



The value and impact of Scotland's secondary school libraries

Final report

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**Scottish
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Foreword

Derek France

Preston Lodge High School, East Lothian

Secondary School Librarian of the Year – 2022

Scottish Book Trust Reading Champion awardee – 2025

I've been a school librarian for the past eight years, and I read this report not merely as a collection of statistics highlighting the benefits of a school library with a school librarian, but as a mirror reflecting the daily realities, hopes, and frustrations of the people who keep our libraries alive.

From the outset, the Executive Summary claims that 'high-quality library programmes correlate positively with student achievement ... and wellbeing'. The citations from Scottish Book Trust, the International Literacy Association, Robert Gordon University, and the National Literacy Trust provide the evidence for this, but the true weight of this evidence is felt when we consider the lived experience behind them: pupils whose only reliable access to ICT equipment and a stable internet connection is from the school library; the school library as a safe space for neurodivergent pupils; a place for those whose anxiety drastically affects their school attendance; and, of course, a place where students can discover themselves with a carefully recommended book or the 'third place' where new friendships can flourish.

Reading for pleasure, closing the poverty-related attainment gap, digital inclusion, and active citizenship are precisely the domains where school libraries have traditionally excelled. The survey results are striking: 89% of school librarians say their spaces foster reading for pleasure, 82% attest to measurable improvements in literacy, and '3 in 5 agreed their library addresses 'closing the poverty-related attainment gap' and nearly 3 in 4 agreed their school library addresses social isolation'. The finding that 47% of respondents flag digital poverty among their pupils underscores the school library's vital role in improving equity of information and digital literacy.

Perhaps the most urgent insight comes from the section on constraints. Over half of the respondents report funding cuts, reduced staffing, or shrinking physical space. The testimonies of library workers buying books out of pocket, libraries relegated to cramped classrooms, and entire posts eliminated in favour of assistants paint a picture of a service under siege. Qualified librarians serving the most deprived communities are disappearing. This is unsettling. The erosion of professional expertise impedes the capacity to teach information literacy, combat misinformation, and nurture critical thinking skills – skills that are indispensable in this era of generative AI and rampant disinformation.

The report also captures the resilience of library workers – repurposing modest budgets or working with no budget, forging partnerships with community organisations, and negotiating contractual hours to ensure students have access to the library. The quote 'I love working here ... the worst part is I don't have enough time' embodies the difficulty of passion meeting scarcity.

Ensuring a school library and a qualified school librarian is a statutory requirement would safeguard the profession against the vagaries of budget cycles. This would guarantee that every pupil, regardless of postcode, enjoys a library that is much more than a storage space for books – it becomes a hub for wellbeing, digital empowerment, and community engagement. This report validates what many of us have known intuitively for years: school libraries are not optional extras; they are essential for equitable education. It is also a rallying cry. As librarians, educators, parents, and policymakers read these pages, I hope they hear the plea: invest in people, space, and resources, and the benefits – raised attainment, better mental health, and more informed pupils – will be unmistakable.

Executive summary

Background

According to the International Literacy Association, '**nearly three decades of research shows positive correlations between high-quality library programs and student achievement**'¹.

This is borne out by academic research from Robert Gordon University, which demonstrated school libraries' impact on **higher test scores equating to academic attainment, successful curriculum or learning outcomes, and positive attitudes towards learning**².

BookTrust further reported in 2022 that, as a result of their Life Changing Libraries programme (in which six primary schools in England were furnished with a bespoke library space and new stock):

'Attention, engagement, confidence and motivation to learn were all reported to have increased, and there were reports of improved academic achievement and/or more rapid academic progress since the libraries were installed.'³

School libraries also impart more than just academic achievement: Scottish Book Trust research on the impact of school librarians in Scotland found that '**library staff play a vital role in supporting pupil wellbeing and expanding their horizons**'⁴.

The National Literacy Trust further reported in 2018 that 'children and young people who use the school library have, on average, higher mental wellbeing scores' – not only that, but pupils who don't use their school library are 'nearly twice as likely to have low mental wellbeing than they are to have high mental wellbeing'⁵.

Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools – the strategic document for the development of school libraries in Scotland, created by the Scottish Library and Information Council, COSLA and the Scottish Government – explores the many ways in which school libraries across Scotland '**play a key role in supporting the next generation of critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers and empowered individuals,**' and recommends that 'every child and young person in Scotland should have access to a vibrant school library service'⁶.

Today's school communities are facing a number of significant challenges, including a largely static attainment gap between the least and most advantaged pupils⁷, deepening poverty⁸, increasing mental ill health⁹ and school absence¹⁰ amongst children and young people, lengthening waiting lists for speech and language therapy¹¹, and the ever-increasing need for strengthened critical literacy in the current media climate, including the rapid development and widespread use of generative AI¹².

The evidence clearly shows that **the school library, and the school librarian, are ideally and uniquely placed to support pupils and learning professionals to navigate and surmount these issues**, giving children and young people 'opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to adapt, think critically and flourish in today's world'¹³.

However, rather than investing in school libraries and librarians, **schools across Scotland are losing their librarians and their library spaces**.

The school library sector in Scotland has faced ten years and more of service reductions, which has left some local authorities with 'no libraries' and 'many with one [librarian] between two or more schools'¹⁴.

Scotland has fewer schools with a dedicated member of staff for the library than the UK as a whole – 32% vs. 41%¹⁵. Moreover, 'only a quarter of schools in Scotland have a designated library budget compared with schools in England (25% compared to 36% in England)'¹⁶.

Cuts are continuing and deepening. In just the last few months Glasgow – the largest and most deprived local authority in Scotland, with 30 secondary schools serving over 30,000 pupils, 57% of whom live in SIMD1 areas¹⁷ – announced they are planning to cut all school librarian posts, to be replaced by library assistant posts^{18,19}. Similarly, in North Ayrshire, all five school librarian posts were cut as of August 2025, to be replaced by four library assistant posts, both cases of 'clear de-professionalisation'²⁰.

There have in recent years been increasing calls for the provision of school libraries and the employment of school librarians to be enshrined in law, supported by figures such as Cressida Cowell²¹ and Michael Rosen²². However, currently, **there is no**

statutory requirement for schools to have a library, or librarian meaning that 'as ring-fenced budgets are put under pressure those which are not protected get cut, leaving school libraries vulnerable as one of a few places savings can be made'²³.

The present research

Scottish Book Trust sees the impact that school librarians have on pupils across Scotland every day. In a context of persistent and increasing cuts, this research explores and evidences this impact through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative survey data and in-depth research interviews with school library workers, as well as a review of existing evidence. The research explores libraries' impact across four broad areas key to pupils' attainment, wellbeing and development: reading for pleasure, learning opportunities / closing the poverty-related attainment gap, digital inclusion, and active citizenship. Headline findings include:

School libraries run countless activities to **encourage reading for pleasure**, including book clubs, author visits, and events as part of Book Week Scotland.

- 89% of responding secondary library workers agreed their library provides opportunities for reading for pleasure 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 'I believe that those who don't like reading simply haven't found an enjoyable book, and I like the challenge of assisting them!'
- Moreover, 82% of secondary library workers agreed their library **improves literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 'Most of my pupils don't have books at home, and I beg, borrow and steal to get the books of their choice so they don't disengage.'

School libraries are **key to providing digital devices and Wi-Fi**, supporting pupils' coursework, and building their digital literacy skills.

- This is particularly essential in areas of high deprivation where many households do not have digital devices or Wi-Fi at home. Nearly half (47%) of secondary school library workers reported their **pupils face digital poverty**.

- 'Our school is situated in an area that suffers from high deprivation. The rising cost of living has also forced more families to prioritise basic needs such as food and power over having home Wi-Fi or mobile devices.'

School librarians are crucial leaders in **supporting media / digital literacy skills**, signposting pupils to **accurate information**.

- 'Aside from promoting a culture of reading for pleasure, it is vital to have an information professional at hand to offer advice on research and finding information. This is particularly important in an age where information (and misinformation) is in abundance.'

School libraries **reach a diversified audience** (88% of secondary library workers agreed) and they provide **a safe space** (95% of secondary library workers agreed).

- 'I have seen friendships develop and flourish after solitary pupils have made friends during lunchtime activities such as playing board games, or book club. These friend groups meet in the library most days at break time and lunchtime now and I see their individual confidence grow.'

School libraries are intrinsic to providing free and equal access to information, offering access to books for pupils with no other provision, maintaining a safe, quiet, inclusive, welcoming warm space, and staffing the library with a non-judgemental, friendly librarian – all of which are important factors in efforts to **close the poverty-related attainment gap**:

- 'Some pupils have a habit of absconding if they become overwhelmed, but these pupils are taught that instead of leaving the building they can go to the library, and they will be welcomed there without judgement.'

However, library workers also reported increasing strain on their capacity, role and overall service provision, which prevent them from delivering the benefits their school library could offer.

Nearly 3 out of 5 (59%) secondary school library workers reported **restriction on funding / resources**, with a further 23% noting restrictions on dedicated school library workers (hours / remit), and another 21% citing restriction on dedicated library space.

- '[The school is] currently looking for ways to make financial efficiencies and that seems to be by not buying books not supporting author visits not supporting the librarian or the English department requests for more books. I believe that the plan is to scrap school libraries.'

Some library workers noted that due to the constraints in budget and stock, they have resorted to **buying library books out of their own pocket**.

- 'I buy the books from 2nd [hand] stores and sites, I cannot afford whole sets, sad when a pupil loves a book and I can't afford to buy more. I buy from my wage not a budget as there is no budget for the library.'

Restricted space and access has a knock-on effect on what service can be offered:

- 'Library has been moved from dedicated library space into a small classroom space with tables / study space for eight people. Classes still have allocated timetabled slots but all have to squeeze in, and sit on floor. There are no individual study spaces available when classes are timetabled.'

Conclusion

School librarians are direct and clear in their account of the sector: they are passionate about their work, dedicated to their pupils, innovative and resourceful in their activity, and a stalwart correction to dis- and misinformation online. They are able to adapt to competing needs of the school curriculum, digital access, media literacy, stock demands and pastoral care.

This research clearly evidences the impact that school libraries and librarians can and do have in tackling key priorities for education. As one library worker shared:

- 'Put more value into school, libraries and staffing them with actual people who know what they're talking about and can do all the things that we've been doing.'

It'll close the attainment gap, it'll improve literacy, it'll help health and well-being, tick all those boxes that everyone says that they care about so much, we can do it.'

However, they are also trying to function to the best of their ability while facing drastic funding cuts, a lack of buy-in and support from management or sector leaders, restrictions and demands on their dedicated library space, and very limited time.

The school librarians who are keeping their service going are often doing so alone, on a shoestring budget, in between competing priorities, and with no guarantee that their effort or its results will be recognised.

With appropriate funding, secure staffing provision and more public and management support, **school libraries can help to tackle some of the most pressing issues of our time**, providing free resources and guidance to pupils living in poverty, a safe space for children and young people experiencing mental ill health, isolation or wellbeing challenges, an environment in which academic attainment can flourish, and support for the interlinked critical literacy and digital skills that are essential in today's media environment – in short, a level playing field allowing all children and young people to thrive. **They are hugely valuable and must be supported.**

Recommendations

These recommendations derive from evidence provided through this research project, The Value and Impact of Scotland's Public Libraries, and have been reviewed by key library stakeholders.

1. That **Scottish Government** enshrines a statutory requirement for secondary schools to operate a high-quality school library service, staffed by a qualified school librarian.
2. That **Scottish Government and local authorities** work with stakeholders to define the parameters of a high-quality school library service to ensure a uniform standard of provision and allow for self-evaluation and continuous improvement.

3. That **Scottish Government and local authorities** work together to empower secondary schools across Scotland with sufficient funding and resource to operate a high-quality school library service, staffed by a qualified school librarian.
4. That secondary **school management teams** appropriately train and support their librarians to deliver a high-quality school library service.

Background

This report is a result of Scottish Book Trust undertaking independent research into the value and impact of public and school libraries in Scotland, in partnership with the National Library of Scotland (NLS), the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC), and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland (CILIPS). Data gathering took place between late 2023 – officially launched in Libraries Week (2–8 October) – and late 2024.

Scotland's school libraries have no legal statutory duty for adequate library provision. Scotland's public libraries, though they do have a statutory duty 'to secure the provision of adequate library facilities for all persons resident in their area', have no enforced standard for what that must offer²⁴.

As a result, across the public and school library sector, Scotland's communities face a lack of equitable access²⁵.

Aims

Scottish Book Trust works across every local authority in Scotland, striving to offer opportunities for all people to tell their stories; as such, Scottish Book Trust is uniquely positioned to bear witness. To structure the research, four banner themes were chosen:

- Reading for pleasure
- Learning opportunities / closing the poverty-related attainment gap
- Digital inclusion
- Active citizenship

These were chosen to identify the main ways that Scottish libraries make a profound impact on their communities, and the ways they bridge the gaps left by the inaccessibility of – and barriers to – other services, such as the cost-of-living crisis²⁶, digital inequality²⁷, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic²⁸, poverty²⁹ and wealth inequality³⁰.

This report investigates how secondary school libraries address inequality across these four research themes, and through many intersections of Scotland's communities. [A separate report on the impact of public libraries is available on the Scottish Book Trust website.](#)

Methods

This report compiles findings from three research methods:

1. Open surveys of school library workers

Conducted between October 2023 and January 2024, completed by 140 secondary school library workers.

2. Industry research

Conducted throughout the project.

3. Research interviews.

13 library workers from secondary school settings, and two external experts. Conducted between March and May 2024.

Primary school libraries

In addition to a survey for secondary school library workers, there was a separate survey for primary school library workers. 41 responses from 12 local authorities were received for this survey. These survey results are available to view in the [preliminary report, available on the Scottish Book Trust website](#). However, given the relatively low response rate, these findings have not been included in this final report as they are unlikely to be fully representative of the situation across primary schools in Scotland.

As there is no requirement for any school to have a library, there are no official figures around how many primary schools have a library space and/or employ a professional librarian. However, anecdotally it is clear that provision in primary schools varies widely with some having a dedicated library space, but many more

using book corners in classrooms, corridor libraries etc. The low response to the survey suggests that dedicated library workers are few and far between – of those 41 responses, ten reported they were librarians, and six that they were qualified librarians – this impression is again backed up Scottish Book Trust and partners' experiences in schools.

Given the proven benefits to pupils of having access to a library and qualified librarian, cited throughout this report, Scottish Book Trust strongly advocate for dedicated library spaces and staff in primary schools as well as in secondary schools, but acknowledge that this is currently unlikely to be the case in most primary schools given this more disparate picture of provision.

Terminology

A note on the term 'library worker': in this report, this term includes both qualified librarians and any other member of staff taking part in the research. In schools, libraries are staffed by volunteers, teachers, school management, and/or career librarians, all of whom have fed into these findings. More detail on the breakdown of respondents' roles is included below.

Quantitative data – note on funding

Due to the provision of a school library not being a statutory requirement in Scotland, there is no quantitative data available about how many are currently operating, how many have closed, what funding they receive, or what changes have been made to their opening hours. However, much of this detail is described by library workers in their responses to the research surveys and interviews, which are analysed later in this report.

In 2023, Great School Libraries research reported that, 'two-thirds of school libraries in Scotland have no library budget at all, and there are significant regional inequalities, with rural areas less likely to have access to a school library and librarian than urban areas'³¹.

Moreover, 'only 11% of school libraries in Scotland reported a budget increase, significantly lower than other nations'³²; 'this is probably an unintended consequence of many educational budgets being ring-fenced. As ring-fenced budgets are put under pressure those which are not protected get cut, leaving school libraries vulnerable as one of a few places savings can be made'³³.

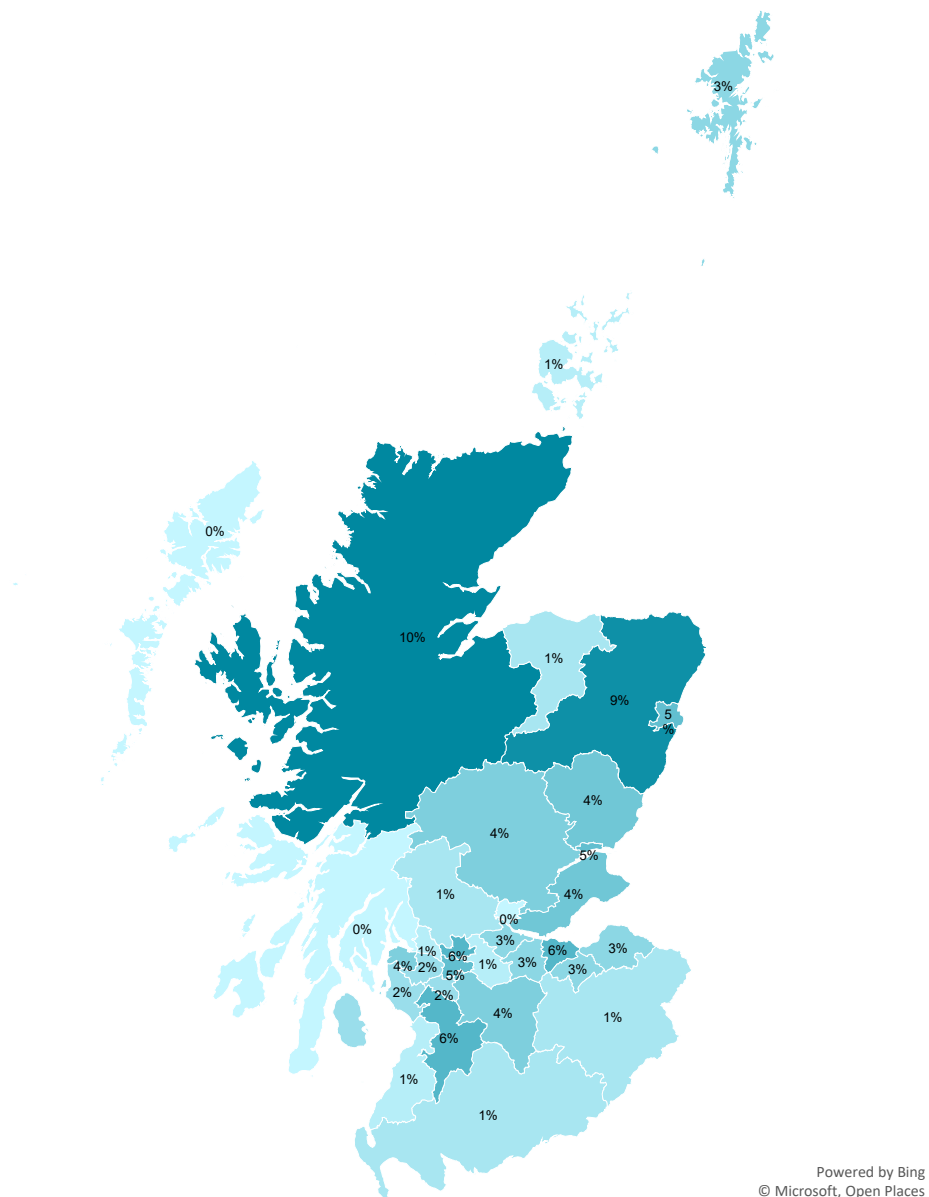
Each year since 2017, the Scottish Library and Information Council has distributed additional, much-needed funds for projects supporting the development of innovative projects through the School Libraries Improvement Fund. £1.87 million has been awarded over the lifetime of the scheme, with £150,000 due to be distributed in 2025/26³⁴.

Main findings

Settings and roles

29 out of 32 local authorities were represented in the secondary school survey. The highest response rates were from Highland (10% of total responses), Aberdeenshire (9%) and East Dunbartonshire, City of Edinburgh and East Ayrshire (each 6%).

Secondary school librarian response rates by local authority (140 respondents)



There were no responses obtained from Argyll and Bute, Clackmannanshire or Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. In the case of Argyll and Bute, the last school library

services ceased as of 2016³⁵. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar suffered a cyberattack in late 2023 that may also have impacted the ability to take part in the survey³⁶.

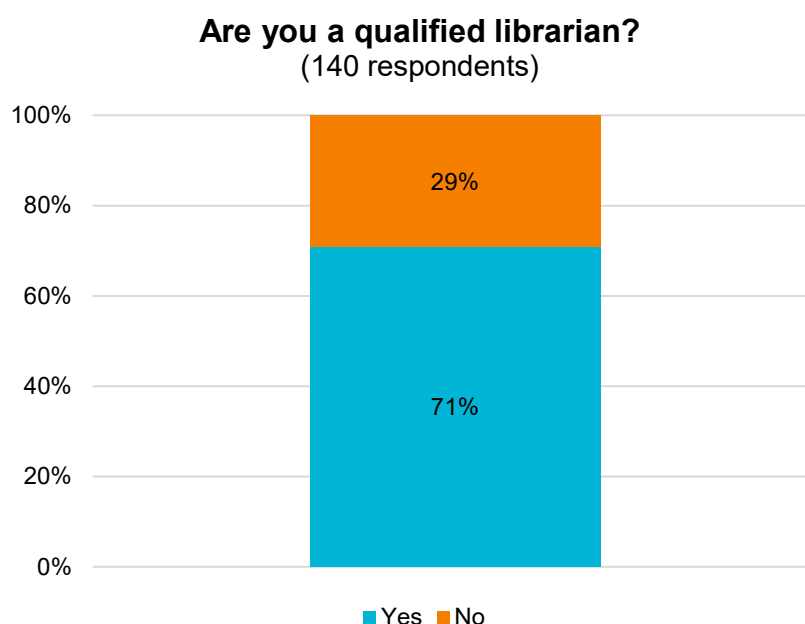
The number and broad geographical spread of responses indicates that, despite threats to public services and potential for 'survey fatigue' among numerous consultations, school librarians are passionately fighting and consistently advocating for their libraries as shown by the disclosures included in the report below.

Qualified librarians

There is demonstrable evidence that qualified school librarians contribute to improved student achievement, positive pupil engagement, improved reading skills and facilitating student learning³⁷:

'The most substantial and consistent finding is a positive relationship between full-time, qualified school librarians and scores in standardised tests of reading, writing, English language, arts.'³⁸

To explore this further, survey respondents were asked if they were a 'qualified librarian', that is, 'someone who holds an undergraduate, postgraduate or Masters qualification obtained from a CILIP accredited course or has a level of CILIP Professional Registration such as Certification of Chartership'.

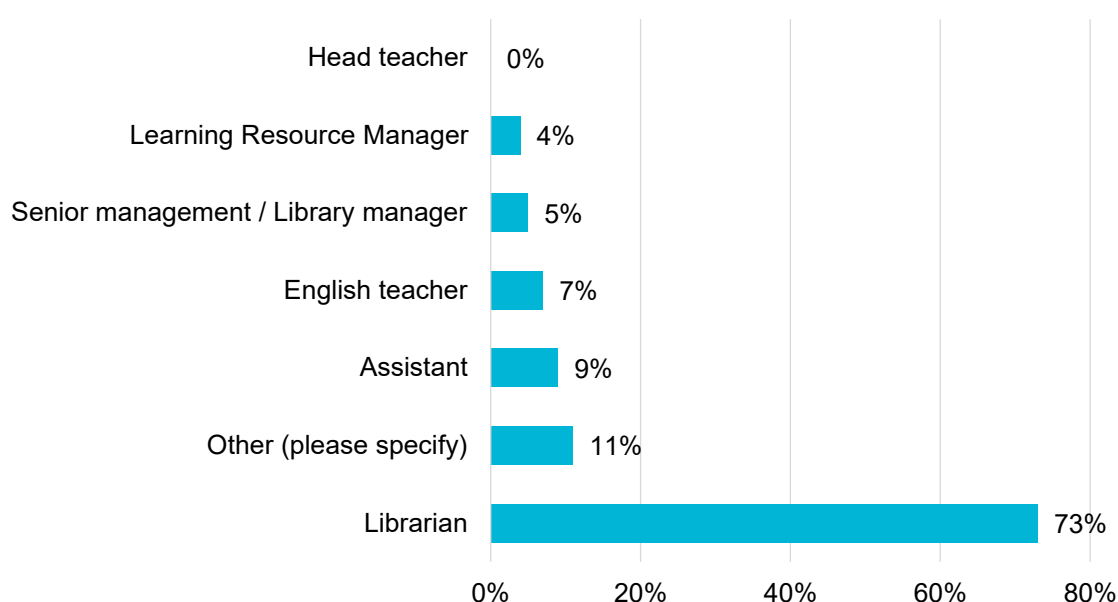


Nearly three quarters – 71% – of respondents noted that they are qualified librarians, where 29% are not. In comparison to the primary school librarian survey, in which just 15% of respondents were qualified, this majority stat indicates a strong base from which to build robust and comprehensive school library services.

Current role

The survey then sought further detail about the role the respondents play in their service. Results were more split compared to the public librarian survey.

How would you describe your current role?
(140 respondents)

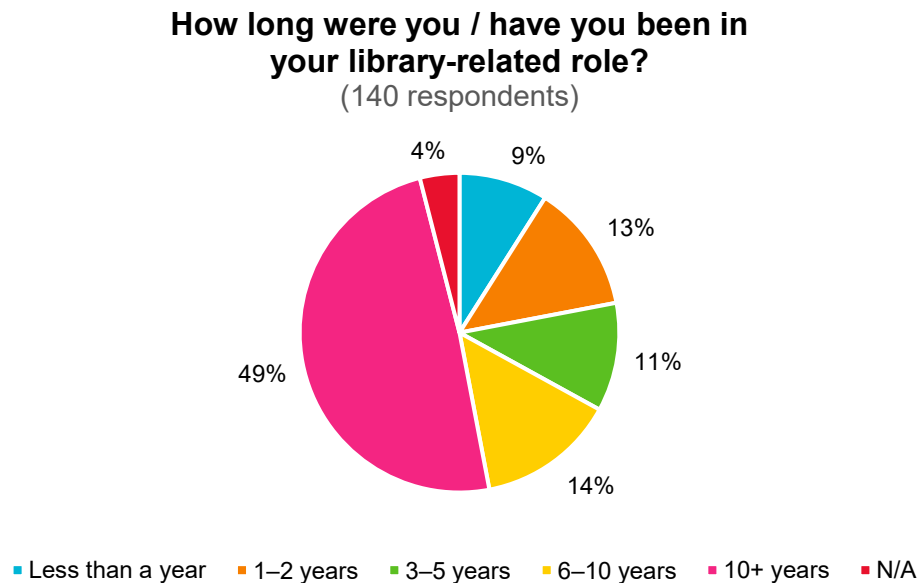


Out of the 11% who chose 'other (please specify)', the open-ended comments broke down as follows:

- 9 'library assistants', or similar, with one noting, 'no librarian or other assistants in this library'
- 4 teachers
- 1 'library development leader'
- 1 'currently seeking Chartership; educated to degree level'

Again, it is notable that 73% (102 respondents) occupy a 'librarian' role in their secondary school, and the majority of those (99 respondents) are qualified librarians. The split among other school roles is chiefly among library assistants, learning resource managers, and English teachers.

A similar breadth of experience was reflected in respondents' accumulated years of service to the library sector:



Scottish Book Trust is delighted to see such a robust response rate from highly experienced librarians, nearly half of whom (49%) have been working for 10+ years in the sector and can bring that cumulative lived experience and institutional memory into their reflections for this research project.



In the hour-long research interviews conducted with Scottish Book Trust, a number of library workers spoke to the breadth of their experience and its legacy, despite the job insecurity of the sector and its financial limitations:

- 'I've been fortunate to have had a long career as a qualified School Librarian. There are dwindling numbers now, however, increasing need to support young people with reading, information literacy and digital literacy. It is a real concern.'

In addition to this ambiguity about the legacy of librarianship, it is clear from interviews that school library workers are facing a squeeze on their current roles. Limited hours, limited pay and ongoing ambiguity about job prospects are all creating a structure where, in the words of one interviewee, 'school librarians aren't hired anymore':

- 'We're hired on three-month contracts on a rolling basis. So that's the way I've personally been working for two and a half years now, and apparently it is being looked at after the funding announcements ... It's a very difficult position to be in.'

This is compounded by ongoing cuts to school librarian roles. Glasgow – the largest and most deprived local authority in Scotland, with 30 secondary schools serving over 30,000 pupils, 57% of whom live in SIMD1 areas³⁹ – recently announced they are planning to cut all school librarian posts, to be replaced by library assistant posts^{40 41}. Similarly, in North Ayrshire, all five school librarian posts were cut as of August 2025, to be replaced by four library assistant posts, both cases of 'clear de-professionalisation'⁴².

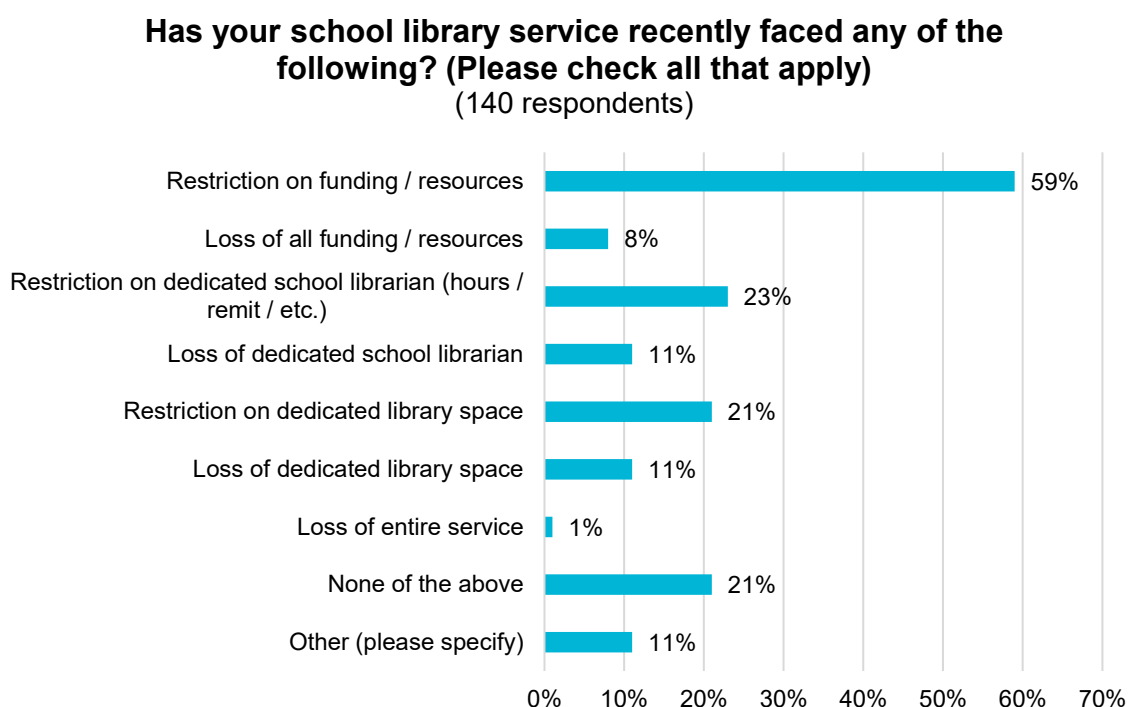
It is important to note here that school librarians are already under-supported in the sector. Their average salary (£22,000 p.a.⁴³) only just meets the national living wage⁴⁴. A starting salary for a school librarian (approximately £18,000 p.a.⁴⁵) is nowhere near the current living wage – but even an experienced librarian's salary (approx. £30,000 p.a.⁴⁶) falls short of an average UK weekly wage⁴⁷.

Little job security and little pay, in exchange for high-quality work, years of experience and dedication to the role. School librarians are demonstrably committed to their vocation, and they deserve greater support, recognition and job security.

Provision for secondary school services

To gain a better picture of current secondary school library services across Scotland, the survey led with a question asking library workers to indicate from a checklist what restrictions or losses their service has recently faced.

The responses were strongly illustrative of how the school library sector is increasingly under-resourced and depleted:



Nearly 3 out of 5 library workers (59%) reported a restriction on funding or resources, with a further 23% reporting restrictions on the remit or hours of the dedicated school librarian, and 21% reporting restrictions on the dedicated library space.

Of the 15 who chose 'other (please specify)', comments ranged over five broad themes:

- Library service closed or amalgamated with another (40% of 'other' responses)
 - 'Replacement brand new school build opening 2026 will not have a library space or physical books. Plan is to go fully digital and delete the school librarian post.'
- Loss of school librarian staffing / hours (53% of 'other' responses)

- 'Restructure within the service meant school library assistant hours were removed. Some secondary schools are staffed by non-qualified staff. Staff are employed as 'school librarians' but do not have the necessary qualifications of a librarian. Some secondary schools have only part-time staff.'
- Unqualified staff employed in librarian posts (26% of 'other' responses)
 - 'Non-qualified staff being employed as school librarians and being paid at the same rate as qualified school librarians.'
- Loss, or ongoing lack, of funding (13% of 'other' responses)
 - 'I've never had funding or resources from my local authority. I always have to apply to outside agencies to receive any sort of funding or materials.'
- Loss of attainment funding (13% of 'other' responses)
 - 'Lost attainment and PEF funding.'

These comments indicate the ways in which libraries at secondary school level are being forced to adapt with little to no resource – whether as part of a service restructure, being 'replaced' with digital provision, or having to seek funding from third parties.

When asked about funding in interview, many indicated the reliance their role has either on time-consuming funding applications, which they undertake in what working time they have, or on funding decisions made at a more senior level:

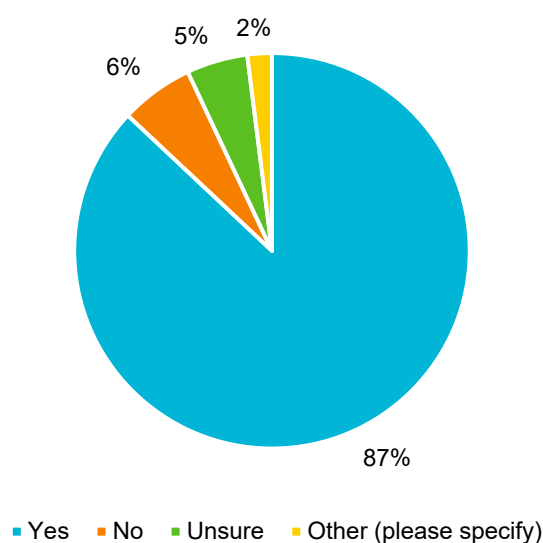
- 'Currently the funding situation is probably the most stressful part of the role. The librarian before me had a budget of 1,800 a year. I'm now down to 400 a year. It's been cut every single year since I've started. That's obviously really ... well, it's practically impossible, because the rate of books that we lose from the library through damage or accidental loss or even deliberate theft, that won't even cover replacing those, never mind the author visits, the events you want to run, the stationery you need to run those events. So, that's a really difficult part of the job.'

More spoke to the issue of contracted hours and workload, as they find themselves in a position without job security despite significant responsibility:

- 'I love working here. The kids are great, the staff are great. I love all of that. The worst part is the fact that I don't have enough time, because I am part-time. I'm trying to do a lot in maybe not quite enough time. Also money-wise, I don't really ever get any money from [my local authority] and very little from the school. I do spend a lot of time applying for external funding which does eat up more of my time. Time is probably my biggest problem, and money.'

In seeking to understand what restrictions the libraries may be facing in running their service, the survey asked if their secondary schools are funded by the relevant local authority:

Is your school funded by your local authority?
(140 respondents)



Of the three responses in 'other (please specify)', all comments noted their school is funded by either a Trust or a combined Trust and ALEO (arms-length external organisation of the local authority).

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey (87%) were funded by their local authority. COSLA reported that the 2025/26 Scottish budget 'will not reverse long-standing cuts to non-statutory service areas key to the health and wellbeing of our communities, such as culture, leisure and street cleaning' and that '100% of respondents to the Local Government Information Unit survey in 2024 said they will

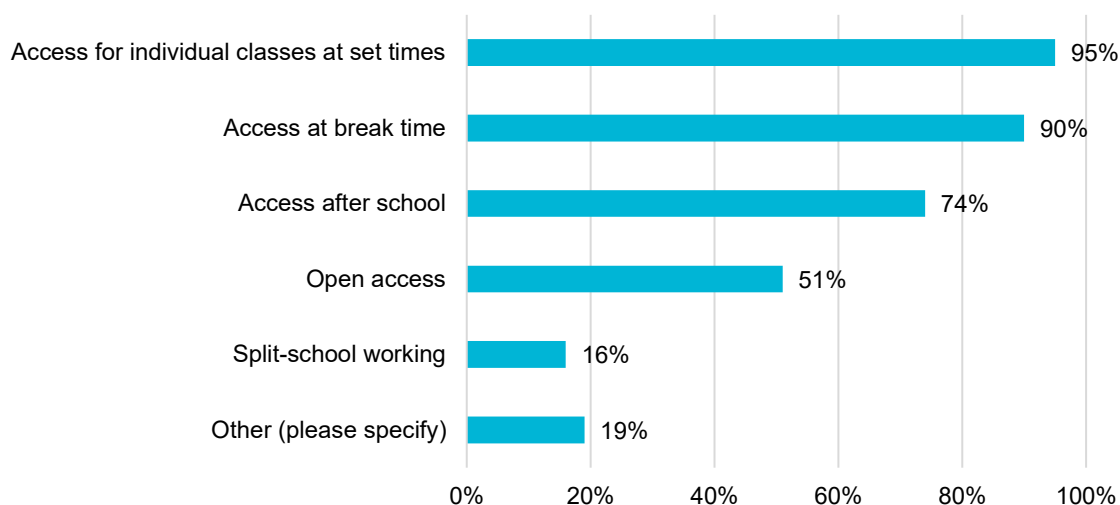
be cutting council services, with 76% advising these cuts will be evident to the public'⁴⁸.

The consequences of pending and potential budget cuts are of great concern to school library workers, who in research interviews expressed their attempts to advocate for their service to local authorities:

- 'Apparently, we're going to have a review of the service over the next financial year to see if the service is still viable. With that review, we are screaming at policymakers to come and see us. Do not look at our figures. Come and see what we do. We have statistical returns that prove book borrowing etc. is up, it's up year-on-year. We can prove statistically that it's a very popular service, but until you actually come and see what we do and the work we do with children – and especially the type of children that I work with and many of my colleagues work with as well – I don't think it can be evaluated properly from a distance.'
- 'I think really the danger just now is there's a lot of funding cuts across councils both for public libraries and for school libraries, and a lot of schools have to save a lot of money in the next couple of years, which is worrying ... I think it's just the first thing that people think that they can get rid of ... but it's such valuable resource.'
- 'I know a lot of councils will have a librarian split across multiple schools, they're not full-time, one-year contracts are quite common in a number of councils. Many councils have just gotten rid of their school librarians. So I think that anyone arguing in favour of school libraries would be very helpful just about now, when we seem like an easy target for cuts.'

Because school libraries are not a statutory requirement in Scotland, there is no uniform standard for how they are accessed, stocked, supported or run. Scottish Book Trust asked secondary school library workers to give insights into how their pupils can access the library service and when:

Which of the following applies to your school library service? (Please check all that apply)
(140 respondents)



Nearly all respondents indicated their school library is accessible for individual classes at set times (95%), and at break time (90%), or after school (74%). Many fewer – just half, 51% – indicated there was open access to their library service.

Of the 26 who chose 'other (please specify)', their responses fell into three primary categories:

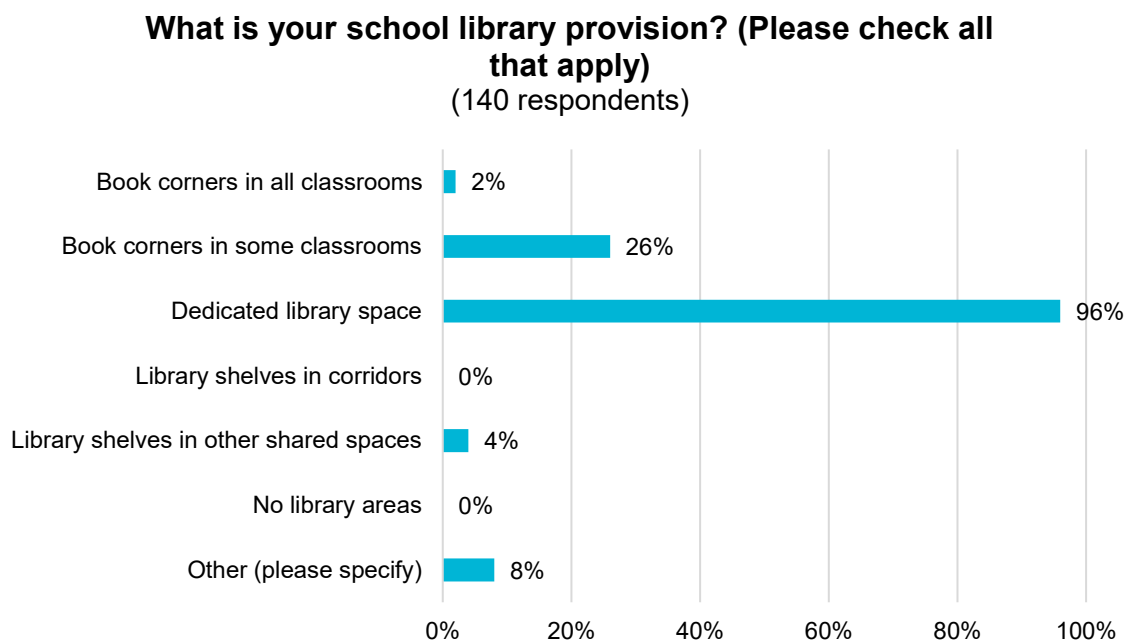
- Access at lunchtimes, either occasionally, in part, or full (58% of 'other' responses)
- Access before (and/or after) school (31% of 'other' responses)
- Access is complicated due to insufficient space (15% of 'other' responses)
 - 'We have our own small book cupboard that is run by pupils – supervised by Eng[lish] staff.'
 - 'Library has been moved from dedicated library space into a small classroom space with tables / study space for eight people. Classes still have allocated timetabled slots but all have to squeeze in, and sit on floor. There are no individual study spaces available when classes are timetabled.'

In interview, one school library worker shared the lengths they are going to in order to ensure that their pupils have the best possible access to the library:

- 'I'm here four days a week, but I'm paid for three days – so I do two half days and two full days. I've deliberately done this so that I'm here at break times and lunch times.

I wanted to make sure that it's open for as many of those times as I could because that's definitely the highlights of my day. I make sure at lunchtime that I've got drop-in activities. So that's definitely the best part of the day, having clubs and activities that the young people have asked for, that the young people respond to, just seeing young people flourish in these opportunities.'

In addition to better understanding when pupils can access their secondary school library, the survey sought to understand what provision the library offered:



The majority of respondents, 96%, indicated their school library has a dedicated library space. A further quarter, 26%, have book corners in some classrooms.

Of the 11 who chose 'other (please specify)', three main themes emerged:

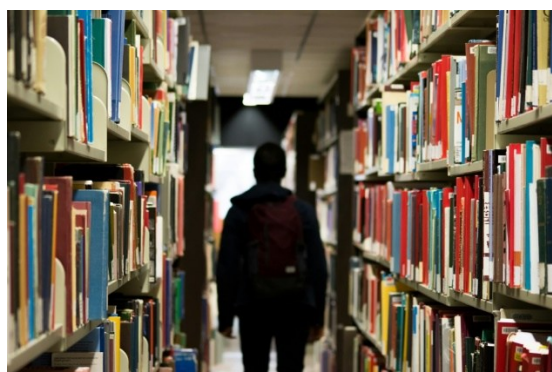
- Library provision forced to downsize or integrate with another service (27% of 'other' responses)
 - 'It is also a public library.'

- 'The library has been downsized. The purpose-built library has been taken away from me for an 'Integrated Support Hub' – essentially Guidance teachers.'
- 'Small classroom selected as suitable to house bookshelves, books and the Librarian. Not suitable for great selection, or whole class visits or as a study space. DHT [Deputy Headteacher] quoted as saying "no point keeping non-fiction books, as the pupils can look things up on internet if they want to know something".'
- English department staff trying to set up library provision (27% of 'other' responses)
 - 'Library was closed about four years ago – books packed away – no funding for post of librarian. Eng Dept have started raising funds etc. and making a small storage area a new 'book nook' area.'
 - 'English Dept have dedicated class libraries, reading registration takes place one day per week, some teachers have put a small selection of books in their class for this.'
- Satellite collections spread throughout school (27% of 'other' responses)
 - 'We also offer book collections in faculties / departments and classrooms to promote reading across the school.'

In interview, one school library worker shared the struggle they faced in trying to maintain a quiet, safe space with their current provision:

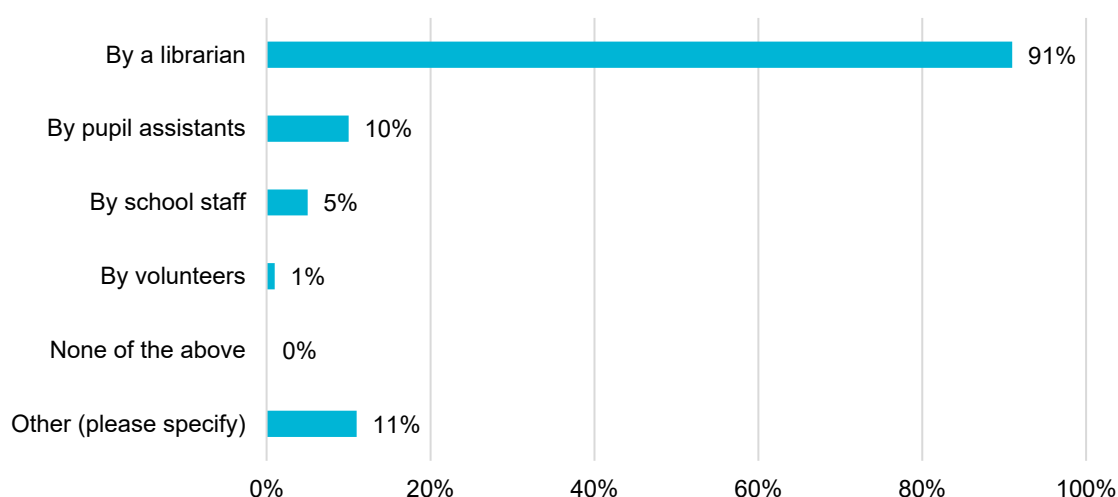
- 'We have an open-plan library here, which is between the hallway and the main lunch hall. So, it is noisy at break and lunch and disrupted during class time with people moving about the halls.
That is the worst as far as reading for pleasure goes because it's not really a cosy place for kids to come and hide. You still get a few just because they've got nowhere else to go. But it takes constant policing in order to maintain a semblance of calmness at breaks and lunchtime.'

What is clear from this data is how hard librarians and English department staff are working to try to provide their pupils' with access to high-quality books as well as space and time for reading, despite rising pressures and decreasing resource.



In the Great School Libraries 2023 report⁴⁹, 40% of librarians indicated that they spend 'less than three quarters of their time carrying out their core library duties due to the range of other roles and responsibilities held by the member of staff' – this stat is borne out in the picture painted by responses to the next survey question:

How is your school library provision managed? (Please check all that apply)
(140 respondents)



The majority of respondents indicated that their provision is managed by a librarian (91%), with a further 10% managed by pupil assistants.

Of the 16 who chose 'other (please specify)', 75% noted 'library assistant' or similar. Their comments indicated some concerning dynamics in library management:

- 'No one listens to the librarian[;] decisions are made by business manager.'

- 'Library assistant (me) not librarian.'
- 'Library Assistant – lone worker. Line manager based elsewhere.'
- 'Community Library Co-ordinator based in the library and Librarian managing five secondary schools.'

In these notes, there is a clearer picture of the strain on the library service – though there may be a dedicated library space and a library worker, that person may not be qualified, they may have inconsistent and uncertain financial resource, they may be excluded from making decisions affecting their library including the use of resource, and their time and capacity may be split across multiple settings.

Where there is variable support or inconsistent resource, there are only so many stop-gap measures a library service can take before it begins to decline. From the variance in staff time and capacity, the continual and increasing need alongside dwindling resource and unpredictable management, these findings demonstrate the strain on secondary school libraries across Scotland.

Reading for pleasure

Research shows that reading for pleasure is one of the most important indicators of a young person's future success⁵⁰. It is proven to support equity and wellbeing, impact learners' attainment, and encourage critical thinking, creativity, empathy and resilience⁵¹. Reading for pleasure can also tackle poverty⁵². Pupils who read regularly experience better educational and social mobility; those who grew up in poverty are less likely to remain in poverty as adults; they have better mental wellbeing and self-esteem; and they have better speech and language development and literacy skills⁵³.

Recent research conducted in Scotland indicates the importance of librarians in aiding and advocating for pupil autonomy and promoting reading for pleasure; barriers to pupils' reading for pleasure include, 'poor access; a mismatch between book provision and students' needs or interests; social factors; undermining reading experiences in school; negative reading experiences; and a lack of time or competing activities'⁵⁴.

A dedicated school library, and well-resourced school librarian, can address all of these barriers; the benefits of such support are clear – for those pupils who do read, they report a sense of pride and accomplishment:

'There's a whole section in my room that's dedicated to books and there's just, like, stacks of books. I'm, like, so proud of it. It makes me want to read more so I can like, add them and arrange them all and stuff. And it's cool 'cause you can like, see how much you've read and feel like you, like, achieved something.'⁵⁵

When asked in an open question if, or how, they or their library promotes children and young people's reading for pleasure, secondary school library workers reported their promotions focused mostly on one-to-one engagement and bespoke support to pupils, book displays in the library or from staff, timetabled reading time or library time, book talks or author visits and bespoke book recommendations:

- 'We are currently working towards our [Scottish Book Trust] Reading Schools Core Award and are hoping to get pupils to be Reading Ambassadors. We hold all-school quizzes to tie in with national events, e.g. BWS [Book Week

Scotland]. We have a small Book Group who meet weekly in the library. We have relevant displays to encourage pupils to borrow books. We tweet/'X' relevant book-related information. We have a library website that recommends books under different genres. We occasionally hold 'DEAR' [Drop Everything and Read] sessions and 'Keep the Heid and Read'. We host author visits.'

In interview, school library workers demonstrated further examples of good practice for promoting reading for pleasure with pupils:

- 'One of the most successful ones, I'm just about to do it again, is taking the kids out of the library. I've got an S1 boys group going to a Waterstones trip in [the nearest city]. That's 40 miles away from us ... I've got a minibus load of the boys that are less keen on reading. I've organised a tour; Waterstones will give us a tour around the shop. They point out books that they might like, and then they get time to browse.

They get to choose a book which will become library stock, but they get to read it first. They're really good because quite a few of the kids – I'm slightly shocked at that – but quite a few of the kids have never been to a Waterstones, have never been into a large bookshop. They do get quite excited about it because it is a different experience than the school library.'

They also emphasised the importance of a comfortable and inviting space for promoting reading for pleasure:

- 'The point of the display as well as it's – a lot of kids are actually overwhelmed coming in and just looking at shelves and rows of books, so if you can break it down thematically, if it's something that can pique their interest, then yeah, it certainly works for those who would not identify themselves as readers.'
- 'We've got bean bags, we've got soft chairs. We've got a large stock of teen fiction – because it is a school. Although we're a secondary school, I've got quite a big stock of picture books. We really do cater for all abilities. Some of our pupils go out and read at the nursery, I also find a lot of our pupils still enjoy picture books. I've made things as available as possible.

The space can always be bigger. I'm probably just over the size of two decent-sized classrooms. So, I can actually have around 60-odd [pupils in the library], if they're all sitting in their areas. When we have author visits, I can have 70–90 [pupils in the library]. We've got quite a good, flexible space.

There's always displays on – the pupils get involved in the displays. There's always books lying around. So I do as much as possible for reading for pleasure.'

One library worker spoke to demonstrable success in their role to promote reading for pleasure among pupils:

- 'I think working face-to-face with the learners is always an absolute joy. I think the best parts of the entire job are those moments when you actually see that you're having an impact. So, when a learner shyly admits that they've gone from saying, "Ohh I hate reading," to actually shyly admitting that they have been reading a manga series you recommended to them. Or, they have produced a piece of work based on a book they read. I think those are the best moments.'

However, in survey some library workers also highlighted that they were not always able to promote reading for pleasure as much as they'd like: 'before funding was cut our librarian had an open access policy, bought in authors, planned workshops'.

When asked more directly about the barriers they face to further supporting pupil reading, library workers were upfront – in an open comment box of unlimited length, six key themes emerged:

1. Time constraints (e.g. library hours / staff time)
2. Capacity constraints
3. Insufficient resources and/or stock
4. Issues with pupil behaviour
5. Restricted access
6. Insufficient staff training

These combined pressures have led to extremely concerning situations for some library workers:

- 'I buy the books from 2nd [hand] stores and sites, I cannot afford whole sets, sad when a pupil loves a book and I can't afford to buy more. I buy from my wage not a budget as there is no budget for the library.'

The idea that, against a backdrop of economic challenge and with wages of below the national average⁵⁶, some dedicated librarians are buying books to re-stock their school libraries from their own money because they have little or no budget for this purpose is extremely worrying.



Further, some school library workers reported that colleagues, including management, do not appreciate the value of libraries. When reflecting on the barriers faced in supporting pupil reading, one library worker noted:

- 'Lack of interest in books / reading from teaching staff; classes don't visit as much, preferring students to google everything on Chromebooks. SMT do not value the library service other than on paper (aspirations in SIP); they take little practical interest. I no longer have a library assistant. My library has just been reduced by 50% in size, and my budget looks to be vastly reduced – not sustainable.'

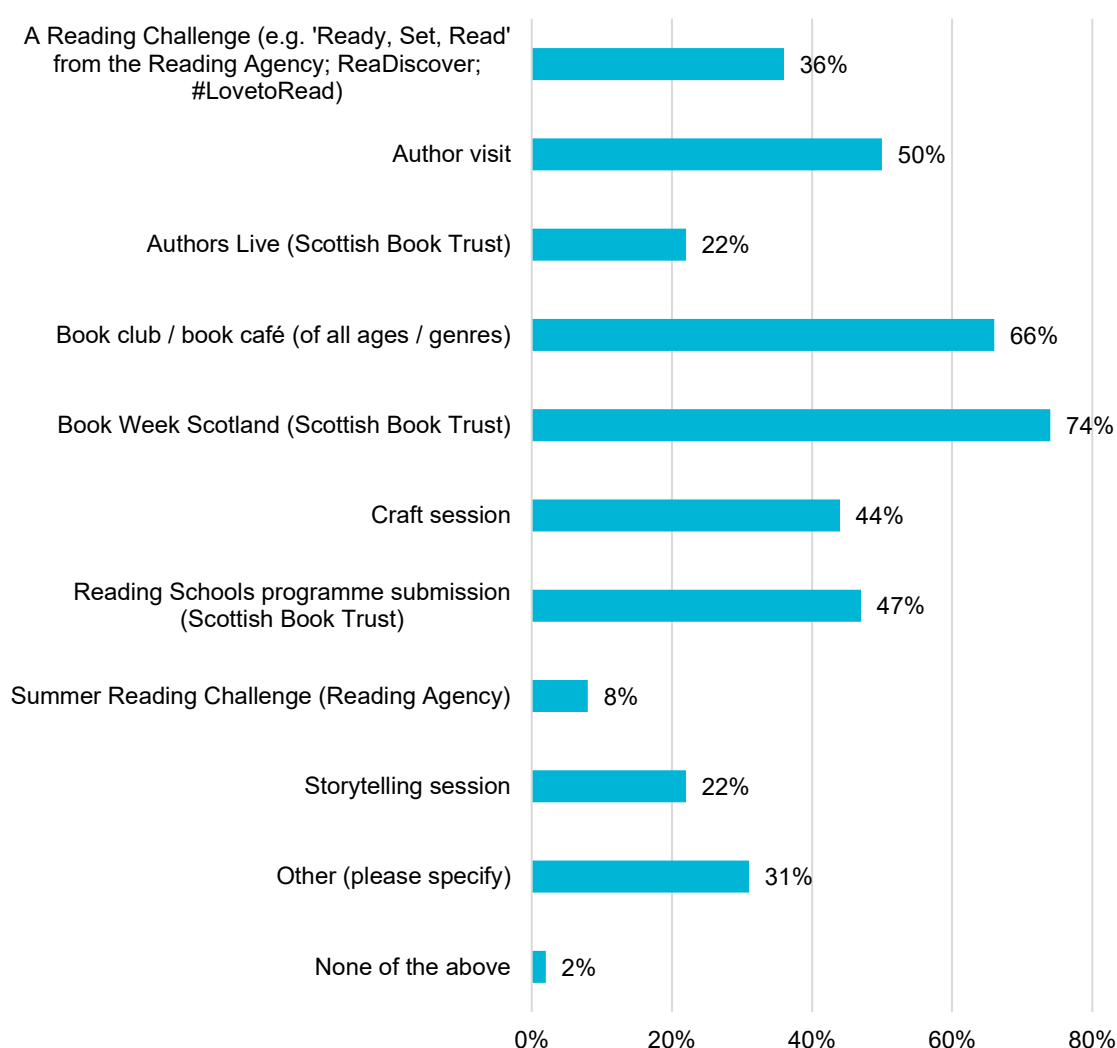
Reductions in library provision, both stock and budget, are overshadowed here by this individual's feeling that both their role and the services they offer are undervalued, and where the reality of reduced staffing, stock and funding is not

reflected in the SIP (School Improvement Plan). It is not possible to build a reading culture while simultaneously dismantling its resource.

The compounding effect of the teaching staff showing no interest in books or reading – and directing pupils to online sources for information, instead of utilising their library – indicates an overall undermining of the library service, perhaps in this case a managed decline.

Considering the barriers that library workers face in their schools, Scottish Book Trust sought to understand what, if any, activities their library was co-ordinating in the near future.

Is your library co-ordinating any of the following activities over the next 12 months? (Please check all that apply)
(121 respondents)



The most popular activity by far was Book Week Scotland (74% of respondents), an annual celebration of books and reading that takes place across the country in November, run by Scottish Book Trust and supported by Creative Scotland and the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC). Book Week Scotland, along with national events like World Book Day, are dates in a school calendar where there may be more leeway or leverage for staff to obtain buy-in from colleagues or management to support a focus on reading for pleasure.

Scottish Book Trust's Live Literature, a highly competitive programme that receives a large volume of applications from schools for events as part of Book Week Scotland (as well as throughout the year), is a further possible source of funding if school libraries wish to run events at that point in the year. Considering the lack of resources already reported, this may be a primary reason for its popularity.

In interview, library workers spoke to the importance of these types of activities:

- 'The most successful activity, that's quite an easy one, are definitely author visits. We've luckily had three here ... and we're going to get one at the smaller school.

It really enthuses the pupils. [The school are] quite selective of [the pupils] they send, but it's not the best readers, it's people that they think might be able to engage with a particular author. So, although it's kind of selected pupils, it is done with a view to enthusing another group that normally wouldn't be the full group that comes in libraries.

For instance, we've had an author, Neil Slorance, who's a graphic artist and he's been great ... [He] has enthused quite a large group of young men, young pupils, male pupils particularly, who like drawing etc. to maybe have another look at graphic novels and express themselves in reading for pleasure that way. So, I would say, yeah, author visits are great.'

Having established that secondary school libraries are facing multiple barriers – restricted access times, strains on capacity, inconsistent representation of qualified experience, and decreased funding – the survey asked library workers to reflect on how much time they spend offering reading recommendations or advice to pupils, to better understand how their school library caters to reading for pleasure.

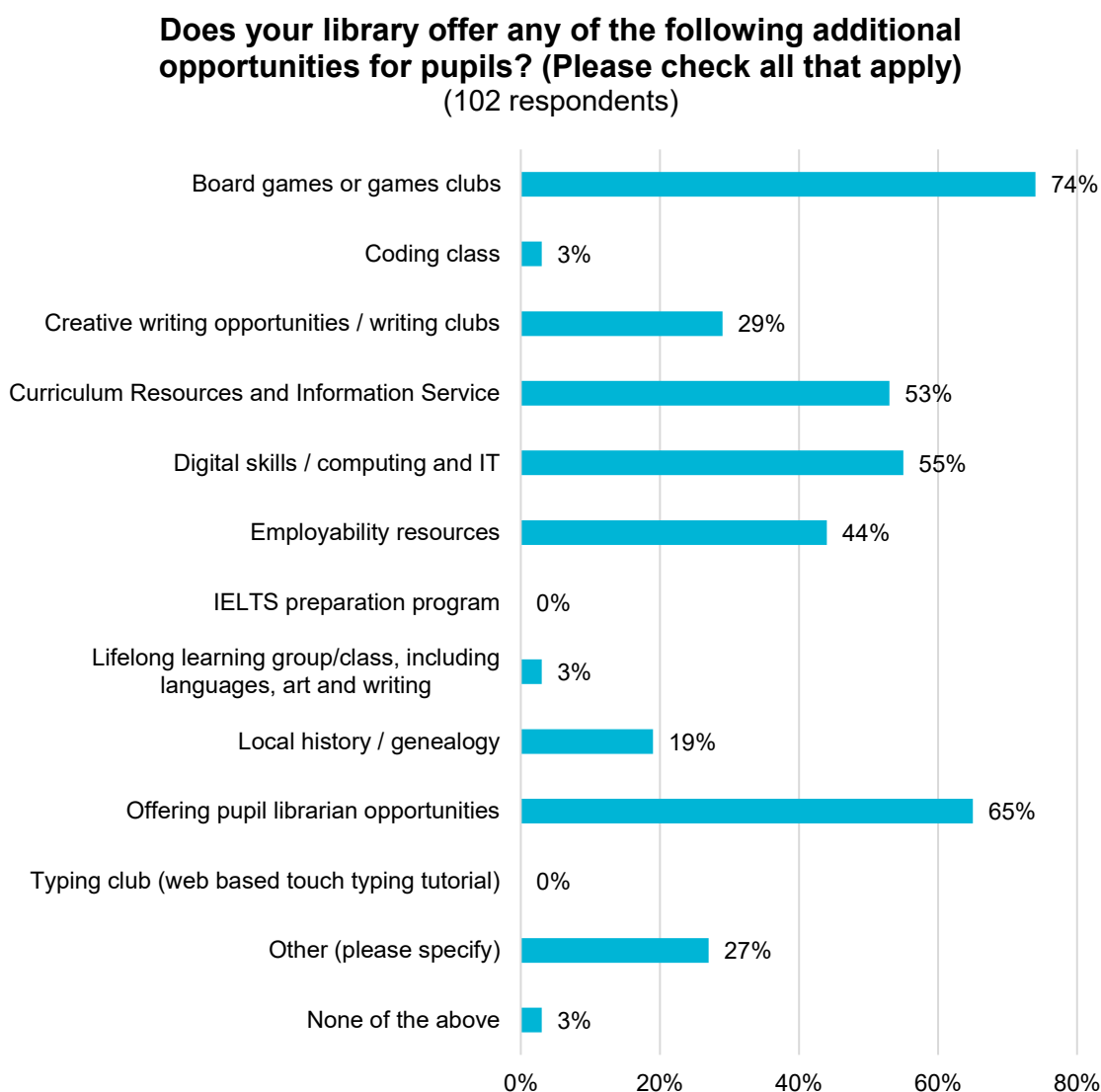
Out of 121 responses, the vast majority – well over half, at 3 out of 5 (63%) – selected 'daily / multiple times a day'. Nearly a quarter (23%) selected 'often / multiple times a week', with a further 11% 'occasionally / weekly', and 3% 'once in a while / monthly'. None chose the 'never' option.

Many library workers in interview indicated the efforts they go to in order to tailor and enhance pupil reading:

- 'I also provide personalised reading lists, and I always have done, because I don't believe one-size-fits-all. So, pupils fill out a questionnaire, they give it to me, I take about 20–25 minutes to go through it, I provide them a book bundle, plus a list with comments and the genre and the availability in the library, and they're supposed to pick two books from the bundle and take it away and keep the sheet and keep adding to it and they can bring that back to me. So, I save all that discourse for them to come back maybe three months' time to go, "right, you read that, you didn't like that," so, we can help narrow down exactly what they're looking for.'

Curriculum-based learning and the attainment gap

When asked what additional opportunities the school library offers to pupils, library workers provided mixed responses:



The vast majority of additional opportunities are either board games or games clubs (74%), pupil librarians (65%), digital skills / computing and IT (55%), or Curriculum Resources and Information Service (53%). None chose typing club or the IELTS preparation programme.

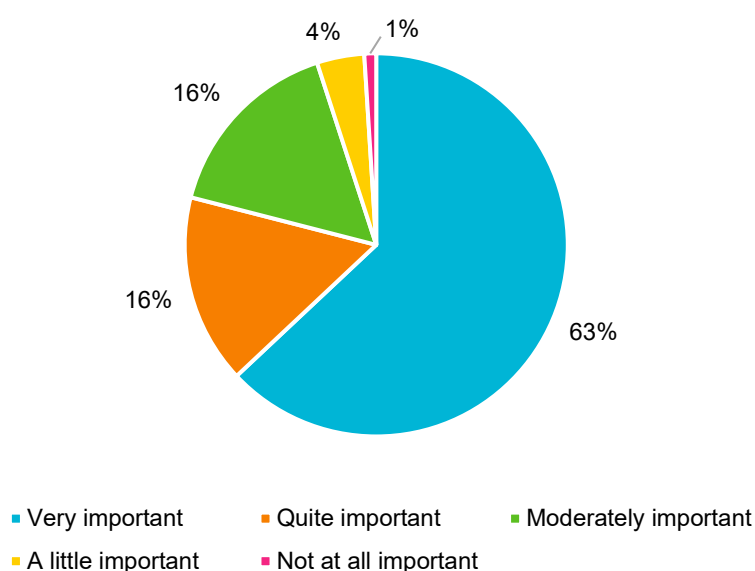
Of the 28 'other (please specify)' responses, five main opportunities emerged: craft clubs (32% of 'other'), pupil volunteering (21% of 'other'), games clubs (21% of 'other'), careers resources (18% of 'other') and homework club (14% of 'other').

However, library workers also noted barriers to offering additional opportunities to their pupils:

- 'Library is only open for 13 mins at lunchtime, whilst these activities are offered not many take them up.'

Comparing this data to the average rating in the following question – 'on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important), how important would you say the library is in providing additional opportunities to pupils in your school?' – there is a demonstrable need for secondary school libraries to be further resourced:

How important would you say the library is in providing additional opportunities to pupils in your school?
(102 respondents)



4 in 5 (79%) felt the library is 'quite' or 'very' important in providing additional opportunities to pupils in their school.

When asked for comment on their choice, one library worker noted the library should be the 'heart' of the school:

- 'We are involved with the peer reading groups in school and a regular dyslexia group. It is important that the library is a welcoming and safe space and pupils regard it as the 'heart' of the school. The space is well used before and after school and at break and lunch. The book group and Dungeons and Dragons are very well attended, and we would love to run more clubs but am conscious that we want to be available to all pupils too.'

Poverty-related attainment gap

Evidence from the Poverty Alliance shows that 'just over 2 in 5 young people living in the most deprived areas achieve one or more Higher when leaving school (43.5%) compared to almost 4 in 5 young people living in the least deprived areas (79.3%)'⁵⁷.

Moreover, in 2022/23, the gap in attendance rates between children living in the most and least deprived areas of Scotland was 6.7 percentage points. This compares with 4.7 percentage points in 2016/17⁵⁸.

School libraries are proven to support improved attainment in their pupils⁵⁹. SLIC's 2018 strategy *Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools* – written in partnership with COSLA and the Scottish Government – notes that:

'Professionally trained librarians and information experts drive improvement in all sectors of the education system and are central to reducing the attainment gap.'⁶⁰

The link between school library provision and reduction of the poverty-related attainment gap relies on understanding the benefits of reading for mental health and wellbeing, improved literacy, as well as the necessity of access to a safe space and to reliable, accurate information.

No one library can raise a child out of poverty or compensate for the barriers to learning they might face within and outwith their school – but all school libraries are crucial to offering a pupil the best chance of achieving those ends.



When asked what barriers (if any) their service faces to helping close the poverty-related attainment gap, library workers noted that changes or updates to their service to help combat poverty are impeded by inadequate funding and insufficient staffing:

- 'Up until January 2023 I worked there five days, and then the library funding was cut and I now only work two days within the school.'

If libraries are to help close the attainment gap, they need top-down support and a nuanced understanding of what they are designed to do. As one library worker put it:

- 'This is a massive question! In my opinion schools only play a very small part in this. Society needs help. ... As a school we actively promote 'zero cost to the school day'... with all of what we have in place to support families we are still finding there is a poverty-related attainment gap.'

In interview, library workers were direct about the benefits of their service to those pupils who are most at risk from the poverty-related attainment gap:

- 'With the children that I work with, they do not have books at home. Not only do they not have books at home, they do not have space to read. They do not have parents or carers who read, they do not have access to the promotion of joy of reading or even basic literature. So the school library is the link.

I'm really passionate about the job. I see it as such a crucial link to reading for pleasure. English classrooms, the English departments are great.

The library is that step between the English department and home. It's a more informal setting. They have choice. They have a voice, they can relax here. It's not a classroom, and it is the only space, the only link that the vast majority living in poverty will have for reading for pleasure.'

Some library workers also spoke to their efforts to ensure at-risk pupils have access to the library:

- 'I think we definitely do [help close the attainment gap]. We create a safe space for all, which is so important. My library is not for the academics, they have little study groups. Good pupils will succeed anywhere.

I'm open for an extra four hours a week, outside of class time: morning, break, lunch and after school. They have access to computers, to access some of

the homework on Bedrock, who do programmes. It means that if they don't have access at home, the library is open before school and after school. We're providing them with online access, we're providing them with access to books, we're providing access to revision material and study space. The exams are on at the moment. Every day I have about 4–5 people in that can't study at home for whatever reason. That's making it completely open access, anyone can use it at any time.'

There is also a consistent thread of concern about a lack of top-down support for the library – library workers are reporting how they 'beg, borrow and steal' to get more stock, how the funding for extracurricular activities has gone, how some go house-to-house to buy books from locals. As one shared in interview:

- 'The area that my school is in has a very low SIMD, so we don't really get hardly any PEF [Pupil Equity Funding] or anything like that, because we're in what appears to be a very rich place, but there is a lot of hidden poverty in our area. There's a lot of stigma around things like claiming free school meals, so we know that there are kids who are in more poverty than it would appear that they are.'

In the absence of statutory guidance for school libraries, there remains no legal requirement for school libraries to be appropriately stocked, staffed, resourced and managed.

An accessible, vibrant, safe, and supportive, well-resourced library will make an invaluable contribution to helping a school address the poverty-related attainment gap. It is therefore extremely worrying that the incidence of reduced library services or complete closure of libraries is higher in areas of multiple deprivation⁶¹, where these services are so essential.

Digital inclusion

Digital poverty is defined as 'the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to'⁶² and includes people without access to a laptop / smart phone / tablet, or affordable, reliable internet.

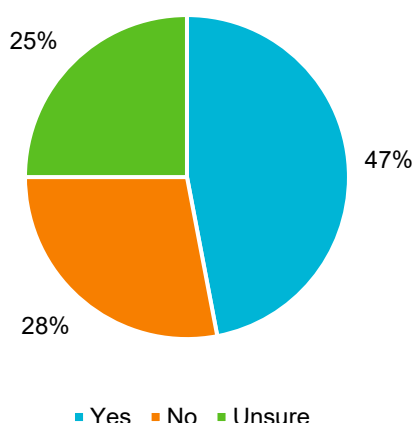
A 2023 report from the Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA) demonstrated that '20% of children in the UK lack access to necessary digital tools such as devices, broadband connectivity, and digital literacy skills'⁶³. That is one pupil in every five that currently faces digital poverty, in a world that is increasingly online.

Pupils who are unable to access digital resources via their school or their school library are facing a huge skills gap, particularly when considering further education, social mobility and the job market.

Conversely, as the DPA argues in their report, addressing digital poverty could 'lead to higher earnings, reduced unemployment, reduced social exclusion and generate cost savings for government'.

When asked whether or not their school or its pupils face digital poverty, secondary school library workers were split.

Does your school / its pupils face digital poverty?
(99 respondents)



Nearly half (47%) reported their school and/or its pupils face digital poverty. A further 28% disagreed, with a quarter (25%) 'unsure'.

Almost half of those who reflected further on this question reported that access to Wi-Fi or digital device access at home may be, or certainly is, an issue (45% of responses):

- 'Most pupils now have iPads supplied by the school. However there is still digital poverty at home such as not having internet access, not being able to afford electricity to run and charge devices. Also there is poor digital literacy in the earlier generations which is a knock-on effect of digital poverty. In [the local authority], the librarians are not being given iPads to help the pupils despite asking at a higher level.'
- 'There are many pupils who can't effectively interact with the online environment to find information. Pupils lack the skills to discern bias and the reliability of information sources.'

All pupils in [the local authority] are issued with a Chromebook. Many pupils come to school with devices uncharged or devices left / lost at home which becomes a barrier to learning.'

- 'Our school is situated in an area that suffers from high deprivation. The rising cost of living has also forced more families to prioritise basic needs such as food and power over having home Wi-Fi or mobile devices.'
- 'My PCs are six years out of date and slow. I was meant to get new PCs when the pandemic hit and the budget was used on testing kits. I won't get new PCs now until the new school is built in 2025 or [2026].'

While many local authorities have funded and provided Chromebooks or tablets to school pupils to try and tackle digital poverty, it's clear from these insights that consistent access to Wi-Fi, digital literacy, electricity or up-to-date resources remains an ongoing problem.

One such example of the impact of this disparity can be seen in this response:

- 'Many of our pupils don't have access to a PC / internet connection at home. Just today, I was talking to an S1 pupil who hadn't realised she could use the library PCs to do her homework. She doesn't have a computer at home and

had been worried about not getting her work done – the relief on her face was clear to see.'

Library workers shared in interview some of the more invisible aspects of digital poverty they observe in their pupils, and the significance of the library:

- 'We have a lot of pupils who have "phones" in their pockets, but there's no data, there's no internet connection, so yeah. For some of them, that's just joining in a game with others. They hear of their friends playing Minecraft at night and things, and they can't join in; here they can. Everybody, when I do the surveys, "what does the library mean to you?", they all say "a safe space", and "I can play with my mates."

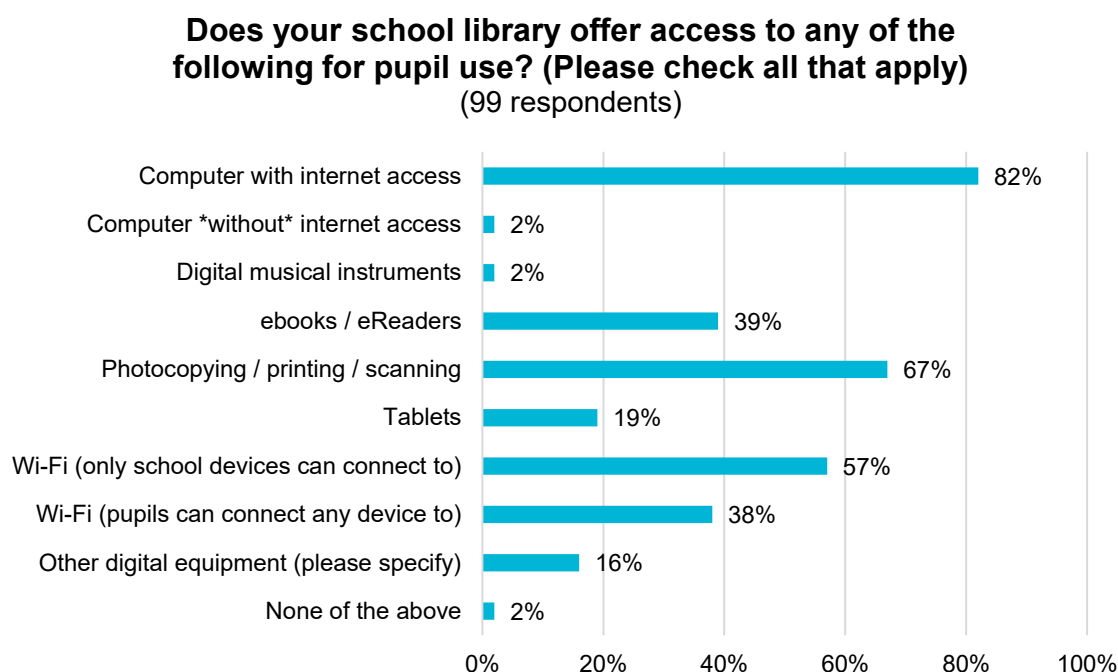
Some households may only have one IT thing that does have access to the internet or whatever ... the library's providing all of these social and academic opportunities to do that.'

Many areas of Scotland face issues with internet connection due to the digital inequality across many rural local authorities. As one library worker noted in interview:

- 'Because of our rurality, it's actually signal that's the worst, that can be a bigger [issue]. So a lot of [pupils] may have phones but they might not have 4G, because of where we live. So having Wi-Fi in school and in the library is really important. So, until very recently, the library was the only space that had Wi-Fi, because we're a community library, we had public library Wi-Fi in here, so it was the only space that kids could come and get access to free internet.'



These comments indicate the extent to which many secondary school pupils rely on their schools to provide them with digital access and devices. This reliance is further evidenced in responses to the question that follows:



Over 4 in 5 (82%) indicated that the school library offers computers with internet access to their pupils, and a further 3 in 5 (67%) reported they also offer photocopying / printing / scanning.

Over half, 57%, offer Wi-Fi that only school devices can connect to – a further 38% offer Wi-Fi that connects to any device.

In interview, one library worker shared the impact of insufficient provision on their school:

- 'ICT poverty, I think, affects most schools, even the most wealthy, because there's just never enough provision. So, we have a library stocked with 30 computers, that's a full class set. But obviously there's hundreds of classes happening at the same time, and so, the room gets booked all the time for ICT. I don't have any free periods. There's not just a space for the sixth years to come in and study, because the library's always being used by classes.

And there's just no other provision that the school has for a full class to come in and use computers. There [are] a few other classrooms, computing

classrooms that have 20 or 25 computers, but not a full class set for a full English class to come in, or a full history class to come in, to do research, which is essential in their education.

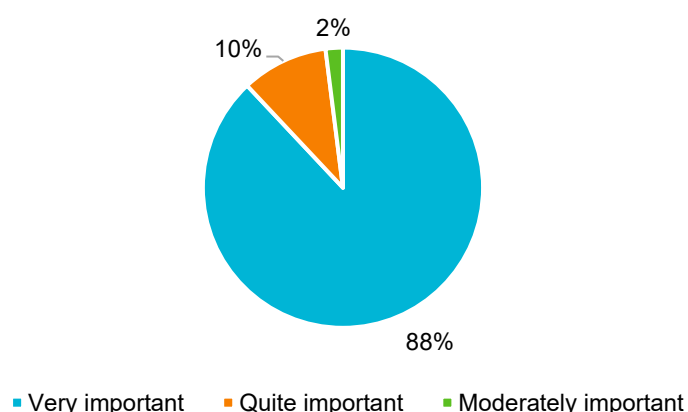
So that is a huge issue, there's just nothing that we're going to be able to do about it, because there's not another space, and there's not another 30 computers going to be pulled out in the next couple of years anyway, when budgets are really particularly tight.

I know a lot of councils are already cutting funding.'

Considering the prevalence and reliance on digital devices for education, Scottish Book Trust sought to further understand the value of digital provision in secondary schools, from the library workers' perspectives:

How important is it, in your opinion, that the library service supports digital access / inclusion for pupils?

(99 respondents)



Nearly all respondents (98%) felt it was 'very' or 'quite' important that the library service supports digital access / inclusion for pupils. None indicated that it was 'a little' or 'not at all' important.

In seeking to understand the role the library plays, in comparison to the whole school service, the survey prompted respondents to share individual examples of how their library supports digital access / inclusion for their pupils. This was an open question with a comment box of unlimited length attached.

Out of 81 responses, three primary themes emerged – the library offers digital devices or services (58%), the library promotes digital resources, e.g. ebooks, PressReader (38%), and the library workers supports pupils with digital access, information literacy and/or ASN (33%):

- 'Access to ebooks and audiobooks is crucial for many students – we provide this to every student.

All students need to be digitally literate in the modern world. Access not just to equipment (during and outside of school hours), but to classes that support digital and information literacy skills that are key for student development.'

- 'Education heavily relies on the use of ICT to access Teams and email, as well as research on the internet. Furthermore, pupils with additional support needs may require ICT to complete classwork and/or assessments, which can be accessed through library resources.

I have many pupils with ASN who benefit from library laptops; and have many, many pupils who can only access ICT or the internet using library resources. This is essential for the completion of senior coursework such as portfolios.'

However, a number of responses illustrated recent cuts and restrictions the school library has faced in recent years, for instance:

- 'I think it very important that the library supports digital access. Unfortunately when the library was moved to a much smaller space the opportunities to provide anything other than Wi-Fi access was removed. Thus making the library seem less important as somewhere to find information in the eyes of the students.'
- 'I used to have a suite of PCs for pupils to access for research, class research skills. However, these were taken all away from the library.'

Considering that only three of Scotland's 32 local authorities are reported as places with a low likelihood of digital exclusion (Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen)⁶⁴, the multiple reports here of school libraries with insufficient funding or resource, having their ICT provision removed, or signposting pupils to their local public library (which

may well be inaccessible due to location or limited opening hours), is a major concern.

Many secondary school pupils, particularly those in areas of deprivation (SIMD 1 and 2), rely on their school libraries to provide them with digital access and devices. Without that access, they face significant barriers to engaging with the curriculum, completing homework, developing their information and critical literacy, or preparing for future education or employment. In other words, if school libraries are stripped of digital resources, access and support, there will be a long-term and significant impact on their pupils' attainment and progress.

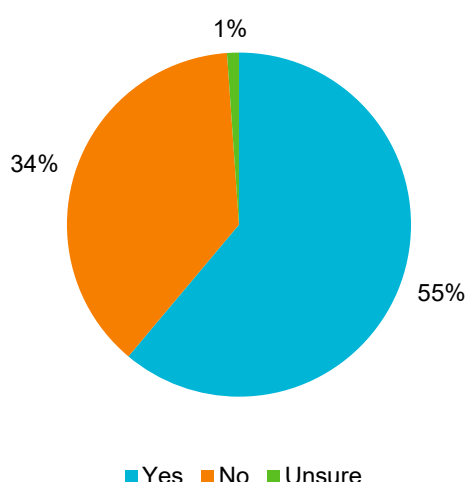
One of the greatest social challenges arising from digital poverty is reduced digital and media literacy. National Literacy Trust reported in 2018 that only 2% of children and young people in the UK had the skills they needed to tell if a news story is real or fake⁶⁵.

School libraries can help their communities to parse disinformation (deliberately false data) and misinformation (false data, usually not deliberate) and understand how to keep their personal data safe online. This is increasingly important in the context of the rapid development and widespread use of generative AI in schools and the wider world, and a reported lack of confidence from teaching staff regarding offering guidance to pupils around its use⁶⁶.

Scottish Book Trust asked secondary school library workers if their library currently supports pupils with media / digital literacy skills.

Does your library currently support pupils with media / digital literacy skills?

(99 respondents)



Over half (55%) reported that their library currently supports pupils with media / digital literacy skills. A further third (34%) reported that it does not. This split is better contextualised by the comments below.

Out of 74 comments, 37% reported that they run information literacy skills sessions or timetabled classes for their pupils.

- 'Digital literacy lessons including website evaluation. Provision of reliable websites for research projects. Demonstration of online digital resources available on NLS website. Use of online library catalogue.'

A number also reported their concern for the lack of media / information literacy support in their school, e.g.:

- 'When Chromebooks came in (seven years ago) using the library for research went out. All 'research' is now googling on Chromebooks. I no longer deliver information handling skills classes. I cannot afford subscriptions to online platforms that provide quality, age-specific resources.'
- 'Little dedicated librarian time and no prioritisation by departments.'

Library workers in interview shared details of their efforts to address digital and media illiteracy among their pupils:

- 'I always include a digital literacy lesson first year, second year and third year that tries to open their mind to just seeing different formats, knowing how to use a desktop computer, not a laptop or their phone, and also making the right choices when they're online. Not everything has to be a PowerPoint. Not everything has to be a Google search. At the moment, I'm doing a lot with my third years on AI and critical thinking, so that they can see, and they're still very gullible online, which frightens me. Even after my lessons, I'll have a wee quiz at the end, and so many still get it wrong, I think because they're so comfortable online, that they don't think that there's a predatory element.

Obviously, you're dealing with young people, so there's that element, but there's also things like data mining and stealing their identities, which they don't seem to recognise as a problem.'

Active citizenship

As the final theme of research, 'active citizenship' investigates the library's role in supporting pupils to be informed about their democratic rights and access, to be empowered to voice their concerns and decisions, and to engage with their local authority, all with the goal of shaping local and national services to their needs.

Research from SLIC⁶⁷ and CILIP⁶⁸ shows that libraries:

1. Reach a strongly diversified audience across all protected characteristics
2. Offer safe spaces for people to remain indefinitely, without expectation of payment
3. Provide access to trusted, accurate information which empowers communities to make informed decisions

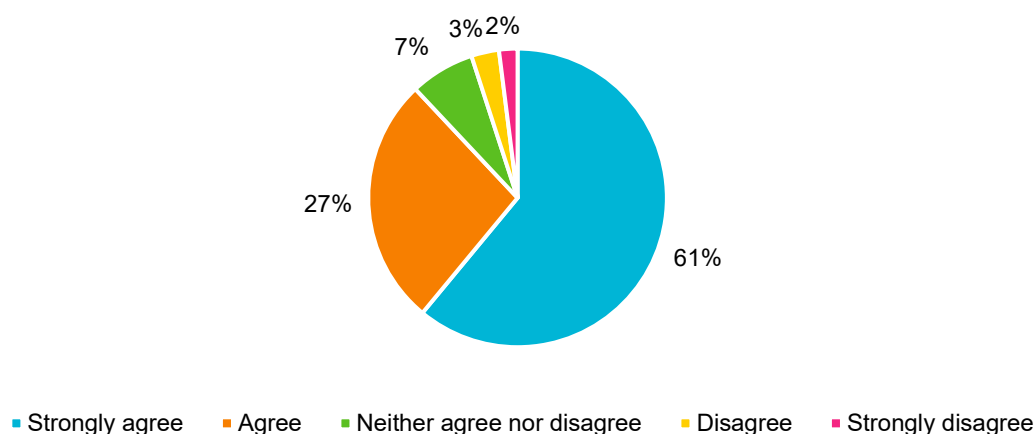
In these ways, libraries are a key conduit to active citizenship for their community. In the school librarian survey, Scottish Book Trust asked questions to gather further evidence on each of these points: (1) reaching a diverse audience, (2) safe spaces and (3) democratically engaged and informed communities.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is designed to support 'children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century'⁶⁹. School libraries are key to delivering on CfE's aspirations, in particular its focus on 'successful learners' and 'confident individuals' – not only because the library is a safe space, a support for literacy and personal development and a curated pathway to information, but also because the library is a central resource in school for the CfE's aims outwith subject silos.

Reaching a diverse audience

To what extent do you agree that your school library reaches a strongly diversified audience (whether across race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, class, language, religion, disability, age, education, etc.)?

(96 respondents)



4 out of 5 (88%) agreed that their school library reaches a strongly diversified audience. Just 5% disagreed, with a remaining 7% who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Out of 71 comments providing further information on the reasons for their choice, a handful of main themes emerged:

- The library provides a diverse collection (52% of responses), including examples of library workers who feel they need to be able to do more
- The library is open and inclusive of all pupils and staff (31% of responses)
- The library is a safe space; it hosts a diverse student body; and it puts up displays and resources for diverse groups e.g. LGBT or Black History Months (18% of responses, respectively)

Of those who selected disagree, comments suggest this may be largely due to restricted capacity.

In interview, school library workers shared the impact of a diverse and inclusive library on their pupils:

- 'Being a school librarian, you have to first of all make your stock inclusive. You have to be aware of social issues and you have to be aware of current issues as well. So it has to be a balanced stock, including absolutely everything that you can possibly include. As well as the stock, I make the library a welcoming space for particular groups. I have sections for equality and empowerment. I have an LGBTQ+ section, which has information, nonfiction, fiction, and is very beautifully decorated. And also I have an anti-racism section, which is updated quite frequently. It has also decoration round about that may be of interest to that group and we celebrate things like Eid, all sorts of cultural festivals. So I make sure that particularly marginalised groups do have specialised sections, they feel comfortable and can see themselves in a library space. So it goes right from the stock selection right to how you display it and make everyone welcome.'

Inclusion goes beyond benefits to the individual: interviews with library workers also demonstrated the advantages of a library in fostering connections between pupils and increasing their confidence:

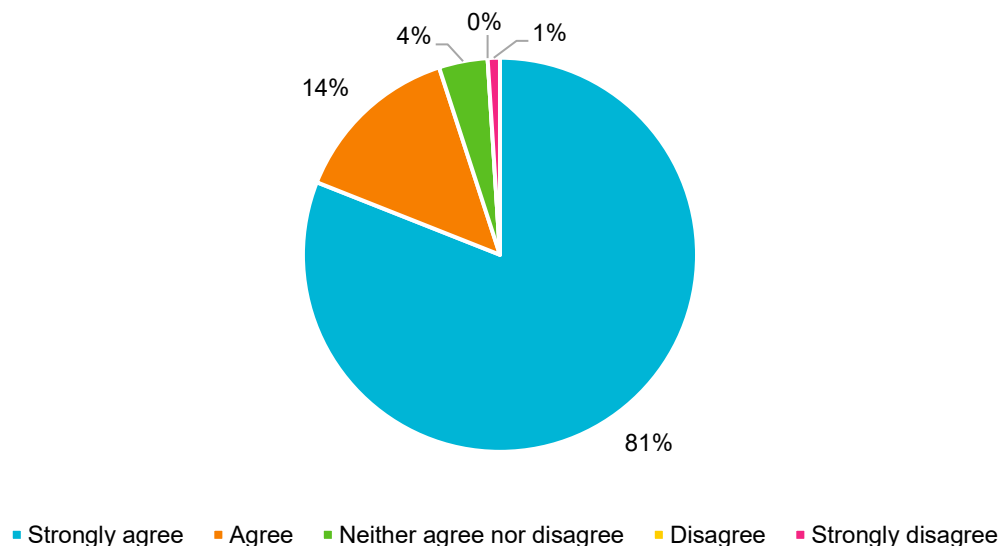
- 'I think it's often the kids that are more vulnerable, especially when they come in in S1. I think a lot of them gravitate to the library and myself and my library assistant, because they may be struggling to make friends, and we can give them activities to do and bring them together so that they can make friends with each other. And teach them new skills.'

So, my library assistant right now is, she's currently teaching one S1 girl to crochet, and I think that's just brilliant for her, because she's very socially anxious. So, getting to crochet keeps her busy, gives her something to fidget with when she's stressed. And the confidence of being able to create something. And it suits her mindset as well because it's very much about spotting patterns and numbers.'

Safe spaces

To what extent do you agree that your school library offers a safe space to your pupils?

(96 respondents)



Nearly all library workers (95%) agreed that their school library offers a safe space to their pupils.

Only 4% chose 'neither agree nor disagree', and only 1% – in effect, one respondent – chose 'strongly disagree'. That one respondent noted, 'it's essential but heartbreaking that it's only for half the time – others don't value the safe space'. They shared earlier in the survey that, 'if a library is closed for 50% of the time and for exams and meetings and parties then it can't be a whole school resource'.

Respondents were encouraged to share the reasons for their choice:

- 'Somewhere pupils can go when they are upset, worried or just want someone to talk to. Many pupils in our school are too anxious to take part in certain lessons, so they have library time built into their timetables to allow them somewhere quiet to work or use the computer. Some pupils have a habit of absconding if they become overwhelmed, but these pupils are taught that instead of leaving the building they can go to the library, and they will be welcomed there without judgement.'

- 'The library has always been the place that guidance teachers send pupils who are struggling at lunchtimes / breaks. Without this space some pupils might choose not to come to school.'
- 'Incredibly important – having a safe place to escape to when needed is crucial in keeping a pupil in school and helps them cope with the rest of their day. I have certain pupils with high anxiety levels and extreme trauma in their lives who can only manage to stay in school because they know they can come to the library when their stress levels are unmanageable.'
- 'It is extremely important. the library is not a classroom and there are no teachers, so our library is 'informal' with beanbags, etc. New S1 pupils sometimes find the challenge of going to a much bigger school frightening and they are often anxious. We are a welcoming space for these pupils. Often teachers will bring these pupils to the library for a quiet space. The pupils usually go to the beanbags. When we know of a pupil that is having problems we are there to support them by making them feel welcome and having conversations with them.'

A 'safe space' is not a luxury, a buzzword, or a superficial need – it is a crucial enabling factor for many pupils to be able to attend school, to gain access to study space they may not have at home, to avoid bullying or harassment, to find support for ASN or neurodiverse needs, to be treated as individuals.

In interview, school library workers spoke passionately about the importance of the library as a safe space:

- 'We have an area in the school called RAP, and it's 'Restorative Assist Programme' and it can be anything from school refusers to those who've been excluded, and they go there and have a restorative conversation.

Anyway, this person was a school refuser and elective mute, but a voracious reader.

At first, she wouldn't come anywhere near, but we would get suggestions on the broad areas of books she would like. We would send off a pile of half a dozen books and then they would come back with – from what they tried to

glean from her, that she'd enjoyed them all, and they said, "She's read them all, blah blah blah."

Anyway, we were asked if we could do something for her to acknowledge ... I mean, I think that was literally all she was doing, all she was engaging with, within education, and culminating, she's read *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her reading really has progressed.

So, we were approached by the pupil support assistant, and asked if we could do something for her to acknowledge this, so we made a certificate for her saying, 'well done. Congratulations. You're definitely well-read. You have borrowed (I think it was) over 30 books since August'. And then we gifted her a book as well to take away.

That's an example of someone who, although she didn't physically come to the library for various reasons, her anxiety wouldn't allow her to, we were able to go to her or take her resources to her.'

Moreover, the library fosters an environment of inclusive behaviour among students, ensuring the safe space is maintained:

- 'We have quite a strong LGBT group and glad to say that they use the library quite often. It's lovely to see because they know it's a space where nothing offensive's tolerated ... and [all the] the kids know that.'

One library worker also shared a moving story about the library as a safe space that nurtured an isolated student to find connection:

- 'I can actually think of a young person who came to the library every day in S1 and S2. I didn't really see that person engaging with other young people, I didn't really see them smiling even. They would come into the library, jacket on, hood on, just not engaging.'

When we set up the Dungeons and Dragons group, it was like a transformation for this young person, because that's his thing. I didn't know it was his thing before we did DND, but he would come along and it was like a completely different child. He was affable, he was smiling, he was laughing,

he was joking 'cause he was able to connect with his peers on this game, so 100%, it wouldn't have happened without the D&D club there.'

In a climate of increasing mental ill health⁷⁰ and school absence⁷¹ amongst young people, the library is in many cases the only point of support for pupils who are struggling and have nowhere else to go.

Democratically engaged and informed communities

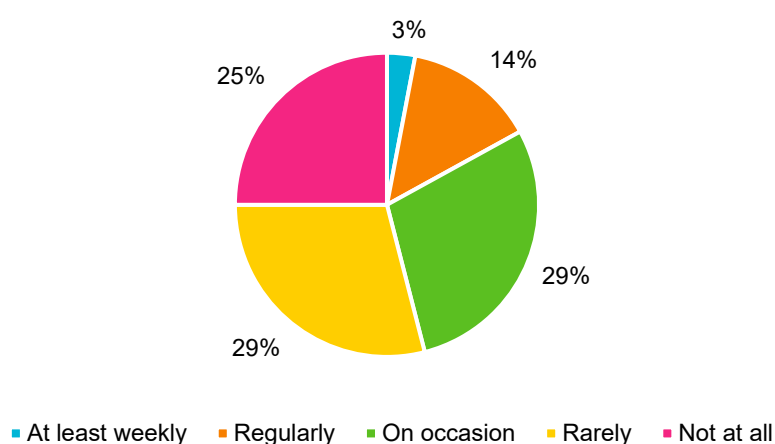
School libraries have a key role to play in supporting their pupils' access to information, critical literacy and democratic engagement^{72,73}.

The survey prompted respondents to share their thoughts on how important libraries are to building informed and democratically engaged pupils. Many commented on the stresses already mentioned above:

- 'I'm a librarian – a solo worker– there's only so much I can do without burning out. Senior school is focussed on the exam diet and there is no room in the junior years either. I can do lots of jobs really badly or focus on the things that really count. Nearly half of our pupils have reading ages below their actual age. Many have reading ages of eight or under. Without helping raise their literacy levels they will be unable to make head or tail of information sources.'
- 'At present, I feel like the majority of the time we are 'firefighting' and doing the minimum to keep libraries open and not always managing that. I do believe that libraries should be well placed to help the public access quality and trustworthy information online. School libraries should be helping to ensure people develop the skills to make their way through the deluge of information and be able to disregard unreliable sources. At present I believe we don't have capacity to do this in a consistent, widespread way.'
- 'I often hear from older pupils that they choose not to vote as they don't feel it will change their situation, therefore I hold conversations where I show them the worth of their voice and what they can do to change things.'

To round out the questions on active citizenship, the survey asked respondents to reflect how often their school library operates as a student hub for informed debate / decision-making.

How often does your school library operate as a student hub for informed debate / decision-making?
(96 respondents)



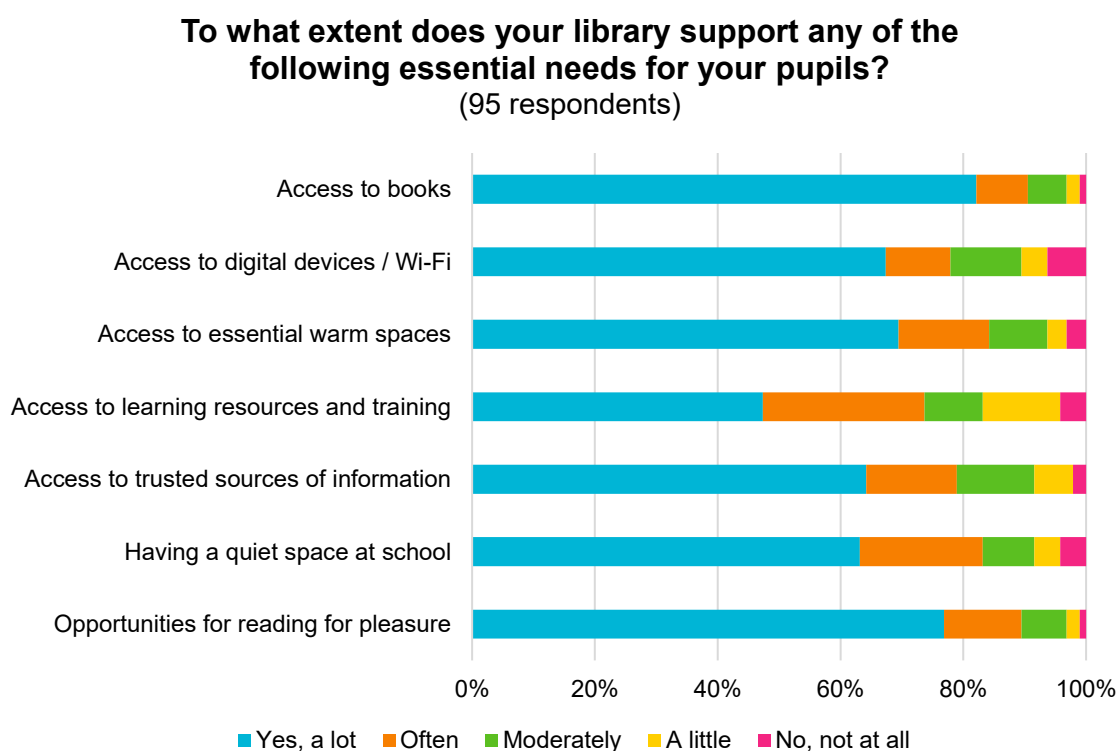
The overwhelming majority reported their library rarely or never operates as a hub for informed debate or decision-making (54%); over a quarter (29%) reported it happens 'on occasion'. Just 1 in 6 (17%) reported that it happens 'at least weekly' or 'regularly'.

Considering the varied and multiple barriers to the opening hours, staffing constraints, and pupil access reported earlier in these findings, the inconsistency in fostering informed debate or decision-making seems to follow as a natural consequence.

Final snapshot

A final two quantitative questions were asked of secondary school library workers at the end of the survey. These were both matrices, scaled from 1 (no, not at all) to 5 (yes, a lot).

The first question asked respondents to reflect on the extent to which their library supports seven essential needs: access to books; access to digital devices / Wi-Fi, access to essential warm spaces, access to learning resources and training, access to trusted sources of information, having a quiet space at school, and opportunities for reading for pleasure.



The overwhelming majority indicated their library supports access to books ('yes, a lot' – 82%), opportunities for reading for pleasure ('yes, a lot' – 77%), and access to essential warm spaces ('yes, a lot' – 69%).

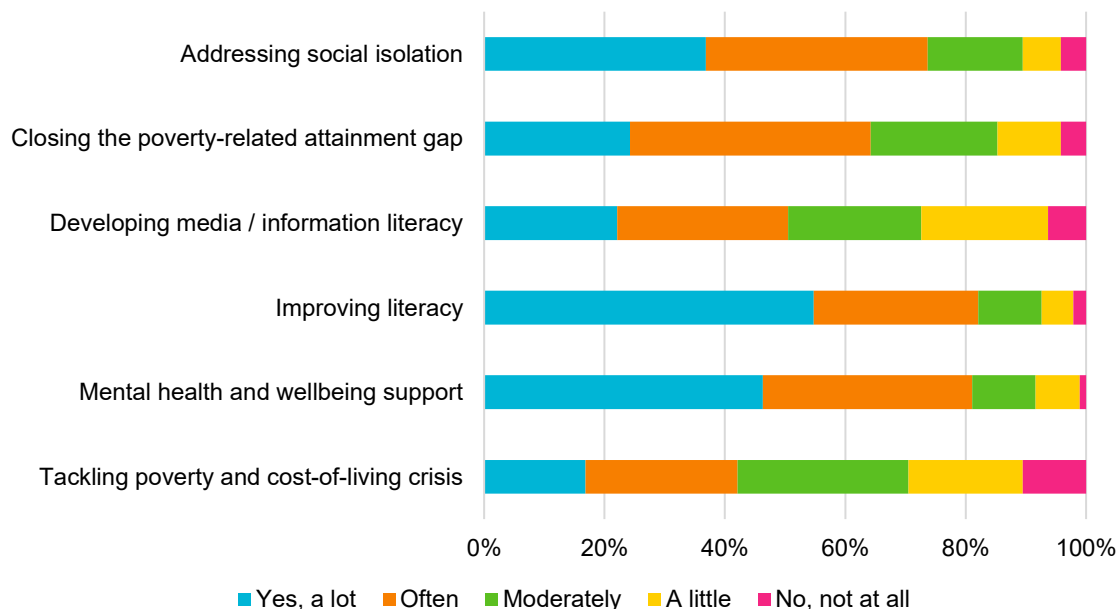
Having a quiet space in school was more moderately reflected ('yes, a lot' – 63%; 'often' – 20%) as was access to trusted sources of information ('yes, a lot' – 64%; 'often' – 15%), digital devices / Wi-Fi ('yes, a lot' – 67%; 'often' – 11%), or learning resources and training ('yes a lot' – 47%; 'often' – 26%; 'moderately' – 9%).

This snapshot reflects a reliance on the secondary school library as a place that provides books, opportunities to read, digital access, trusted sources of information and a quiet or warm space, but less so a service that offers learning resources or training.

It also indicates a stark departure from the responses that make up the rest of the survey: clearly, school libraries are supporting these essential needs where they can, but given the issues and restrictions outlined, it can only be to a fraction of their potential. They are doing their best to fulfil these needs despite the many barriers they face, demonstrating their commitment and value.

The last question asked respondents to reflect on the extent to which their library addresses the six following issues: addressing social isolation, closing the poverty-related attainment gap, developing media / information literacy, improving literacy, mental health and wellbeing support, and tackling poverty and cost-of-living crisis.

To what extent does your library address any of the following issues?
(95 respondents)



For 'developing media / information literacy', there is almost a perfect split – 50% reported their library addresses it 'often' (28%) or 'yes, a lot' (22%); the other half was separated between 'moderately' (22%), 'a little' (21%) or 'no, not at all' (6%).

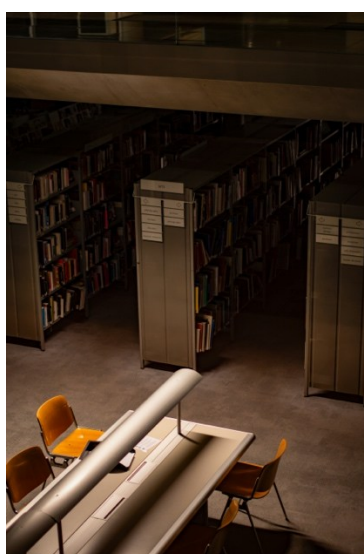
Similarly for 'tackling poverty and cost-of-living crisis', the findings are ambiguous: some agreed the library addresses it 'often' (25%) or 'yes, a lot' (17%). The largest percentage selected 'moderately' (28%), followed by 'a little' (19%), or 'no, not at all' (11%).

However, 3 in 5 agreed their library addresses 'closing the poverty-related attainment gap' ('yes, a lot', 24%; 'often', 40%), and nearly 3 in 4 agreed their school addresses social isolation ('yes, a lot' and 'often', both 37%).

4 in 5 agreed their library addresses 'improving literacy' ('yes, a lot' – 55%; 'often' – 27%) and 'mental health and wellbeing support' ('yes, a lot' – 46%; 'often' – 35%).

These findings illustrate that many secondary school libraries are primarily directing their increasingly limited resources towards literacy and mental health and wellbeing. Societal issues, such as tackling poverty, or closing the poverty-related attainment gap, are too big for a school library to address in isolation; however, libraries can make a huge contribution to the whole-school strategy to address these issues. School libraries are in many cases pupils' only point of access for holistic support, perhaps one reason why 'addressing social isolation' is strongest after 'improving literacy' and 'mental health and wellbeing support'.

The split response regarding media and information literacy is perhaps indicative of the digital inequalities across Scotland, as well as reports of school libraries being treated as 'an IT suite with books'.



In interview, one school library worker discussed what they felt are the deeper benefits of their library service:

- 'If I wasn't here or if anyone wasn't here in either school, it would be really sad. It's one of the few spaces in a school that's not about lessons. ...

It has to be the safe space and I don't think people realise what that means in a school ... this is a self-designated safe space. It's something that you have to recognise yourself in the space, you can see yourself in the books, you can identify with particular sections that are here.

For a child that might be the make or break thing in the school, especially if things are hard at home, especially if they're not engaging with lessons, especially if they're being bullied, which is very common, and especially if they identify as maybe one of the minority groups within the school, and find that really difficult.'

Conclusion

Research conducted by Dr Charlotte Webber for Scottish Book Trust in 2024 demonstrated the adaptability and resourcefulness of school librarians, and the benefits they offer across the curriculum, pupil wellbeing and long-term achievement:

'Libraries are champions of pupils' needs, supporting them to gain additional skills and develop their reading self-confidence. Librarians act on requests for specific information and support, often providing support which is not available elsewhere. Libraries are inclusive and supportive of vulnerable and marginalised pupils, providing tailored support for particular groups (e.g., EAL pupils, neurodivergent pupils) and offering a 'safe space' to both readers and non-readers. Libraries also help pupils become more autonomous and develop and explore their own identities. Librarians make reading relevant to pupils' lives, helping them explore a wide range of texts, linking reading to their personal preferences, broadening their worldview, and preparing them for the future.'⁷⁴

Through both in-depth interviews and research surveys, this report similarly demonstrates how much school library workers impact their pupils' academic and personal development.

School library workers are vital to promote **reading for pleasure** – as one shared in interview:

- 'I think the best parts [of the job] are when the young people are engaged in what you're doing, particularly if it's got to do with books and literature, and you see them kind of spark that interest in something that you've read. When I feel like I've got something right for a child, whether it's a choice of a book or explaining something the right way for them.'

Similarly, another school library worker shared the importance of their library service in addressing the **poverty-related attainment gap**:

- 'We know that reading for pleasure has bigger impacts on kids' outcomes than their socio-economic backgrounds. All of the data that we've had to put together to convince people to get in the library, we know how important it is,

and we know that a lot of our kids won't have access to books at home and we're the only port of call for that.'

When it comes to **digital inclusion**, pupils across Scotland are relying on their school libraries:

- 'Our academy library is well resourced with 25 PCs, a trolley of laptops and a printer. I try to ensure that pupils have access to IT before school, at interval, lunchtime and after school. We offer a Homework Club every lunchtime – this is supported by pupil library volunteers and pupil Digital Champions. Pupils have said that this is vital to support their learning as many don't have access to IT at home, resources are shared and internet connectivity can be problematic.'

As for **active citizenship**, school library workers are striving to develop pupil autonomy before they begin independent life:

- 'I think we can say, across the board, school libraries do a lot to empower. Even just learning how to send an email to somebody, all of a sudden they can start corresponding with teachers, not face-to-face, but in other ways, from home. That's all empowering, to do things themselves.'

Yet despite these ongoing and often invisible successes, many library workers also outlined the difficulty of expressing the scale and importance of their work:

- 'It's only once you've sat in a school library for probably about a month every day that you see how much impact it can have, on so many young people, in so many different ways. And because it's so fast-paced, and because we're so under resourced, it's really difficult for us to pause and capture that, because it's just not a priority.'

You're dealing with a kid in front of you. That's where you're focus and attention goes. And that happens all day, every day.'

Here it seems the significant demands of the library service are what can prevent library workers from proving their significance. In effect, they are often too busy doing the work – with little resource and increasing pressure – to stop and make time

to justify its importance. Moreover, library workers demonstrate a dedication to their responsibilities that can easily be overlooked:

- 'I think librarians take for granted what they do. Sometimes someone will see me do something or whatever, and they'll be like, "oh, that was amazing," and I'm like, "no, that's just the bread and butter. That's just what happens. That is our job. That is my job.'"

Many school library workers discussed the struggle they faced in trying to advocate for their service when financial restrictions continue to put pressure on their resource:

- 'I do look and think, "Well, everything that we do is amazing and great, but when a saving has to be made, it's very easy just to put a line through and say, "well, that's just a room of books".'

When asked what change they would like to see, library workers were near-unanimous:

- 'Put more value into school, libraries and staffing them with actual people who know what they're talking about and can do all the things that we've been doing.

It'll close the attainment gap, it'll improve literacy, it'll help health and well-being, tick all those boxes that everyone says that they care about so much, we can do it.'

School library workers are direct and clear in their account of the sector: they are passionate about their work, dedicated to their pupils, innovative and resourceful in their activity, and a stalwart correction to dis- and misinformation online. They are able to adapt to competing needs of the school curriculum, digital access, media literacy, stock demands and pastoral care.

They are also trying to function to the best of their ability while facing drastic funding cuts, a lack of buy-in from management or sector leaders, restrictions and demands on their dedicated library space, and very limited time.

The school library workers who are keeping their service going are often doing so alone, on a shoestring budget, in between competing priorities and with no guarantee that their effort or its results will be recognised.



With appropriate funding, secure staffing provision and more public and management support, school libraries can help to tackle some of the most pressing issues of our time, providing free resources and guidance to pupils living in poverty, a safe space for children and young people experiencing mental ill health, isolation or wellbeing challenges, an environment in which academic attainment can flourish, and support for the interlinked critical literacy and digital skills that are essential in today's media environment – in short, a level playing field allowing all children and young people to thrive. They are hugely valuable and must be supported.

Recommendations

These recommendations derive from evidence provided to Scottish Book Trust through this research project, The Value and Impact of Scotland's Public Libraries, and have been reviewed by key library stakeholders.

1. That **Scottish Government** enshrines a statutory requirement for secondary schools to operate a high-quality school library service, staffed by a qualified school librarian.
2. That **Scottish Government and local authorities** work with stakeholders to define the parameters of a high-quality school library service to ensure a uniform standard of provision and allow for self-evaluation and continuous improvement.
3. That **Scottish Government and local authorities** work together to empower secondary schools across Scotland with sufficient funding and resource to operate a high-quality school library service, staffed by a qualified school librarian.
4. That secondary **school management teams** appropriately train and support their librarians to deliver a high-quality school library service.

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