so many people are unaware of what libraries deliver but there are usually several hundred or thousand staff in a local authority who are a captive audience and can advocate for the service."

What's newsworthy?

When seeking media coverage of an event, activity, project consider if really is newsworthy. If you can answer yes to most of these questions then chances are you're ready to pitch your story to the local media – either directly or through your comms team.

- Is it unusual - the first, the biggest or the longest running?
- Is there an anniversary or landmark to celebrate, e.g. your 10th year in operation, or 100th customer?
- Is it topical? Does it reflect a trend or national conversation?
- Is there human interest, e.g. a quote or interview with a customer whose life has been improved by your service? Stories about people always get more traction than stories about policies.
- Do you have high resolution images ready to go?

8. Resources and further reading

Publications

The following publications contain evidence, recommendations and guidance that can support your advocacy messages and demonstrate the value of public libraries.

An impact analysis of Suffolk Libraries, Moore Kingston Smith, 2023

https://www.suffolklibraries.co.uk/about/initiatives-and-impact/measuring-our-impact-independent-research-into-our-social-value

An independent review of English public libraries, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2024

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-independent-review-of-english-public-libraries-report-and-government-reponse/an-independent-review-of-english-public-libraries

British Library: Economic Impact Assessment of the Business & IP Centre (BIPC) National Network, ERS Research and Consultancy, 2023

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374421043_BIPC_Economic_Evaluation_2023

Cornerstones of Culture, Local Government Association, 2022

https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/culture-tourism-leisure-and-sport/cornerstones-culture

Digital Exclusion, House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 2023

https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/40662/documents/198365/default/

Digital Inclusion in Libraries in England, research report by Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected, 2023

https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/insights/digital-inclusion-in-libraries-in-england

Libraries for living, and for living better: The value and impact of public libraries in the East of England, UEA Publishing Project, 2023

https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-living-and-living-better

Public Libraries and Literacy Recovery,
research report by National Literacy Trust
and Libraries Connected, 2022

https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-
services/research-reports/public-
libraries-and-literacy-recovery/

Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking
and the levelling up agenda, House of Commons
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2022

https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/
cmselect/cmcumeds/155/summary.html

The Reading Framework,
Department for Education, 2023

https://www.gov.uk/government/
publications/the-reading-framework-
teaching-the-foundations-of-literacy

Warm Welcome Impact Evaluation,
Eido Research, 2023

https://www.warmwelcome.uk/impact-report

Data sources

The following tools can provide local data to support your advocacy work.

Digital Exclusion Risk Index
Developed by Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI) tool visualises the risk, or likelihood, of digital exclusion for every Lower Layer Super Output Area in England and Wales, and every data zone in Scotland.

https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/digital/get-online-greater-manchester/greater-manchester-wide-support/digital-exclusion-risk-index-deri/

Health Survey for England
The Health Survey for England monitors trends in the nation's health and care, including loneliness.

https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england

Index of Multiple Deprivation
The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) datasets are small area measures of relative deprivation across each of the constituent nations of the United Kingdom.

View by local authority:
https://imd-by-geo.opendatacommunities.org/imd/2019/area

Import postcodes for deprivation data on your membership:
https://imd-by-postcode.opendatacommunities.org/imd/2019

Interactive Essential Skills Map
This interactive map from the Learning & Work Institute shows local-level data on essential skills needs in England, including indicative numbers of 16–64-year-olds with low literacy or numeracy.

https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/literacy-numeracy-england-map/

Local Government Inform
LG Inform is the local area benchmarking tool from the Local Government Association. The service allows you to access, compare and analyse data, and present your findings online or offline.

https://lginform.local.gov.uk/

ONS Explore Local Statistics
Find, compare and visualise statistics about places in the United Kingdom. Indicators cover Economy, Housing, Education and skills, Health and wellbeing, Connectivity and Crime.

https://explore-local-statistics.beta.ons.gov.uk/

Public Health Dashboard

See how your local authority compares on a range of health and wellbeing indicators, including school readiness.

https://healthierlives.phe.org.uk/