

CENTRAL LIBRARY.

The value and impact of Scotland's libraries

Preliminary findings from public librarian surveys

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Aims	3
Methods	3
Findings	4
Reading for pleasure	5
Learning opportunities	6
Digital inclusion	8
Active citizenship	9
Final snapshot	10
Conclusion	11
Main findings	12
Settings and librarian roles – all surveys	12
Local authority – public and school librarian surveys	12
Qualified librarians – public and school librarian surveys	14
Current role – public librarian survey	16
Current role – school librarian surveys	17
Public librarian survey findings	21
Threats to public library services	21
Reading for pleasure	24
Children and young people's reading for pleasure	29
Adults' reading for pleasure	33
Learning opportunities	38
Poverty-related attainment gap	44
Digital inclusion: digital poverty, access and support	53
Digital inclusion: digital and media literacy	64
Active citizenship	66
Final snapshot	81
Conclusion	84
References	87

Executive summary

Beginning in Libraries Week 2023, Scottish Book Trust is undertaking an independent research project 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).

Scotland's school libraries have no legal statutory duty for adequate library provision. Scotland's public libraries, though they do have a statutory duty for adequate library provision, have no enforced standard for what that must offer. As a result, across the public and school library sector, Scotland's communities face a lack of equitable access.

Aims

Scottish Book Trust works across every local authority in Scotland, striving to offer opportunities for all people to tell their stories; as such, we are uniquely positioned to bear witness.

This research intends to showcase how public and school libraries address inequality across many intersections of Scotland's communities, through the following thematic approaches:

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

Methods

This interim report details preliminary findings from the survey completed by public librarians between October 2023 and January 2024. (Further findings from school librarian surveys, interviews, library user feedback, and quantitative data gathering will be available with the final reporting in late 2024).

There was one survey each for public librarians, primary school librarians and secondary school librarians. The response rate was positive:

1. Public librarian survey – 315 responses total
2. Primary school librarian survey – 41 responses total
3. Secondary school librarian survey – 140 responses total

A note on the term 'librarian': in this report, this term includes both qualified librarians and library workers. Only 30% of respondents to the public librarian survey were qualified librarians, compared to just 14% of respondents to the primary school librarian survey and 70% to the secondary school librarian survey. As such, 'librarian' in this report indicates any library worker.

Findings

- 1 in 3 librarians reported that their **whole service** is at risk of reduction or losses.
- 82% – or 4 in 5 librarians – reported a **restriction on their funding and resources**.
- 1 in 3 librarians reported **loss of dedicated librarians** and other library staff.

In addition to ongoing cuts faced by the library sector, librarians reported a widespread lack of understanding from their local authorities about the social, long-term impact of their service.

In an environment of precarious funding and budget cuts, a cost-based approach fails to capture or quantify the value of libraries:

'Councils like to divide the headcount by the cost of running a library to tell us why they are cutting funding. The social impact of someone using the library, whether to read, broaden their knowledge, apply for jobs, study, and then contribute positively to the local economy/society is not quantifiable. This doesn't suit the easy headcount divided by cost approach. And this doesn't even take into consideration the positive impact on families, literacy, the positive mental health aspect libraries provide.'

To best evidence the positive social impact that libraries provide, which is not captured in quantitative cost-based approaches, Scottish Book Trust's research focused on four primary themes: reading for pleasure; learning opportunities; digital inclusion; and active citizenship.

Reading for pleasure

The most popular reading activities in libraries across Scotland reported by librarians were Bookbug sessions (97%), craft sessions (89%) and reading challenges (84%), followed closely by Book Week Scotland (79%), book club / cafés (73%) and author visits (67%).

Libraries reported promoting children and young people's reading for pleasure with essential provision for neurodiverse children and children with additional support needs, co-ordination with local schools and inspiring children and teens to read and be involved:

'Visibility within the community by encouraging group/class visits to the library and outreach work in schools and nurseries. Offering Chatterbook, storytime, Bookbug sessions. Attending school assemblies. Attending school in-service days to engage with teacher and promote the library service. Try to "up sell" with every interaction and offer reading recommendations and inspiration. Encourage a positive experience for children in the library. Visibility at community events like gala days.'

Regarding adult reading for pleasure, librarians indicated the importance of activities catering to diverse interests, inclusive provision and accessibility, and partnering with local community groups and organisations:

'We run five book groups for adults, have author events, hold a summer reading program for adults, design book displays, solicit customer recommendations and promote them. Host Open Book reading and creative writing sessions, offer an inviting space for people to sit and read.'

Librarians also reported the struggle of promoting adults' reading for pleasure – more than funding restrictions, this extended to short staffing and restricted opening hours,

lack of support for adult reading and difficulties reaching unengaged community members.

80% of respondents do not enforce late fines – half of these (49%) reported that late fines were suspended as an impact of the Covid pandemic and lockdowns.

Learning opportunities

The importance of the library in offering further learning opportunities to adults cannot be overstated.

A clear indication of the impact of this is best illustrated by the following librarian's response:

'It's very important but we don't do it as we don't have the resource. The people we see are the 30–40% of people who have zero digital skill, no email, no phone. Sometimes no ID, are unable to read. Let's say for example a reformed character who was released from prison. We are the first place that people come when they need help, possibly the only place in a landscape of shrinking services. When we are gone then these other agencies will need to foot the time bill and the mental health crisis we are averting. The prison guy? We helped him get an email. As he had an email, he was able to apply online for funding. He ate that weekend and had lecky. He comes to job club now. Often, we hear talk about pathways, directions, signposts etc. What are libraries if not a way station. A levelling-up factory that sends people in the positive direction.'

In the public librarian survey, respondents indicated their strong service in providing a vital utility to their communities:

- 2 out of 3 librarians (64%) reported their library service provides digital / ICT skills and devices
- 1 in 3 (34%) reported their library provides employability resources
- 1 in 4 (26%) reported working with partners or their local authority to provide further community learning resources

Despite this high-level delivery, librarians indicated the strains and restrictions on their service:

- 40% of those who commented on the importance of the library in providing further learning reported staff shortages, service cuts and/or funding for further learning for their service users being unavailable
- 1 in 4 (25%) of these comments reported that there was strong public demand for further education / learning opportunities, many of whom noted that 'more could be done'
- Nearly a quarter of those commenting (23%) reported that they provide further learning by signposting adults to relevant services – i.e. further learning that occurs outside the library service

Librarians also highlighted withdrawn or impacted services and lack of management-level understanding:

- 'All our adult classes gone since Covid and now restricted opening times.'
- 'The service has had budget cuts and vital staff have left so there is no appetite from middle management for offering any other service than the backward "a library is about books and nothing else".'

When asked how public libraries help (if at all) to **close the poverty-related attainment gap**, librarians overwhelmingly agreed and indicated six main metrics as to why the library helps:

1. It provides free access to all forms of books
2. Access to a safe, warm and free space
3. Access to a space of equity and respect
4. Access to digital resources and support
5. It is a vital resource for those who can't afford books / technology
6. Its librarians are knowledgeable and approachable

However, librarians also noted that they cannot be expected to close the gap alone; the tension between the high-level complexity of that goal alongside the continually

restricted funding offered to libraries results in an increasing pressure on librarians to deliver while their resources are stripped back.

In reflecting on the barriers to helping close the gap their library face, they identified the lack of adequate funding (35% of comments), lack of dedicated staff (23% of comments) and a need for greater public engagement or awareness of their services (30% of comments).

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. In the words of one librarian:

'Books don't solve the attainment gap. Libraries and people in them solve the attainment gap. We no longer have branches in all the towns and so lack the right amount of staff. We do not have enough books so that every child could take a book out and we could still have a service. The council itself briefs against our service portraying us as failing, we need people to come in but we don't advertise it well. We are not the right tool at this moment to help much with this. I would go as far as to say that we are not put into gear to solve this or have been set this as a task. Whoever is in charge of solving this is unaware of our input or our potential input. We experience every type of barrier imaginable it would seem.'

Digital inclusion

- 2 in 3 librarians (66%) reported that their community faces digital poverty
- Over half of those who reflected further on this question reported that people in their community don't have or can't afford Wi-Fi or digital devices at home (52%)
- Half of those providing specific individual examples of how their library supports digital access / inclusion within their community (49%) reported that they provide ad-hoc digital support in their day-to-day role

Libraries are bridging the divide posed by digital poverty across Scotland: 96% of librarians reported that their library offers access to Wi-Fi, 99% to computers with internet, 71% to ebooks / eReaders and 40% to courses in digital skills.

Most sobering from these reflections is the example provided by one librarian in a local authority with a large rural population:

'Wi-Fi is available outside the building and we often have people hanging around there when the library is closed. There is a space that is covered and I'm arranging to get a bench put there so at least they have a seat to access the Wi-Fi any time they need, rather than crouching on the concrete.'

Active citizenship

Research clearly shows that public libraries operate as anchor institutions¹ for communities – in other words, public libraries reach diverse audiences, empower individuals with trusted, accurate information, offer safe spaces, and promote democratically engaged and informed communities^{2,3}.

This report reinforces the fact that public libraries reach a diversified audience (86% of librarians agreed) and that they provide equal and free access to trusted information (87% of librarians agreed). Over 9 in 10 librarians agreed their library offers a safe space within their community.

However, this report indicates a clear rupture from the final metric of active citizenship – promoting democratically engaged and informed communities – as only 55% of librarians agreed. Their reasons for this departure are clear: **funding, staff cuts, and library closures pose a greater and urgent crisis.**

As one librarian made starkly clear when reflecting on whether or not libraries increase participation in the democratic process:

'Not with funding the way it is going. I would love for this to be true. However, the reality and practicalities of the situation – the crisis – of funding and underfunding, which we are facing, means that this is all but impossible to achieve and maintain. Simply look at the amount of staff cuts and now library closures our service is facing – and that is merely in my own area, rather than across Scotland and the rest of the UK!

Sadly, talk is cheap and 'visions and strategies' are all very well. But they require the investment and ring-fenced funding – for our children's futures, and their children's futures – that those making such decisions seem singularly unwilling, or else unable, to provide.'

Another respondent painted a bleak picture for the library sector's fate:

'Not so long ago I underwent an interview for the senior library assistant position I now hold and in one of my questions I was asked how do you see libraries in the future. My answer was "in the very near future libraries will not be libraries, they will be community hubs with books being a very small part of it".'

Final snapshot

To conclude the survey, there were two matrix questions on a scale of 1 (no, not at all) to 5 (yes, a lot).

- 93% of librarians agreed that libraries support **access to digital devices / Wi-Fi** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 89% agreed that libraries are essential **warm spaces** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 79% agreed that libraries support access to **trusted sources of information** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 80% agreed that libraries **address social isolation** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- Over half of librarians agreed that libraries support **access to learning resources** and **training** 'often' or 'a lot' (53%).
- 62% of librarians agreed that their library **addresses the poverty-related attainment gap** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 47% of librarians agreed that their library **develops media / information literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 71% of librarians agreed that their library provides a **quiet space** 'often' or 'a lot'.

- 72% agreed that their library **improves literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 69% agreed that their library addresses **mental health and wellbeing support** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 54% agreed that their library helps **tackle poverty and the cost-of-living crisis** 'often' or 'a lot'.

Conclusion

The workers who keep library spaces open, running and relevant to their community are bridging gaps for which their role has had to expand without sufficient support or resource.

Nowhere else in modern life, whether urban or rural, is there a public space where anyone can enter and remain without the expectation of payment or labour. Nowhere else is there a public space where people can access information, combat digital poverty, learn new skills, socialise with others, express themselves creatively and seek to self-improve, entirely for free. These institutions are vital for every person in Scotland, and they are endangered.

Main findings

Settings and librarian roles – all surveys

Local authority – public and school librarian surveys

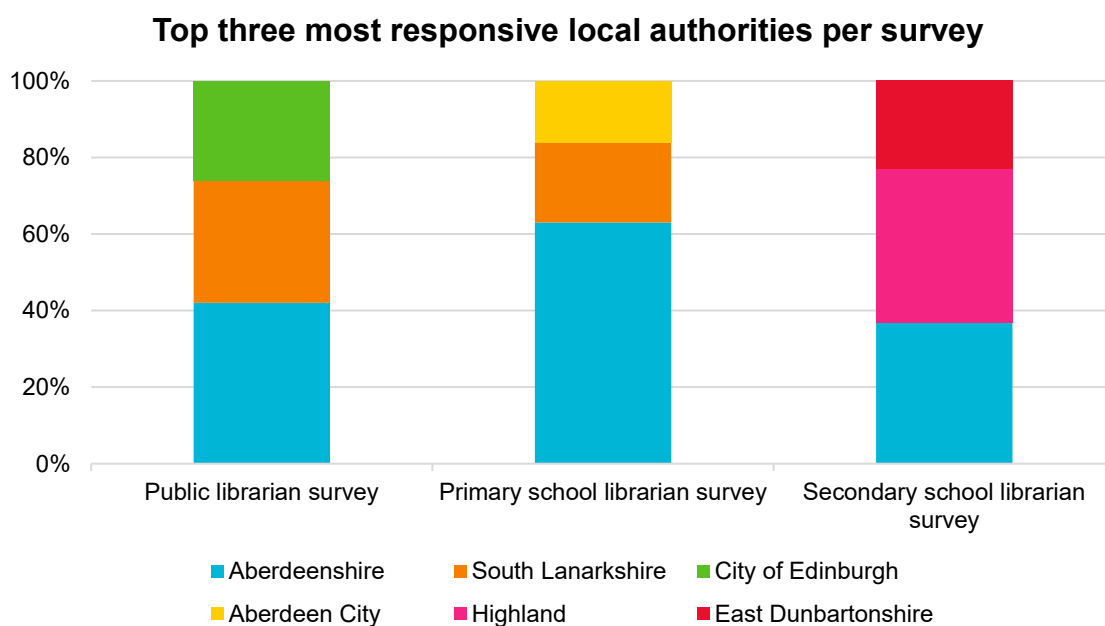
The first question on each survey asked respondents to identify their local authority.

All 32 local authorities in Scotland were represented in the public librarian survey, with the highest response rates from Aberdeenshire (14% of total responses), South Lanarkshire (10%) and City of Edinburgh (8%).

Just 12 local authorities in Scotland were represented in the primary school survey, with the highest response rates from Aberdeen City (37% of total responses), South Lanarkshire (12%) and Aberdeenshire (10%).

29 local authorities were represented in the secondary school survey (no responses obtained from Argyll and Bute, Clackmannanshire or Comhairle nan Eilean Siar). The highest response rates were from Highland (10% of total responses), Aberdeenshire (9%) and East Dunbartonshire (6%).

It is important to note here that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar suffered a cyberattack in November 2023⁴ that impacted on their ability to participate in the research.



It is important to note that each of the most responsive local authorities have faced budget cuts or indeed library closures over the last five years:

- In March 2023, Aberdeenshire opened a public consultation⁵ investigating future delivery in the library services (in response to a £66.8m budget gap⁶).
- In November 2023 South Lanarkshire Council proposed to 'reduce the school library service by approximately 50%'⁷ further compounded by South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture planning to close seven public libraries (as of 1 March 2024)⁸, with a £20.7m budget gap reported for 2024/25⁹.
- From January to April 2024, the City of Edinburgh Council launched a public consultation 'to provide the framework for service delivery and development for public and school libraries over the next five years'¹⁰. Again, this local authority faced a budget gap of £76m in 2023/24¹¹.
- As of December 2023 – following months of public outcry, petitions, legal action and public consultations – Aberdeen City Council has closed six public libraries to 'make savings' of £47m¹².
- Highland Council faced a £49.2m budget gap for 2023/24¹³. Though of less relevance to secondary school librarians, as of March 2023, Highland Council is reviewing the Service Delivery Contract in place with High Life Highland¹⁴, which provides the mobile library service to remote and under-resourced areas of the Highlands.
- In late 2018, East Dunbartonshire Council threatened the closure of three libraries¹⁵ but extra funding was approved in March 2019 to keep the three libraries open¹⁶. East Dunbartonshire faced a £20.6m budget gap for 2023/24¹⁷.

The fact that these local authorities had the highest response rates indicates that – despite constant threats to public services and potential for 'survey fatigue' among numerous public consultations – librarians across Scotland are passionately fighting and consistently advocating for their libraries. This research also indicates that many librarians are actively engaged in the current affairs of their local authorities.

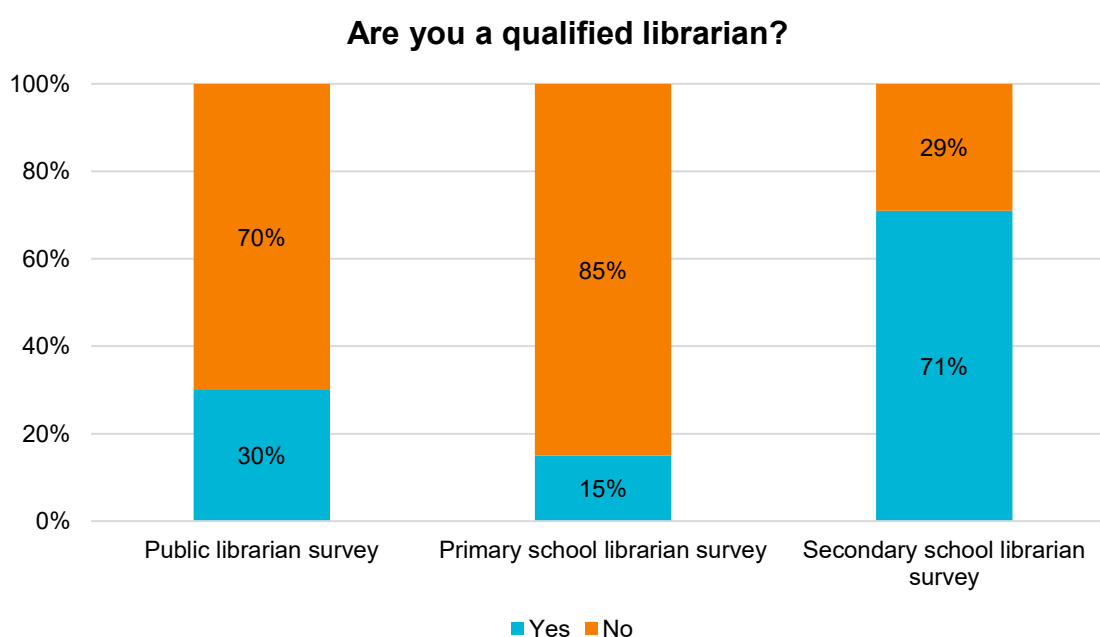
Regarding the lowest response rates, potential causes are likely one of many. All local authorities across Scotland are facing budget cuts, which put a greater stress on librarians, who may feel unable to speak – even anonymously – to questions about their service, for fear of backlash.

Findings from Great School Libraries' 2023 report¹⁸ illustrate that nearly a quarter of schools in Scotland do not have a school library space, and two-thirds of school libraries in Scotland have no library budget at all. Ten years of service reductions in Scotland have left some local authorities with no librarians and many with one librarian serving between two or more schools¹⁹.

In other words, the lower response rates could be indicative of the impact that library cuts and closures are already having on those communities.

Qualified librarians – public and school librarian surveys

Each survey included a definition for a 'qualified librarian': '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'. Following this definition, respondents were asked if they were qualified librarians, which drew very mixed results:



In public libraries, the overwhelming minority of qualified librarians may be a shock to see at first, but Freedom of Information requests submitted to each local authority have revealed that:

- Between 2015 and 2021, Scotland's librarian numbers were cut by at least 32% – this statistic does not include figures from Angus, Edinburgh or Argyll and Bute, as these local authorities did not provide any information for the requests²⁰.

This decrease is borne out by known cases of librarian posts being reconfigured into more generic roles: e.g. in 2021, Aberdeenshire Council attempted to, in the words of CILIPS, 'de-professionalise' librarians by removing the need for a formal qualification for more than 20 new library posts²¹. This reconfiguration is not exclusive to Aberdeenshire; survey responses detailed in this report indicate similar trends across all of Scotland.

In schools, there is an interesting disparity: in primary, only 15% of responding librarians were qualified, compared to 71% for secondary schools. This can be partly accounted for by the different volumes of responses (the primary school librarian survey obtained 41 responses; the secondary school librarian survey obtained 140).

Within these stats it is important to remember the cuts that school librarians have faced, even over the last year or two:

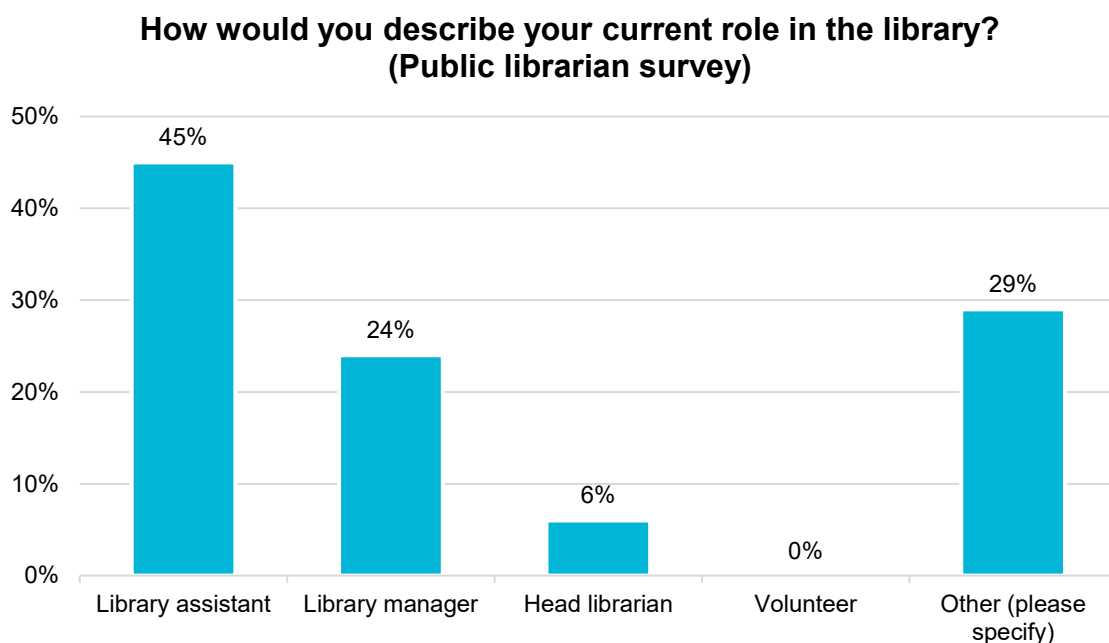
- In February 2023, North Lanarkshire Council confirmed their plan to scrap all 23 school library posts and remove library spaces in some schools²².
- As of March 2023, West Dunbartonshire Council proposed reducing school library provision in several secondary schools to three days per week, in addition to relocating and reviewing library services²³.
- As of May 2023, East Renfrewshire Council notified all school librarians that they would be offered voluntary redundancy; Inverclyde Council announced their intent to replace all their school librarians with Public Library Assistants; and East Dunbartonshire Council proposed cutting school librarians so that they provide a three-day rather than a five-day service²⁴.

- As of November 2023, South Lanarkshire Council has proposed to reduce the school library service by approximately 50%²⁵.

There was high engagement from many librarians facing acute uncertainty and threat to both their role and their service.

Current role – public librarian survey

The public librarian survey then sought further detail about the role the respondents played in their service. Almost half (45%) identified themselves as 'library assistants' – only 7% of these were also qualified librarians:



Out of the 29% who chose 'other (please specify)', the open-ended comments broke down as follows:

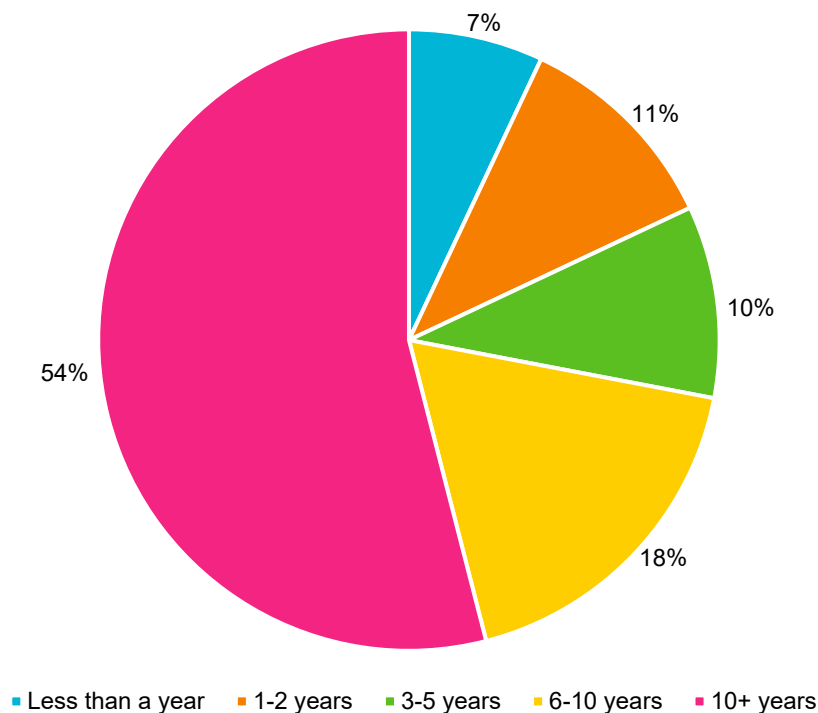
- 30 'librarians' or similar, including one that noted, 'Library/Librarian has been taken out of my title'
- 19 'assistants' or similar
- 16 'supervisors' or similar
- 8 'co-ordinators' or similar
- 5 in development / engagement
- 4 'library managers' or similar
- 4 library users (these may have strayed onto the wrong survey)
- 3 retired librarians
- 1 teacher

- 1 'do not want to be identified'

This range of roles indicates the breadth of experience feeding into this research; it also illustrates the lack of uniformity in librarian roles across local authorities.

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

**How long have you been working in the library sector?
(Public librarian survey)**

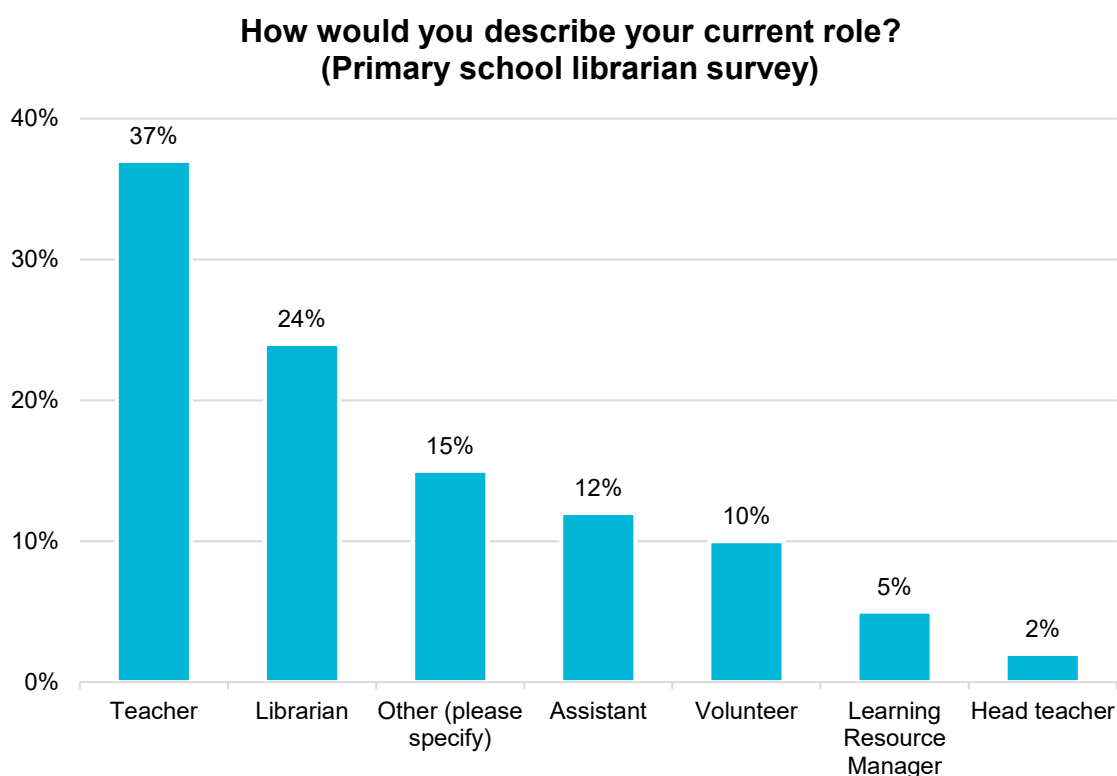


Scottish Book Trust is delighted to see such a robust response rate from highly experienced librarians, over half of whom have been working for 10+ years in the sector and can bring that cumulative lived experience and institutional memory into their reflections for this research project.

Current role – school librarian surveys

The primary and secondary school librarian surveys then sought further detail about the role the respondents played in their service. Results were much more split compared to the public librarian survey.

Primary schools



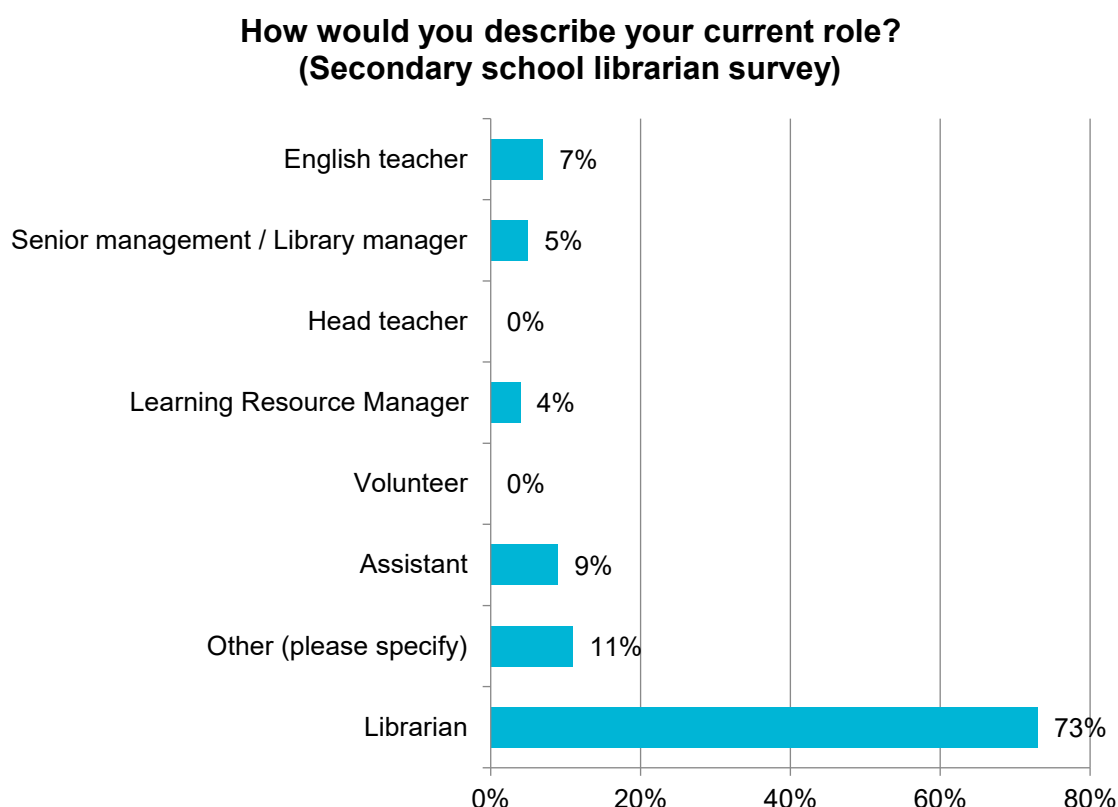
From those who chose 'other (please specify)' in the primary school librarian survey, there were three Depute / Depute Head Teachers, one parent, one pupil and one teacher.

The parent did not complete the survey, likely realising the survey was targeted at librarians.

The pupil did complete the survey, however, and their responses indicate their dedication to, and love of their library. In some open comment boxes at later points of the survey, they shared: 'Children need to read'; 'Our school is a school with ASN pupils as well as mainstream and every class gets a lesson at the library'.

15% of primary school librarian respondents were qualified librarians. When aligning this fact with the majority of their roles being split between 'teacher', 'librarian', 'assistant' and 'other', a clear picture emerges of how the library service runs in primary schools – libraries appear to be the main remit of teachers, deutes and assistants.

Secondary schools



Out of the 11% who chose 'other (please specify)' on the secondary school librarian survey, 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 71% of those (99 respondents) are qualified librarians. The split among other school roles is chiefly among library assistants, learning resource managers, and English teachers.

The high ratio of qualified librarians in the secondary school librarian survey is striking, particularly in comparison to the primary school and public librarian surveys.

One potential cause for this is illuminated by responses in the open-ended comments:

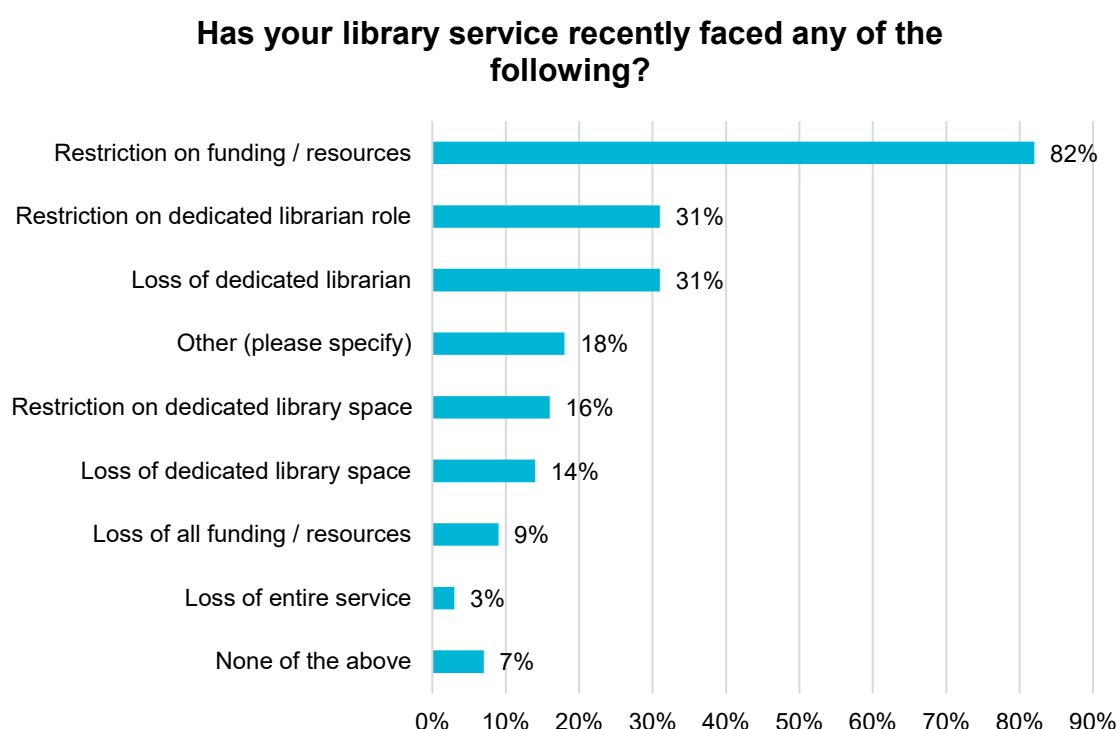
- 'Assist all of the school too.'
- 'Non-qualified staff being employed as School Librarians and being paid at the same rate as qualified school librarians.'
- 'Replacement brand new school build opening 2026 will not have a library space or physical books. Plan is to go fully digital and delete the school librarian post.'
- 'I'm split between two schools so each school no longer has a fulltime librarian.'
- '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.'

Public librarian survey findings

Threats to public library services

To gain a better picture of the current stresses on the library service, the public librarian survey led with a question asking librarians to indicate from a checklist what restrictions or losses their service has recently faced.

The responses were strongly illustrative of how the public library sector is being systemically under-resourced and depleted:



- 1 in 3 public librarians reported that their whole service is at risk of reduction or losses, e.g.:
 - 'Reduced hours, loss of volunteers, cut staff hours and jobs, recurring threats of closure.'
- 4 in 5 public librarians reported a restriction on their funding and resources, e.g.:
 - 'Deleting of books purchased with public money without any consultation whatsoever – of books relevant/in good condition, not only damaged books.'
 - 'Loss of space will be happening this year on a large scale.'

- 1 in 3 reported a restriction on a dedicated librarian role, or an outright loss of their dedicated librarian, e.g.:
 - 'As staff leave or retire posts are often reduced or given up completely to reduce costs.'

Out of the 18% (58 responses) selecting 'other (please specify)', the open-ended comments reported:

- Whole service at risk of reduction or losses (34% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Bookfund continually dropping, no roles described as library only focused, closest being local history librarian.'
 - 'Reduced hours, loss of volunteers, cut staff hours and jobs, recurring threats of closure.'
- Loss of staff (34% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Front-facing library staff have not been replaced when they leave.'
 - 'Loss of one Library Manager who was not being replaced.'
 - 'Currently no Library Head of service.'
 - 'Loss of library HQ staff (equivalent to 2.5 f/t posts).'
 - 'As staff leave or retire posts are often reduced or given up completely to reduce costs.'
- Reductions in hours (19% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Loss of Library Assistant hours.'
 - 'Constant understaffing.'
 - 'We have gone from being open six full days a week to 3.5 days.'
- Reduction in staff (12% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Restriction on staffing (half the previous number).'
 - 'Struggle to get vacant post approved for recruitment and restriction on covering vacancies and absences with relief staff.'

- Loss of dedicated library space (8% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Loss of space will be happening this year on a large scale.'
 - 'Currently trying to source alternative accommodation for a few libraries where we can share buildings with other services.'
 - 'Library integrated with customer advice service.'
- Restrictions on funding / resources (5% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Closure of 6 of 17 libraries and a freeze on recruitment.'
 - 'Deleting of books purchased with public money without any consultation whatsoever – of books relevant/in good condition, not only damaged books.'
- Reduction in facilities / equipment (5% of 'other' respondents)
- RACC-related closures (1% of 'other' respondents)
- Unsure (3% of 'other' respondents)

They also reported:

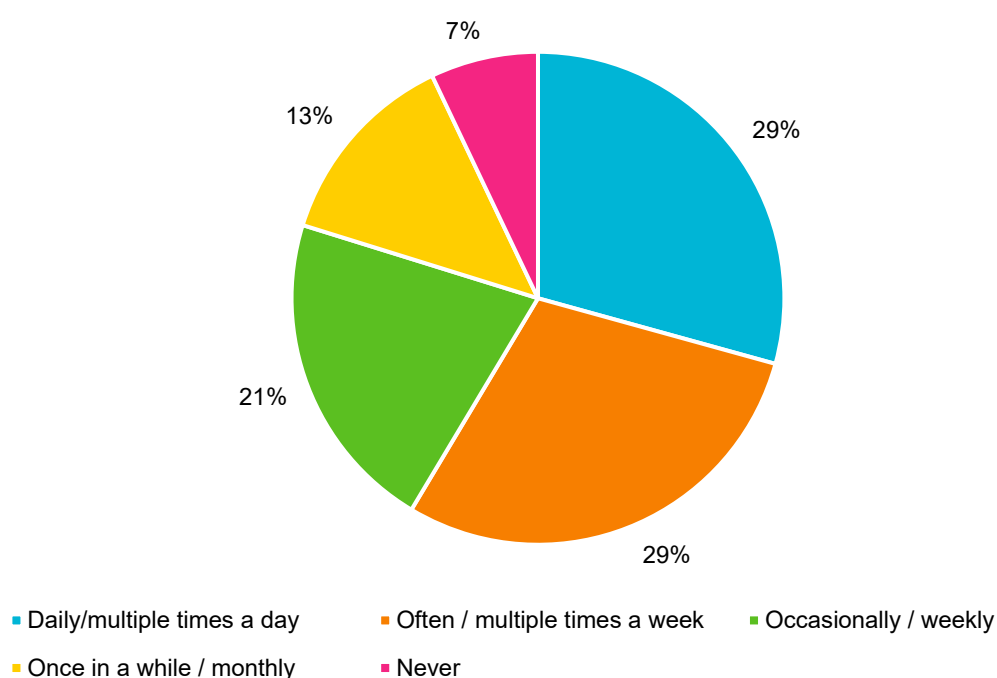
- Loss of opportunities for professional development (5% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'Loss of Professional Qualifications to practice.'
 - 'No requirement for a qualified librarian within public branches, only within academy libraries.'
- Negative impact of constant scrutiny on librarians' wellbeing (3% of 'other' respondents)
 - 'I think the constant scrutiny over our worth and value has a significant impact although not on anything physical / tangible.'

Reading for pleasure

Reading recommendations and activities

When asked how much time they spend offering reading recommendations or advice to people to help them extend and develop their reading, public librarians were split:

Frequency of offering reading recommendations



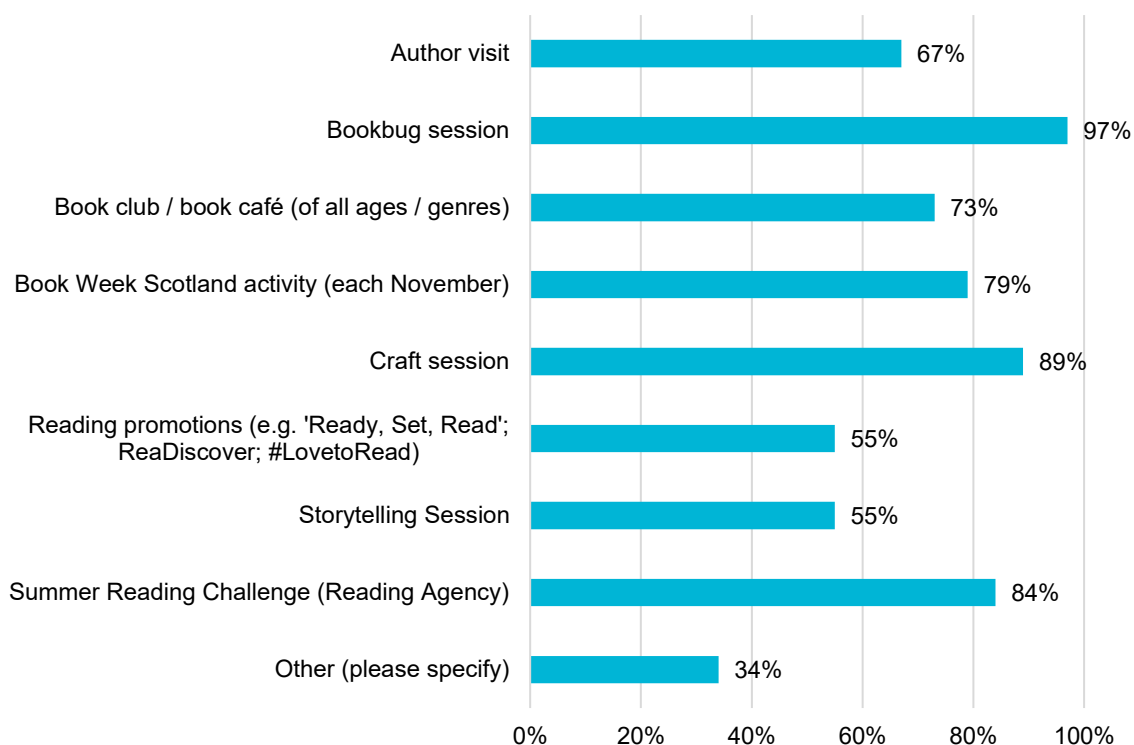
In the open-ended comments, they drew a clearer picture of the impediments to this work:

- 'The library service is becoming more and more about helping people access public services, providing support for internet use and dealing with technical issues than offering suggestions for reading.'
- 'I would like to do this more and while it's mostly children that I help with recommendations, I am aware that I don't know a lot of the kid's stock now apart from what frequently goes out, but even that is just a passing recognition.'
- 'Due to low staff numbers my only interaction with books is checking in / checking out and shelving / tidying. On the rare occasion I have time to assist readers, I am very much restricted as there will be a queue of people needing help or assistance, and maybe only two staff available. A lot of the library role

for me is signposting other services / looking up help and advice for those in need, finding numbers for housing / emergency assistance/mental health services / visa help / food banks etc., and bus pass help. I work part-time hours during very busy time periods of the day so this may be why my role doesn't every really involve any book recommendations or time to work with books. The other part of my role is to deliver Bookbug activities for children, where I can spend more time encouraging them to try new books, but again time is very limited due to staffing numbers and high attendance at events for children covered by one member of staff.'

- 'Time is the main barrier. Lack of sufficient staff makes it unable to give enough time to an individual reader.'
- 'Old stock is not being replaced because of budgetary restrictions, also limited amounts of new stock purchased. Staff not being replaced or recruited so existing staff have less time to focus on customers' individual needs.'
- 'I am only part time (18hrs a week) and my time at work is filled up with fixing staffing issues and dealing with building maintenance, risk assessments, HR rather than doing what I actually want to do which is working with the community. I would have time to develop the library and its programmes if I was full time but apparently there is no budget to make me full time so instead they give me a full-time work load and expectations and cram it into 18hrs.'
- 'Librarians in public library settings are very rarely frontline workers anymore. We are not based in one library anymore either.'
- 'Role wasn't public facing. I'm not convinced newer appointments to customer facing roles have the confidence to be able to recommend titles to readers. We struggled to get time to offer reader dev[elopment] training to team members. We've also seen appointments at supervisor level take place where no library knowledge was part of skill set of successful candidate, depleting pool of those who could offer training.'

Is your library co-ordinating any of the following activities over the next 12 months?



These figures indicate the breadth of work being undertaken by public libraries to encourage reading for pleasure.

The most popular reading activities in libraries across Scotland are clearly Bookbug sessions, craft sessions, and reading challenges, followed closely by Book Week Scotland activities, book clubs / cafés, and author visits.

From the respondents who chose 'other (please specify)', the majority of the open-ended comments reported:

- Other craft sessions (29% of 'other' respondents) e.g. 'Chess & Chat', 'Knitwits', 'Mindfulness Colouring', 'Art group', 'Lend and mend', 'gardening' and 'kids clubs for games/crafts'
- Minecraft, Lego or Dungeons and Dragons groups (28% of 'other' respondents)
- Reading or creative writing groups (24% of 'other' respondents)
- Games activities (19% of 'other' respondents)
- Memories / reminiscence groups (17% of 'other' respondents)

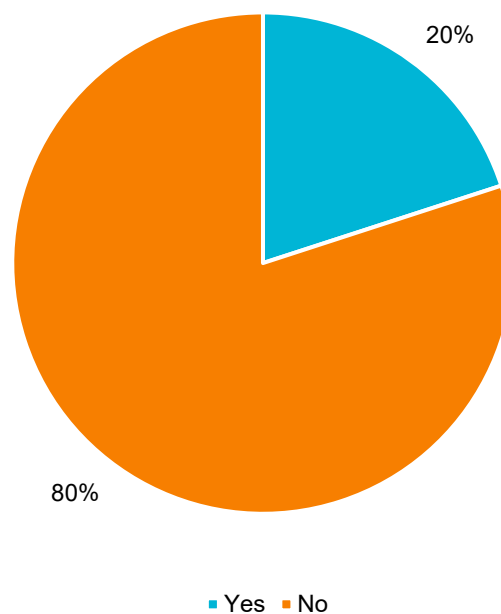
These open comments indicate the ways that group activities in the library encourage people to treat it as a community space, with a knock-on effect on their reading habits:

'Lego Club. Knit & Nattering groups, always take books when in.'

Late fines

It is important to understand if people face any financial barriers to their reading habits, so Scottish Book Trust asked public librarians to indicate if their library service enforced late fines on their users.

Does your library enforce late fines?



The vast majority of public libraries do not enforce late fines, and when asked how recently they stopped enforcing them, the data showed a clear picture:

- Over 1/3 of respondents' libraries stopped enforcing late fines in 2019
- Half (49%) of respondents reported late fines were suspended as an impact of the Covid pandemic and lockdowns

The additional comments illustrated how much our public librarians try to support and encourage their library users; this clearly has an impact on their communities, who want to look after the library in return:

- 'It's unofficial, Council Policy is we charge. The decent thing to do is not charge at this time so we don't. We are the last of the good guys and won't break faith with our communities.'
- 'In my old branch Whiteinch in Glasgow we didn't enforce fines and it increased issues and renewals. Most times people would pay the fines anyway and replace a damaged book.'
- 'After Covid, many customers like to leave a donation.'



Children and young people's reading for pleasure

Touchstone research has proven the phenomenal statistic that whether or not a child enjoys reading is more important to their educational success than their family background. In other words, reading for pleasure is the single most important indicator of a child's future success²⁶. Research proves it supports equity and wellbeing, impacts learners' attainment, and encourages critical thinking, creativity, empathy and resilience²⁷ – and reading for pleasure can tackle poverty²⁸.

When asked if, or how, the librarian or their library promotes children and young people's reading for pleasure, Scottish Book Trust received a wealth of responses that showcase all the extra activities that libraries across Scotland are running for their communities.

They illustrated their essential provision for children with additional support needs and neurodiverse children; co-ordination with local schools; workarounds for funding or staffing cuts; and inspiring children and teens to read and be involved.

Provision for children with additional support needs and neurodiverse children

Colourful creative themed book displays throughout the year, 'scavenger hunt' encouraging people to explore the library, engaging with children and parents daily. Awareness of barriers to reading e.g. dyslexia.'

- 'Regular class visits from local primary school. Visits from Autistic Base to borrow books and use library cards. Regular Bookbug sessions. P1 and P2 have requested Bookbug sessions which they all enjoy. Craft tables in school holidays to provide a safe place to bring children to play and look at books.'
- 'Really focused on children's reader development particularly on those children with challenges such as young carers, ASN, children from SIMD areas facing poverty and early years.'

Co-ordination with local schools

- 'Visibility within the community by encouraging group / class visits to the library and outreach work in schools and nurseries. Offering Chatterbook,

storytime, Bookbug sessions. Attending school assemblies. Attending school in-service days to engage with teacher and promote the library service. Try to "up sell" with every interaction and offer reading recommendations and inspiration. Encourage a positive experience for children in the library. Visibility at community events like gala days.'

- 'We welcome school visits, organise activities after school and in the holidays and welcome children and families enthusiastically. It's not the children we struggle to get in its the parents who are reluctant to enter the library or let their kids take books home.'

Workarounds for funding or staffing cuts

- 'We put posters up and have class visits. I would like to be able to run a children's book club (had this before staff cuts), and I would like it if the community centre could run more boisterous clubs so kids could enjoy quiet space in the libraries.'
- '- Regular Bookbug sessions for pre-school
- Welcoming children's room with eye-catching displays
- Other activities bring children into the library and hopefully they get books when they are here! e.g. lego table, puzzles and games, treasure hunt, craft activities, sensory room

We're not able to do enough due to time and lack of staff resources.'

Inspiring children and teens to read

- '14 dedicated staff who promote reading for pleasure through a range of activities – book clubs / school class visits / craft activities / Reading Schools etc.'
- 'We have Bookbug sessions once a week, and once a month at Innis Mhor (the old folks' home); have lots of books on face-out display. SRC [Summer

Reading Challenge] regularly has 80 children signing up and mostly finishing it.'

- 'This is a significant part of my job. I run reading groups, shadowing, facilitate class visits to borrow, promote new books across the school, have individual conversations with young people daily about what they're reading and what they could read next.'

Inspiring children and teens to get involved in their library

'We created a new Teenage Section in Central Library as we came out of the first Covid lockdown. It is adjacent to the children's library. The aim was to give teens from families visiting the library their own space while their younger siblings stayed in the children's centre. It's proved very popular.'

- 'Bookbug is well loved in the library. We also offer Chatterbooks sessions for 8–12 year olds and other craft activities at least weekly that (often but not always) use books as a source of inspiration. We always run Summer Reading Challenge activities during the summer and promote the scheme heavily: it does work even for those who don't finish it! And we work with local schools to arrange class visits wherever possible. On an ambient level we talk about books when we can with the many youngsters who use the library as a trusted space. We ask for help from young people in creating displays and take a real interest in what they like reading. Author visits and storytelling sessions are great when possible – an 'outsider' casts a magic spell. I always feel we could do more, though.'

Librarians also shared insights into the impact of restrictions and cuts to their services and how it is impacting the reading provision and activity in the library space.

One library assistant, who has been working in the sector for over ten years, noted the longer-term impacts of their library becoming integrated with a customer advice service:

'Due to the library being an integrated service only the basic library service are offered to library users – most of the staff have only had basic training and focus is really customer services... There are regular Bookbug sessions which are very popular. Membership of Summer Reading Challenge has fallen considerably since the integration of both services.'



Adults' reading for pleasure

Reading for pleasure is proven to have a greater and longer-lasting effect on adult literacy than formal teaching²⁹. In Scotland, over 1 in 4 adults might face challenges due to their low literacy skills³⁰. It's estimated that 'the average worker in the UK with very low literacy will earn approximately 7.1% less than if they had a basic level of literacy'³¹.

Studies show that adults who read 'for just 30 minutes a week are 20% more likely to report greater life satisfaction'³².

When asked if, or how, the librarian or their library promotes adult reading for pleasure, there was a similar depth of responses, demonstrating the frequency and diversity of activities libraries are offering.

There are some clear themes emerging from this feedback, including: activities catering to diverse interests; inclusive provision and accessibility; and partnering with local community groups and organisations.

Activities catering to diverse interests

- 'We run five book groups for adults, have author events, hold a summer reading program for adults, design book displays, solicit customer recommendations and promote them. Host Open Book reading and creative writing sessions, Offer an inviting space for people to sit and read.'
- 'We run several reading groups for adults, and regularly swap around our display spaces according to tastes throughout the year to encourage reading from those who might not otherwise be encouraged (i.e.: holiday reads in summer, seasonal reads at Halloween / Christmas-time).'

Many of our staff – if not all – are big readers themselves, and have gotten wider family members not otherwise interested into reading for pleasure (via physical books and digital ebooks through Borrowbox and Libby).'

- 'We have regular displays, with varying themes, and public consultation takes place, as often as we are able – usually at the desk, while issuing books, or else on the floor, while finding or suggesting books to borrowers. We also hold

themed events in the library, including: local history / heritage groups; structured book groups; writing and poetry festivals and workshops; events such as author readings, from local writers groups; and of course, Book Week.'

- 'There are more ways to 'read' than a book held in your hand. We promote our online and digital services which include newspapers and magazines, and ebooks and audiobooks. We have Large Print, spoken word, various genres and of course, non-fiction. We establish relationships and rapport with our customers and get to know them so that we can help them find the titles they love or new titles to try.

Some readers struggle to focus, so audio can be a good alternative, some get bogged down by books that are 'too heavy' so a wee palette cleanse can do the trick!!

We also have promotions, challenges, reading groups and quality displays.

We continually try to find ways to engage and offer excellent customer service to our patrons.'

Inclusive provision and accessibility

- 'We have a section of dyslexia-friendly and audiobooks plus Quick Reads. We regularly create themed displays and are always happy to make suggestions if someone needs encouragement.'
- 'We have three book groups for adults including audio and LGBT+ that run monthly. We try to offer a variety of author events if funding allows. We have one-off events, for example a speed read event or book café. We use social media to promote stock and engage with public through things like book-cover quizzes or first-line-of-fiction quizzes. Staff are passionate about reading and love to chat with customers about book choices and offer recommendations.'
- 'We have a Library Link group which supports people to use the library who have mobility difficulties. We will happily visit local groups outside the library if we can to promote the service and offer a first point of contact and we try to

attend school and community fairs where we will bring books along with us. Our library displays play an important role in promoting our stock and opening up conversations in the branch, and we try to programme events for adults too. We have recently had training to help us facilitate use of the online resources offered by the library; this is undoubtedly an attractive package for members and discussions of the relative merits of ebooks, audiobooks and so on are also interesting ways of embedding reading for pleasure in all of our lives.'

Partnering with local community groups and organisations

- 'We host book groups for adults at all five of our library branches and are regularly receiving new members. We communicate with other charities, organisations and resources within the community to merge our facilities and provide joint services for the community.

We host regular First Aid classes, Macmillan information sessions, Dementia Awareness Sessions, Inverclyde Carers Centre Sessions, SAMH sessions, Sewing Classes, Lend and Mend Hub, ICT Classes, Job Seekers Group, have a Community Garden and Community Fridge, we host a Tea Dance for those within Sheltered Housing and much more. All of our resources are free to access and use.

We also create promotional displays specifically aimed at adults to promote new books and try and encourage reading outwith your personal comfort zone.

We also listen to what the adults want from the library and have facilitated this when we can: Online Book Group as well as in-person book group, Sewing Classes and Sign Language Classes. We have regular reading challenges throughout the year for children and are looking into hosting one for adults too as a lot have expressed an interest.

We also provide a books-on-wheels service to those who are housebound but still love to read so we have their carefully-selected books delivered to their house for them each month.

Additionally we are one of the main sources for hearing aid batteries and walking stick ferrules within our community. We also provide free internet and PC access and technological help when need be.'



There was a larger proportion of responses that described the struggles of promoting adults' reading for pleasure. These issues went beyond funding restrictions (though certainly included them), and extended to short staffing / restricted opening hours, lack of support for adult reading, and difficulties reaching unengaged community members.

Short staffing / restricted opening hours

- 'We promote various different reading campaigns through the year. Most adults are no longer able to get to the library since the hours have been cut and I no longer open late, so I've been working with the local community

garden to get funding for a wee lending library in the garden where I can put donated / withdrawn books for people to be able to access.'

- 'I think there is an effort at local authority level (social media etc.) to engage adults however, the staff at our library are all Customer Services staff and are so busy with other council duties e.g. council tax, blue badges etc. that they have very little time to promote reading beyond engaging with the folk that do come in and trying to get them to join the library.'
- 'We don't have enough staff to do more activities than all the ones we already do.'
- 'Poorly. Without an adequate budget, it is not very innovative in promoting adult reading at all. The same local authors are trawled out for events.'

Lack of support for adult reading

- 'We need to improve on this, but [my service] is obsessed with children's events and activities and we get very little support for events that promote reading for pleasure for adults. There is always funding for craft supplies for children's events, but getting funding for adult events is very difficult and we are often met with barriers.'
- 'Sadly we do very little and would like to do more but restricted in when we can offer more. We have a monthly book club.'

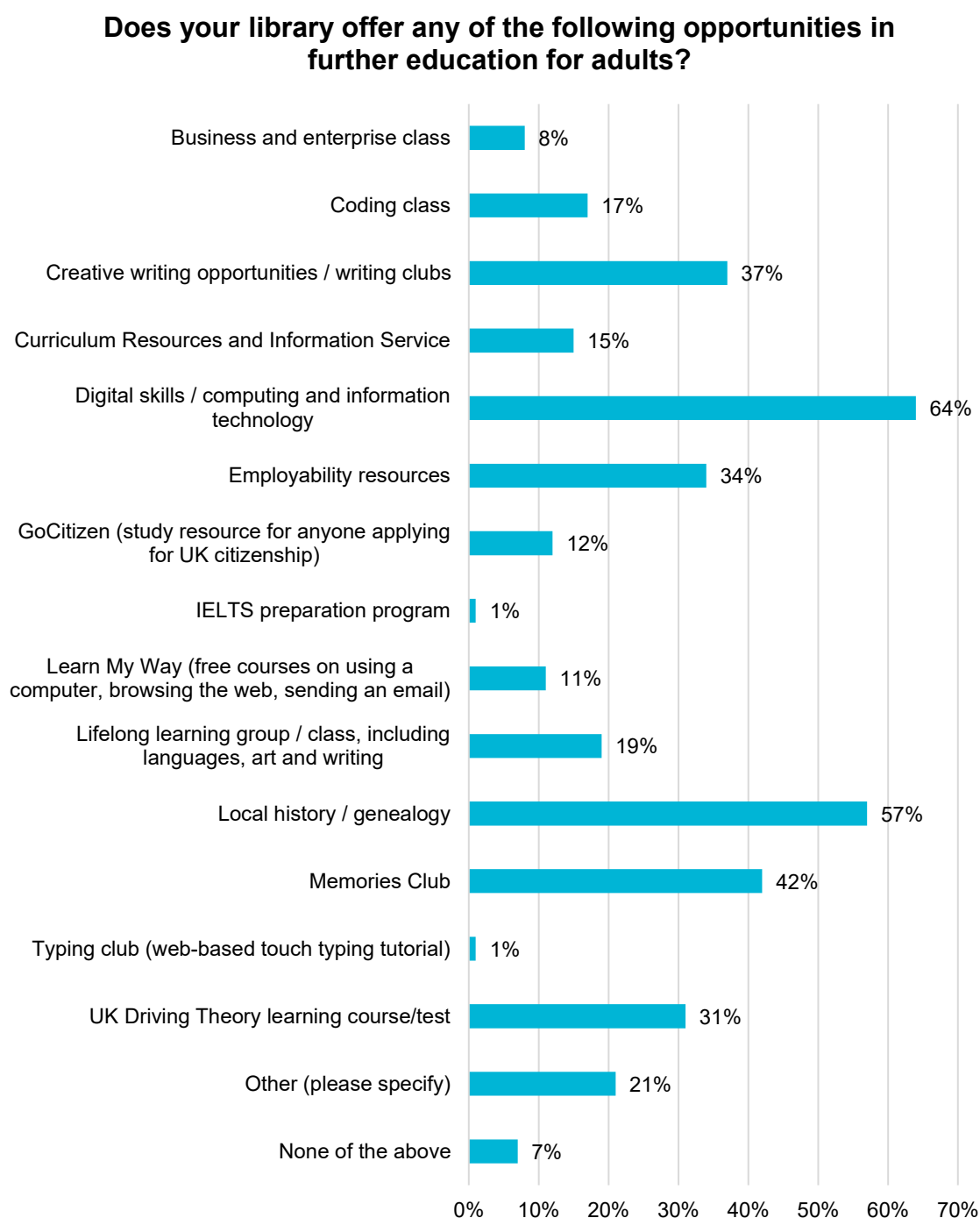
Difficulties reaching unengaged community members

- 'We have had a few promotions encouraging adults to read for their mental health etc. however we do feel that we are preaching to the choir as those that see these promotions are generally reading books already.'

Learning opportunities

In Scotland, over 1 in 4 adults might face challenges and constrained opportunities³³ in their day-to-day life due to their low literacy skills. The average worker in the UK with very low literacy will earn approximately 7.1% less than if they had a basic level of literacy³⁴.

Public librarians detailed the further learning opportunities on offer in their libraries:



By far the most popular learning opportunities were: digital skills / computing and information technology (64%); local history / genealogy (57%); Memories Club (42%); creative writing clubs (37%); and employability resources (34%).

Out of the 'other (please specify)' responses (43 total):

- 26% of 'other' respondents reported working with partners or their local authority to provide community learning resources
- 19% of 'other' respondents reported offering digital resources and IT access to their communities for further learning
- The same number reported offering craft or domestic skills groups, including crochet, gardening or food hygiene classes, as well as 'classes for adults in our new STEM hub including 3D printing, knitting and how to use a sewing machine'
- A further 16% of 'other' respondents reported opening their library space to external groups

The remaining open comments mentioned:

- Support for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) (14% of 'other' respondents)
- Promoting free learning opportunities within the library to other organisations / audiences (14% of 'other' respondents)
- IT skills training (12% of 'other' respondents)
- Offering employability resources (7% of 'other' respondents), wellbeing groups (5% of 'other' respondents), support for people living with dementia (2% of 'other' respondents), UK driving theory (2% of 'other' respondents), and free tea / coffee (2% of 'other' respondents)

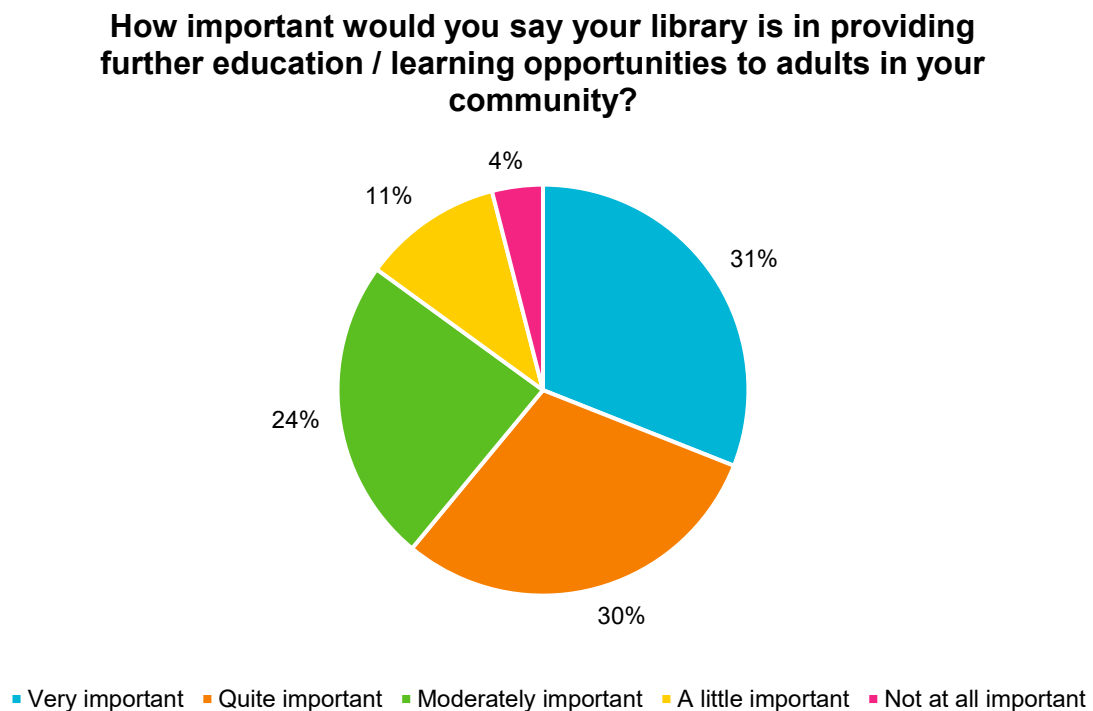
Withdrawn / impacted services were also featured in librarians' comments on learning opportunities:

- 'All our adult classes gone since Covid and now restricted opening times.'

- 'We could direct people to any of the above, if our PN [[People's Network](#)] network worked!'
- 'No longer delivered from this branch library.'

When asked to comment on how important the library is in providing further learning to adults, librarians' responses were mixed.

On a scale of 1 to 5, the overall average rating was 3.7, i.e., moderately to quite important:



Respondents were asked to comment on the reason behind their answer. Out of 150 comments, over 1/3 (35%) reported that their library service provides further learning to adults in their community by offering digital skills support or equipment (e.g. PCs, Wi-Fi).

When reflecting on the importance of the library in providing further learning:

- 21% of comments stressed the significance of the library as a safe space, with friendly staff that cater to users' access needs
- 41% of comments reported that they directly support further learning as part of their role

- 25% of comments reported that there was strong public demand for further education / learning opportunities, many of whom noted that 'more could be done'

Some qualitative examples of this positive impact include:

- 'We don't offer formal learning as we are careful not to duplicate what partners are doing, but the use of computers / internet including informal staff help and support is absolutely invaluable. Nowhere offers this on an ongoing daily, free-of-charge basis to anyone.'
- 'The cost-of-living crisis has widened the attainment gap. Libraries are important locations in communities where there are no barriers to learning.'
- 'I have always seen libraries as an essential means of child and adult education – whether borrowers realise it or not. I was always taught, "if you are reading, you are learning," and this is at the heart of everything I do, as a library manager, where child and adult education are involved or affected. Any and every resource we can provide, or host, which can benefit our borrowers, educationally, and which do not impact on our severely restricted (all but non-existent) budget, should be welcomed, embraced and advertised, so that the public know our library is the educational and cultural heart of our community, and therefore continue to value the essential service, which we provide.'

Despite the central role that public libraries are playing in being 'the educational and cultural heart of [the] community', there were a remarkable number of respondents who shared how their libraries' provision for further learning has been diminished, restricted or cut altogether:

- Nearly a quarter of comments (23%) reported that they provide further learning by signposting adults to relevant services – i.e. further learning occurs outside the library
- Nearly 1 in 10 comments (9%) reported that staff were insufficiently trained to provide further learning for their service users

Most notably, however, 2 in 5 comments (40%) reported staff shortages, service cuts and/or funding being unavailable for their service to provide further learning.

- 'We have seen a shift massively from simply providing reading material to the public to being a community hub for education and digital support. With many services scaling back and losing funding we have daily enquires about classes or support we can offer.'
- 'We don't offer anything. I would like to offer a creative writing club and digital skills but am not able to due to lack of staff.'
- 'We are a very small library, we only have two computers and not enough space for adult classes. The vast majority of our readers are very young or very old. If we had the time, space, resources, funding, training etc. then this might be different, but there is simply no money for getting anyone in or renting a larger space, no training for staff, and no resources for us to muddle through with it ourselves.'
- 'I think it's important that libraries offer a supportive space for all age groups to access free learning advice and opportunities, and become a real hub for accessible information, courses and offer lifelong learning. However, to offer such things, we would need an increase in staff for the library to be able to effectively manage all other aspects of the service, as well as training offered to staff and a discussion about pay increases if it were to be library staff that were running / teaching these courses.'
- 'As a small community library, facilities are paramount – particularly to older demographic who may not have computer skills; I think there is more that could be done to support the opportunities mentioned in Q11. We have been asked before and have to refer to Library HQ – which is not always an acceptable solution in "current economic climate".'

One respondent also noted a lack of management-level appreciation of the library's provision for further learning:

'The service has had budget cuts and vital staff have left so there is no appetite from middle management for offering any other service than the backward "a library is about books and nothing else".'

The importance of the library in offering further learning opportunities to adults cannot be overstated. A clear indication of the impact of this is best illustrated by the following librarian's response:

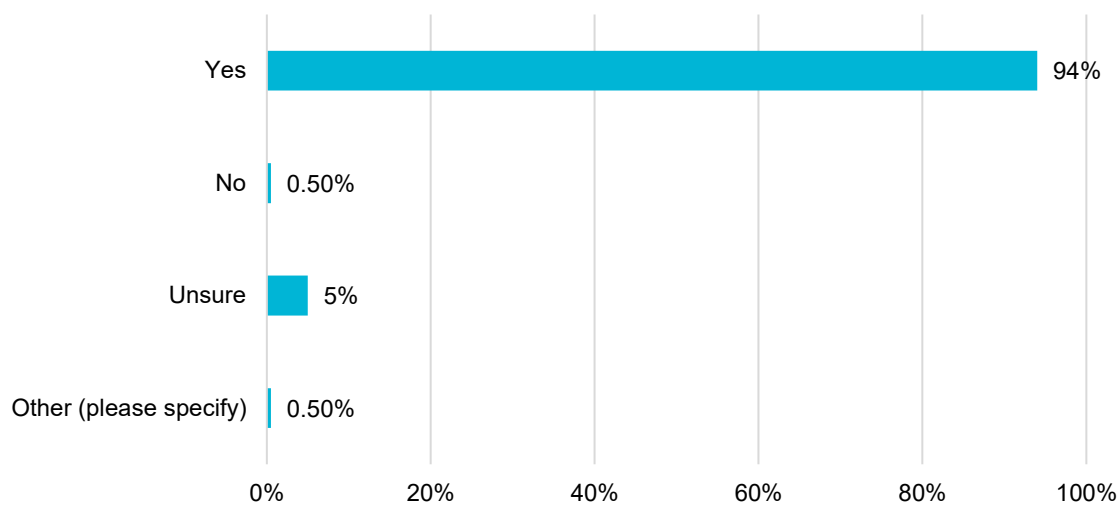
'It's very important but we don't do it as we don't have the resource. The people we see are the 30–40% of people who have zero digital skill, no email, no phone. Sometimes no ID, are unable to read. Let's say for example a reformed character who was released from prison. We are the first place that people come when they need help, possibly the only place in a landscape of shrinking services. When we are gone then these other agencies will need to foot the time bill and the mental health crisis we are averting. The prison guy? We helped him get an email. As he had an email, he was able to apply online for funding. He ate that weekend and had lecky. He comes to job club now. Often, we hear talk about pathways, directions, signposts etc. What are libraries if not a way station. A levelling-up factory that sends people in the positive direction.'

Poverty-related attainment gap

Libraries are key to closing the post-pandemic literacy gap, according to reporting by the National Literacy Trust: 'Libraries are uniquely placed to help narrow the post-pandemic literacy gap by giving free access to books, fostering a strong home learning environment and inspiring children to be readers'³⁵.

The survey asked librarians for their thoughts on this report:

The National Literacy Trust reported that public libraries 'must be vital partners in the mission to break the link between social background and literacy'. Do you agree?



Almost every response agreed that public libraries must be vital partners in the mission to break the link between social background and literacy.

Only one librarian selected 'other (please specify)', in which they stated:

'It should be, but we can't inspire much since we are just "cutting fires" (staff shortage).'

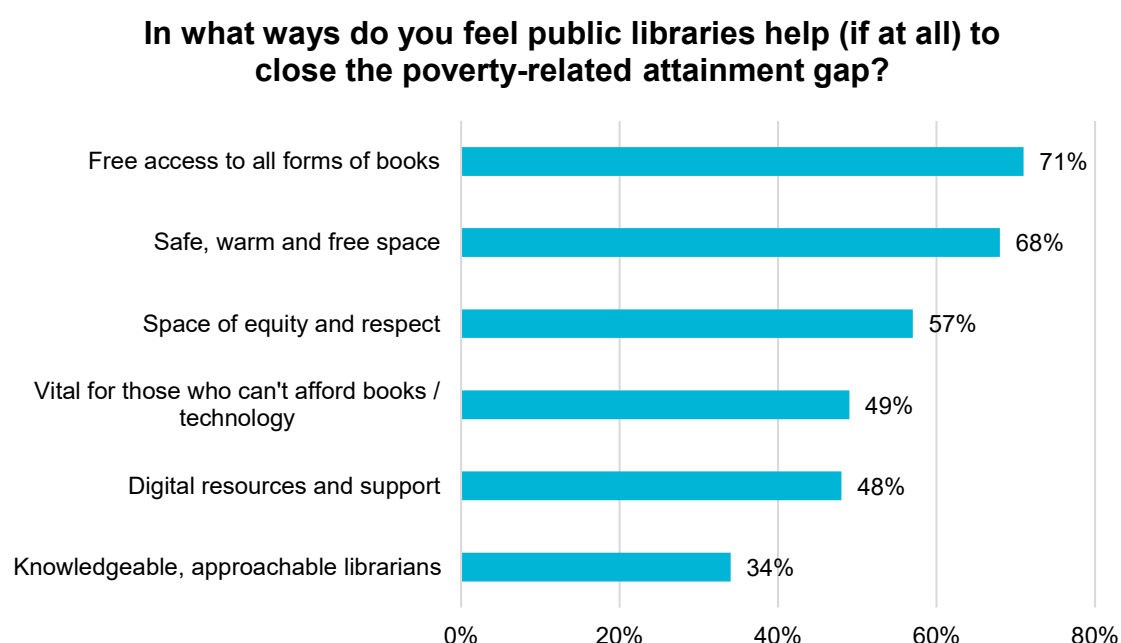


In December 2023, Scottish Government reported that, 'children and young people ... continue to navigate the lasting impact of the pandemic and the current cost-of-living-crisis, both of which have raised the barriers to learning created by poverty'³⁶.

They also reported that in 2021/22 that the gap between children living in the most and least deprived areas of Scotland was 11.7 percentage points, and that, 'speech, language and communication remains the most frequent developmental domain in which concerns are noted'.

The survey asked librarians to reflect on the ways they feel public libraries help (if at all) to close the poverty-related attainment gap. This was an open question with a comment box of unlimited length attached. There was nearly unanimous assent among the 182 answers that libraries are crucial to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Their responses centred on six main touchstones: free access to all forms of books; access to a safe, warm and free space; access to a space of equity and respect; vital resource for those who can't afford books / technology; access to digital resources and support; and knowledgeable, approachable librarians.



Additional comments – from 58% of survey respondents – centred on the importance of library in providing for areas of deprivation, offering provision to support local schools / teachers, and promoting social inclusion.

One librarian stressed that, though libraries are crucial in providing free access to books, digital resources and support, they cannot be expected to close the attainment gap alone:

'I have to say that often people who have a social background that doesn't promote reading usually do not come to the library, or if they do, they do not read ... libraries offer a lot, but if children are not read to by parents and carers from a young age, it is rather impossible to [close] the gap.'

This tension – between the high-level complexity of closing the attainment gap and the expectation to deliver – recurs through many librarians' comments. Primary among them is the dual pressure of running cost-effective services, while their funding is continually decreasing:

'By being given access to public funds that would allow us to do more than just keep our heads above water. If we are to be a vital partner then we need to be supported in a way that will allow us time to figure out how to be one.'

They reported a lack of understanding from their local authorities about the social, long-term impact of their service. In this environment of precarious funding and budget cuts, a cost-based approach fails to capture or quantify the value of libraries:

'Councils like to divide the headcount by the cost of running a library to tell us why they are cutting funding. The social impact of someone using the library, whether to read, broaden their knowledge, apply for jobs, study, and then contribute positively to the local economy/society is not quantifiable. This doesn't suit the easy headcount divided by cost approach. And this doesn't even take into consideration the positive impact on families, literacy, the positive mental health aspect libraries provide.'

Cost-based evaluations and consequent budget cuts have had a domino effect on service restrictions that hinder the library's impact, which in turn, is reflected poorly in the next cost-based approach. One librarian reported that the digital poverty in their area was being reinforced by the cuts endured by the library service:

'During the pandemic, it highlighted a digital divide yet [my local authority has] not helped. Opening hours are restricted and lack of staff means libraries are

closed at short notice so people don't know when they're open now. They have learning centres but don't use them to their full potential.'

The same librarian noted the extreme barriers their service faces in providing a safe space:

'Limited and unreliable opening hours, short staffing – staff are leaving in their droves and are not being replaced. [In my local authority, one] library is now being run by the archivist.'

Short staffing recurs in librarians' comments, as great an issue as their funding restrictions. When considering how public libraries help to close the poverty-related attainment gap, librarians express noticeable tension about the fracture between what they want to provide and what circumstances dictate:

'We don't have the staff to get this type of initiative off the ground. Our library staff are mainly there to issue books and be nice to people, signposting folk to other services when we can. It is a big wasted opportunity as we should be doing more...'

Yet, despite these pressures, librarians continue to maximise on their limited resource. Their spaces and services are egalitarian, accessible and unique. Libraries allow unfettered access to information, warmth, digital equipment, Wi-Fi and helpful, non-judgemental staff. In the librarians' own words:

- 'By providing a warm space to use computers for free (or use Wi-Fi for free), borrow books for free, read newspapers and magazines for free, we are allowing everyone to have the same access to help / information and reading material whether they have money or not. It is one of the few places where a person can come and use all the facilities without dipping into their own pockets. This MUST be helping close the attainment gap – where else offers such help?'
- 'Actually offering IT services is huge for our community so that's got to be a big one. And I do think that the staff being present, watchful, responsive – also huge. Of course the books and the access to information almost goes without saying but the fact that the people behind the desk are actively joining the people (the users) with the information has got to be the key. People living

difficult lives can be shy of authority. Libraries have a history and an identity that removes them slightly from being 'top-down' council institutions and makes them more egalitarian. I think the evolution of libraries is constantly adding to that picture – offering free period products, hearing aid batteries, bus pass assistance – all this feeds the picture.'

- 'By providing free resources, available to all, for learning – whether online, or on paper – we inform, educate and liberate our public from the failings or perceived failings of a system, which can sometimes miss, or else pass over those who do not fit easily into 'boxes', within an educational environment. I know several adults, who have become auto-didactic, in adult years, coming to realise the benefit of a library service, and the opportunities for education this can provide – both generally and in an educational and employment environment, where self-improvement has improved their lives, income and family circumstances, via the free resources provided by a public library service.'

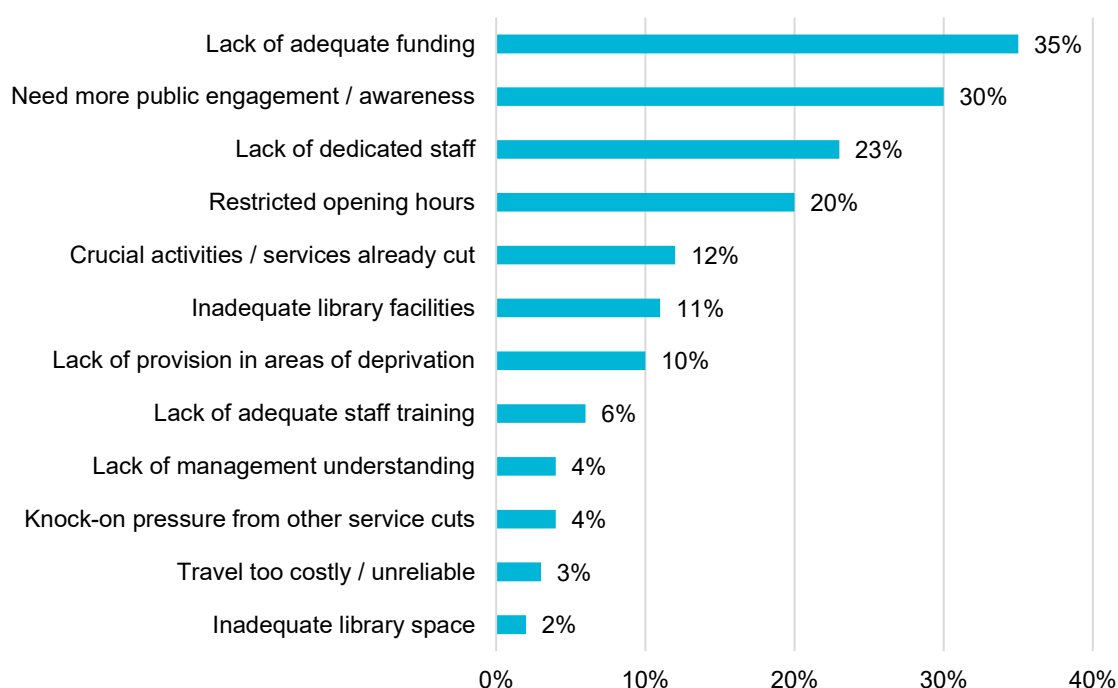


We asked librarians to share what barriers (if any) their library faces to helping close the poverty-related attainment gap. Again, this was an open question with a comment box of unlimited length attached.

Their responses centred on three main touchstones: lack of adequate funding (35% of comments); a need for greater public engagement or awareness of their services (30% of comments); and lack of dedicated staff (23% of comments).

Further to these, librarians described restricted opening hours, service cuts, inadequate facilities and space, a lack of provision in areas of deprivation, lack of adequate staff training, lack of understanding at management level, knock-on pressure to the library due to other service cuts in the area, and costly or unreliable travel barriers.

To what extent does your library experience barriers (if any) to helping close the poverty-related attainment gap?



The picture painted in these responses is stark. Librarians are facing lack of understanding from their line (and/or middle) management, top-down requests to scale back their library service, a vicious cycle of service cuts leading to less public engagement leading to further service cuts, and structural access barriers for many of those most in need.

Librarians reported a lack of awareness about the value and range of library services from both their line and/or middle management as well as the general public. Their comments below highlight the pressure librarians are facing to deliver a comprehensive service while its resources, staffing, stock and funding are decreasing. There are some reports that librarians are being instructed to charge for their events, going against the entire ethos of the library as a public service that afford people a free, safe space. There are also reports that the lack of stock is being

covered by gifts of books from some members of the public: that public-funded core services are being kept afloat through individual donations, in a national cost-of-living crisis, is a deplorable reality.

Librarians being instructed to scale back

- 'Recently we have been told to reduce the amount of outreach activities we run and also to reduce our involvement in these activities. This is a major barrier when there is so much more we could do to help people in the community who perhaps have nowhere else to turn because of financial difficulties.'
- 'Lack of understanding of power of libraries, how they are valued by population and their key positioning in the heart of communities by senior leaders – CEOs and Directors and elected decision makers.'
- 'Lack of funding; lack of interest in this area from senior management team who are more interested in increasing footfall to pre-Covid levels than in actually spending time identifying community needs.'
- 'There's no budget for activities, no staff time allocated to activities, and denial from middle management that libraries are more than just about books on shelves.'
- 'We are currently under pressure to start charging for some of our events (like our children's craft club). Doing so would create a divide between those who have and do not have the means to attend. This would isolate many children in the community and leave them with little that they can do for free.'

Service cuts, leading to less public engagement, leading to service cuts

- 'Teams are stretched and keeping libraries open is often a challenge, loss of the professional role of the Librarian, training our teams to deliver services, too many plates to juggle, lack of consistency following restructure after restructure and changing roles, still recovering after the pandemic.'

- 'So much of our stock now is gifted rather than chosen.'
- 'Our stock budget has been cut this year after being maintained at a set figure for the past few years (so in real terms a decrease as the price of books and digital resources has increased).

Lack of flexibility in responding to digital needs – local authority IT department do not move quickly and it is often challenging to get their buy-in for new initiatives, even if funding is secured.'

Access barriers

- 'Training. We have little to no training to deal with people who are struggling in various ways. We often see people who are unhoused, living with problematic substance use, and/or have mental health difficulties who come to us for help accessing services or looking for information. These visitors are vulnerable and their needs can be complex, and meeting those needs can be challenging. We have no training to help deal with those challenges, and every week I hear from visitors that other council branches have directed them to the library to help. We need more support, knowledge, and recognition.'
- 'In order to take books out or access computers customers must have a registered library card which requires a proof of address, this can create barriers for people who may struggle to provide this.'
- 'Seeing people unable to get the support and assistance that they're really entitled to is frustrating but not necessarily a library barrier – we do what we can and most library staff do provide money from their own pockets for their customers.'
- 'Those that really need our help don't attend. During the holiday programmes we have been tasked with working with targeted vulnerable young people. The young people don't come. We need better links with youth groups and to be able to work in partnership with groups to break down the barriers they have with regard to the library setting. We need to make libraries 'cool' spaces for young people.'

What emerges strongly from these responses is an urgent need for libraries to be afforded more funding, staff, resource and public engagement. But ultimately, what librarians reported was a need for greater understanding of the service, from both their line management and the general public.

Libraries are already being affected by the budget cuts faced elsewhere in their local authorities and yet continue trying to bridge the gap. They are providing the best service they can, while experiencing continual restrictions and cuts.

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. In the words of one librarian:

'Books don't solve the attainment gap. Libraries and people in them solve the attainment gap. We no longer have branches in all the towns and so lack the right amount of staff. We do not have enough books so that every child could take a book out and we could still have a service. The council itself briefs against our service portraying us as failing, we need people to come in but we don't advertise it well. We are not the right tool at this moment to help much with this. I would go as far as to say that we are not put into gear to solve this or have been set this as a task. Whoever is in charge of solving this is unaware of our input or our potential input. We experience every type of barrier imaginable it would seem.'



Digital inclusion: digital poverty, access and support

Digital poverty is defined as 'the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to'³⁷ and includes people without access to a laptop / smart phone / tablet, or affordable, reliable internet.

In 2020, Inspiring Scotland reported that approximately 800,000 people are estimated to face digital inequality³⁸ – close to 15% of the whole population. They also estimated that '19% (c.1 million) of Scottish people do not know how to use digital technology and, as of 2017, an estimated c. 400,000 do not live in areas with 4G coverage'.

As an illustration of these stats: the 2017 Get Digital heatmap highlights the extent of digital inequality across all 32 local authorities: it indicates that 19 local authorities have a high likelihood of digital exclusion, and only three with low likelihood: Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow³⁹.

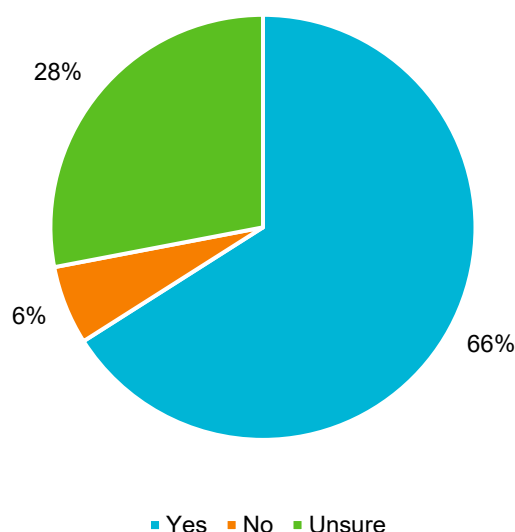
Scottish Government, in their case for the Connecting Scotland programme, advocate for digital inclusion as a fundamental part of accessible infrastructure:

'In Scotland there is a significant portion of households and individuals that do not have the essential skills or infrastructure required to engage in a digital society. Inability to engage means that people are unable to access public services online, are not offered the same opportunities to achieve the same level of education and contribute to the economy to the same extent as those with access and may be deprived of the opportunities to contribute to democracy.'⁴⁰

Scottish Book Trust knows, from working with public libraries across Scotland, that digital devices and Wi-Fi are crucial points of access that libraries provide to communities in need.

When asking public librarians whether or not their local community faces digital poverty, an overwhelming majority said 'yes' – 66%.

Does your local community face digital poverty?



Respondents were asked to reflect on the reason for their choice. Out of 137 comments, five issues emerged as priority concerns:

- People don't have, or can't afford, Wi-Fi or digital devices at home (52% of comments)
- People lack digital skills or literacy (34% of comments)
- People need digital access to participate in society (34% of comments)
- The library is in an area of social deprivation (28% of comments)
- There are significant connectivity issues across Scotland, particularly in rural areas (18% of comments)

Other themes raised by librarians include antiquated or inadequate digital devices in the library and people's fear or lack of confidence using technology. Some examples of these include:

- 'Every day in my role I encounter people needing assistance to find / Google things as they have no internet access, or don't know how to do it on our computers. Many of our readers come in daily to use the computers as they cannot afford Wi-Fi or data for their phones or home computers (if they have one)

I am regularly asked to find phone numbers or printable forms online for those who cannot use online forms, have no access to them, or who do not feel comfortable using them.

A lot of people are oblivious to digital poverty, and I'll never forget a member of staff more senior than me saying, "but everyone has a mobile phone". That's very much not the case, and often if they do, that phone doesn't have data because they can't afford it.

We have a very big homeless, refugee and student community where I live, and many can't afford the luxury of phones.'

- 'Classes are little and often, and we have members of the public – particularly adult and elderly borrowers – who visit us, on a daily basis, seeking assistance with digital issues. I encourage all staff to help, wherever possible, or direct those affected to other resources, in order to address their problems.

Then there are those members of the public – again adult and elderly – who tell us they simply cannot afford digital access, or else fear and avoid it, for lack of knowledge.

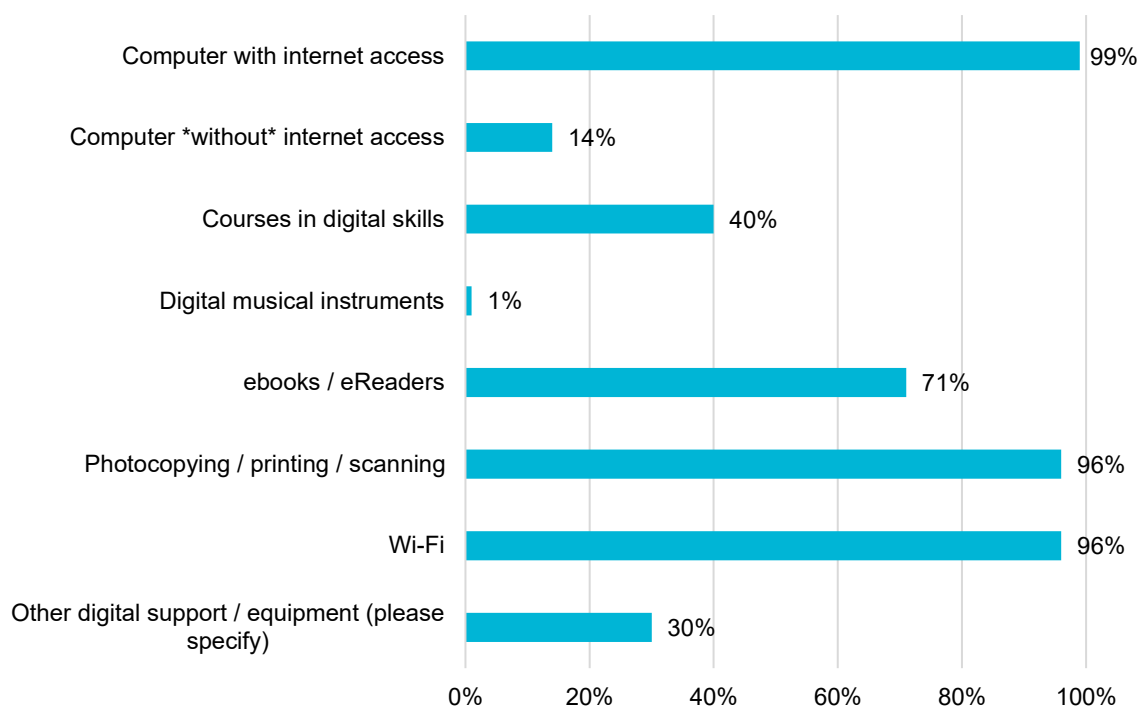
This amply demonstrates, to me, the need for further digital services provision, in respect of access and training, in our area.'

- 'Our community, being remote and rural, faces issues with connectivity to reliable broadband and mobile signal. We are considered a middle-class area, by and large, but those who are struggling to make ends meet face the additional barrier of extra expense if they want reliable connectivity to the internet. Our own public access services are largely aging so cannot always adequately make up for the issue of connectivity for people.'
- 'The kids all get an iPad at school, and most of them are technologically literate, but I spend large portions of my day helping people on the computers who claim to have never used a keyboard before, don't know how to log into their emails, can't open a jpeg or download a pdf. Often people come into the library to use our internet for job interviews, to video call family, to apply for benefits, all things they probably shouldn't be in a library doing, but have no other way of doing these things.'

- 'It will vary across the authority but we're in danger, if we haven't already reached the point, of withdrawing the resources from the very people who rely on them. Public transport is poor so as libraries face closures, how are people supposed to get to the main libraries where the resources may have to be focused – even more of an issue for our more rural communities. We had considered delivering a mobile digital service for more remote communities but the green agenda has put the cost of the vehicle outwith our reach.'
- 'Our community is very impoverished and a lot of people do not have access to internet, computers or other resources they need for school, work etc. Our computers and resources are used almost constantly, every day by people within our community. More often than not, we do not have enough of these resources to facilitate the demand. Everything is digital nowadays and a lot of generations are being left behind because they do not know how to work these pieces of technology and thus become isolated or left behind.'
- 'Areas of multiple deprivation, they can't feed themselves or their families or heat homes, digital access is not at top of list of their priorities.'



Does your library offer access to any of the following for community use?



Libraries are bridging the gap posed by digital poverty across Scotland: 96% reported their library offers access to Wi-Fi, 99% to computers with internet, 71% to ebooks / eReaders, and 40% to courses in digital skills.

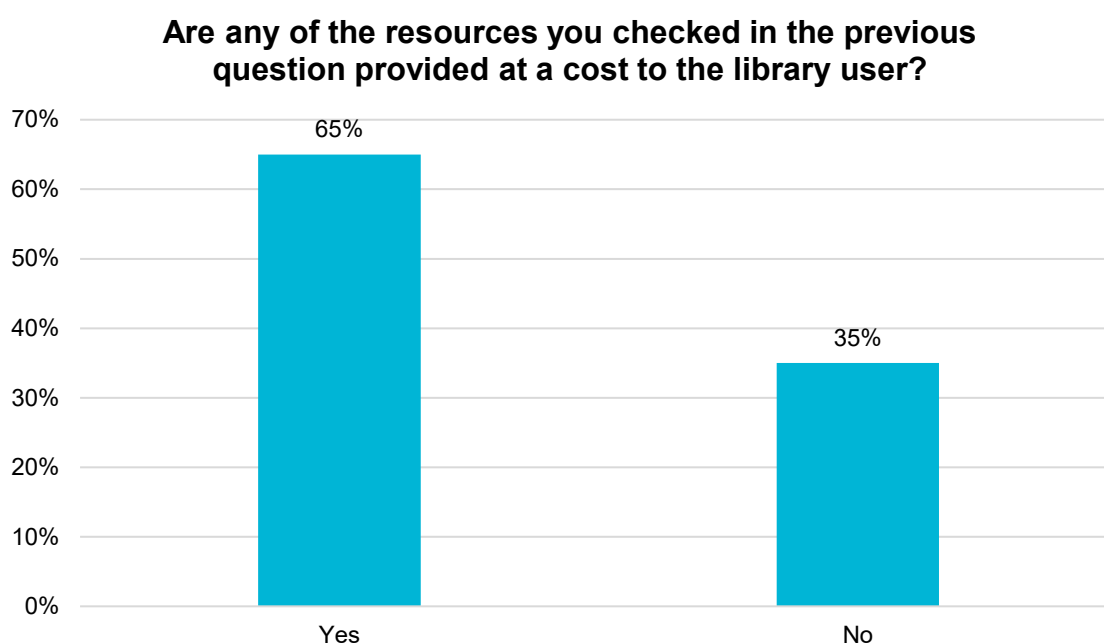
Of the 57 respondents who chose 'other (please specify)', two crucial priorities were highlighted:

- Dedicated access to digital devices, e.g. Hublets, microbits (67% of 'other' respondents)
- Dedicated staff to help with digital access (35% of 'other' respondents)

Further comments reported that libraries provide digital community activities, e.g. code clubs or VR headsets, free SIM cards, a Maker Space. However, some noted that their libraries had inadequate digital facilities or support:

- 'The Wi-Fi is not consistent and the pns [People's Networks] are out of date.'
- 'Appalling printing service.'
- 'Drop in one-to-one support if staffing allows – often doesn't.'

In seeking to understand what financial barriers people might face, librarians were asked if any of their library's digital resources were provided at a cost to the library user.



Out of the 65% who chose 'yes', most of the costs were either for printing (89%) or photocopying (73%), as well as scanning (8%). These costs are usually per sheet, with a higher price for larger paper sizes, or for colour ink over black and white.

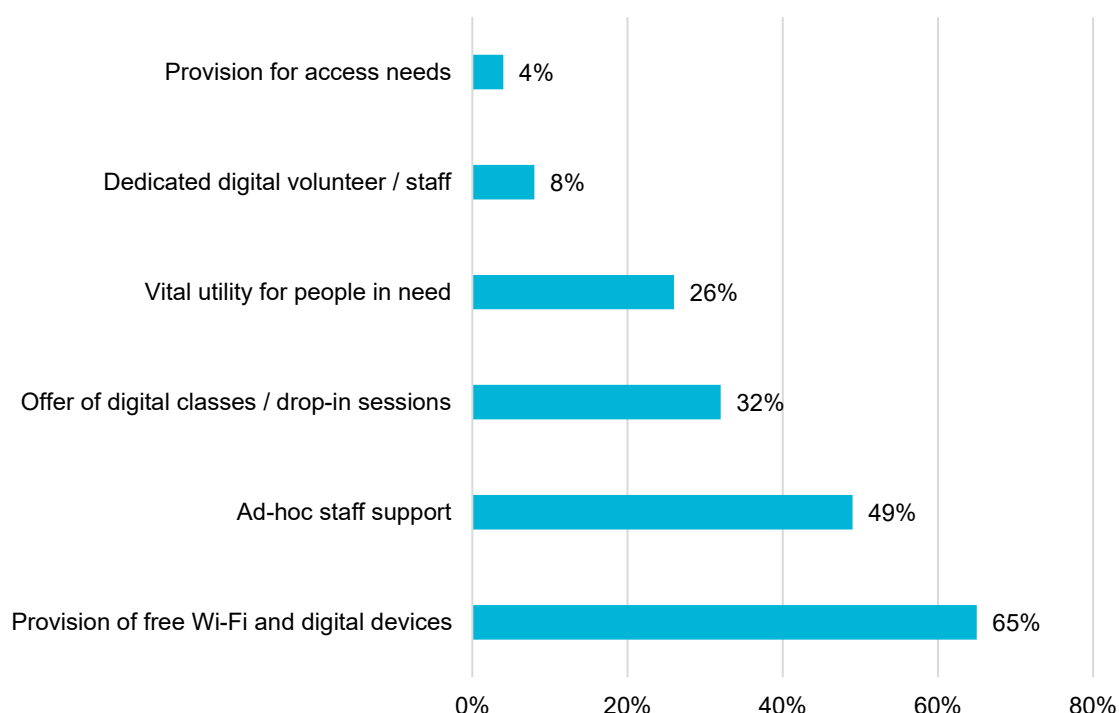
Even in these responses, librarians shared the ways they continue to try and overcome their communities' digital poverty on an individual basis:

- 'I personally don't charge when the printing is council application forms / NHS documents or if it is children printing their homework.'
- 'We have been told that children will soon have to pay for the children's craft club as well but not how much. I believe this may exclude many families which would be very disheartening.'
- 'If printing council forms or essential job-hunting material we do not charge.'

Scottish Book Trust sought to understand how public libraries are supporting digital access and inclusion in their communities by asking librarians to provide some individual examples and reflect on how important they feel digital inclusion is.

Out of 147 responses, six distinct themes emerged: provision of free Wi-Fi and digital devices, ad-hoc staff support, offer of digital classes / drop-in sessions, dedicated digital volunteers / staff, provision for access needs and the recurring emphasis that digital inclusion is a vital utility.

Please give us some individual examples of how your library supports digital access / inclusion within your community



A key insight in the librarians' reflections is how often they are called on to assume knowledge and support for digital inclusion when this is often not an official part of their remit. A consequence of this expectation is that librarians are often responsible for helping customers with personal or confidential paperwork, which the customer can only access online.

Far from being solely custodians of a book depository, librarians' roles have expanded to include remits that are often not an official part of their job description, whether as citizens' guardians, digital technicians, pastoral care support workers, counsellors or career advisors.

In their reflections on the importance of digital inclusion, librarians highlighted their service as the last bastion of digital access for many; their role in helping with official

paperwork; nurturing digital skills in all ages; and funding / staffing constraints on their provision.



Last bastion of digital access

- 'Visiting groups locally to describe what is available within the library and with membership – very important; people are always surprised by what is on offer. Helping one-on-one with application forms online – very important (and necessary a lot of the time as people are often unable to access forms another way).'
- 'We get a lot of people sent up from the job centre who have never had to use a computer before. We help them understand and set up email addresses and build their confidence.'
- 'We do our best to support users when they have issues getting online, but this can be dependent on how busy it is and staff resources on the day

An example – I recently helped a user to submit a job application when he was having trouble getting online and needed to photograph and send some items (passport etc.). He has no internet access at home and his mobile phone signal was too poor to use.'

- 'We offer free Wi-Fi and internet access PCs. We have a tablet lending service and we also offer free help with computers. This is important for those who are unable to access the internet at home – either due to their connection or inability

to operate a device. We hope that we help to boost their confidence in becoming computer-literate.'

Helping with official paperwork

- 'A lady came in today who needed to fill out a 31-page form for citizenship. She had been sent this as an email attachment which she couldn't read on her phone, but was able to print it out in the library.'

A couple of regular library users come in regularly to communicate with their children / grandchildren in various other countries. They have no Wi-Fi at home.

I think these are essential services and we should provide more access to them.'

- 'People know they can come in here and get help with the digital tasks. This is very important because so much paperwork and bureaucracy is done online now, and so much is made the responsibility of the individual instead of the company or organisation.'
- 'Many people come in to apply for jobs so their benefit won't be sanctioned. Many come to apply for grants. People come for the Wi-Fi. People come to print or to send an email. A Chinese national came in once he was wanting to return home so had to fill in an elaborate passport check at the Chinese consulate. He had zero digital skills and zero English. I think he had worked here for a while but was due home. We helped him scan his stuff in and add it, we helped him resize images. We sent everything off. Again this is paraphrasing for the survey, it took two visits and my personal intervention to make things the right size. He and many others would not stand a chance with the difficult digital landscape.'

Nurturing digital skills

- 'We provide free access to Chromeboxes and staff on hand to help with any problems. Very important, especially the support we give to people struggling with little or no IT skills e.g. being sent to the library by Universal Credit, also older folk who are isolated with no family nearby to help them set up their phones / laptop / tablet, or those who are struggling with their eyesight or hearing

or people who are stressed by a form they need to fill out or print. We provide a vital service for our customers!"

- 'An 85-year-old lady who finally removed her "new" tablet from its box, switched it on, and learned how to email and check bus times! This made me so happy – she was incredibly empowered.'
- 'I feel we could do more. Even though we're short staffed and busy, we try to help as much as we are able to on the computers and with printing. This can be difficult and we are often asked if we have classes, which would be beneficial. I'm not great with computers, but I can grab a phone and Google things to troubleshoot.'

If someone is completely new to PCs or scared of them, I'll find what they need myself and print it out, and most of our staff will do the same.'

Funding / staffing constraints

- 'Digital inclusion is essential ... our library service training pool is very limited and affected by budget, while our geographical area is inordinately large, by UK council standards. This cuts into and restricts the services available to any community, in a massive way, and requires further investment if the government are to achieve their projected aims for digital inclusion, and provision of digital public services.'
- 'I don't feel that we do at the moment as we have lost our Digital Services Team.'
- 'I feel we should do a lot more for targeting this kind of help, running job clubs, computer help sessions again would be good as have fallen by the wayside.'

Perhaps most sobering from these reflections is the example provided by one librarian in a local authority with a large rural population:

- 'Wi-Fi is available outside the building and we often have people hanging around there when the library is closed. There is a space that is covered and I'm arranging to get a bench put there so at least they have a seat to access the Wi-Fi any time they need, rather than crouching on the concrete.'



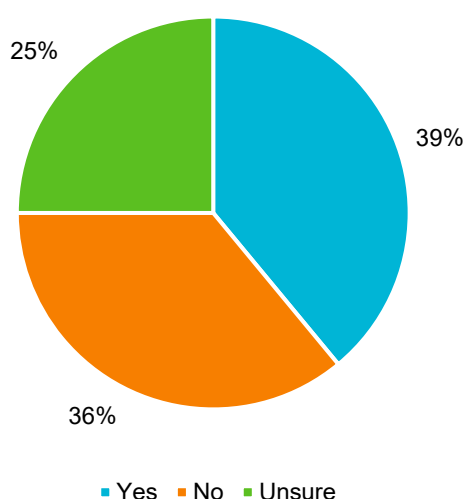
Digital inclusion: digital and media literacy

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 currently have the skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake⁴¹.

Public 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.

Scottish Book Trust asked librarians if their library currently supports the local community with media / digital literacy skills.

Does your library currently support the local community with media / digital literacy skills?



Librarians were almost exactly split in their responses. 2 out of 5 librarians reported that their library does support their local community with media / digital literacy skills. 1 in 3 disagree.

Comments on their responses hint at a broader picture:

- 35% of comments reported that their library provides a dedicated digital skills volunteer / support sessions
- 29% of comments reported they offer ad-hoc advice with adults

- 'Yes we do help with digital literacy skills but we do not yet do anything to specifically help with critical thinking of media or data.'
- 10% of commenters were unsure or didn't know
- 5% of comments reported this support has been cut, in addition to 15% reporting there is insufficient training, time, funding or staffing to offer this provision:
 - 'Currently we don't, we did have a digital champion who supported our customers, however he has had a change in circumstances and can no longer volunteer. As we are under threat of closure we are reluctant to recruit another volunteer.'
 - 'My staff are again, not trained in this and I think many users don't really comprehend what media or information literacy is. I was a school librarian prior and struggled to have this recognised even within an educational setting. With the media landscape constantly changing, it is very hard to keep up with technology to the extent to instruct others. I feel this really is a specialism in its own right.'
 - 'Nothing has been set up by senior management, lack of support / funding / resources / staff training.'
- 20% of comments reported their library does not support it
 - 'Not currently offered by our service, however as a former school librarian who taught these skills to pupils every year, I would consider introducing this.'

Active citizenship

As the final theme of research, 'active citizenship' investigates the library's role in fostering communities 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 SLIC⁴² and CILIP⁴³ shows that libraries:

1. Reach a strongly diversified audience across all protected characteristics
2. Ensure equal access to information, education and support
3. Offer safe spaces for people to remain indefinitely, without expectation of payment
4. 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 communities. In the public librarian survey, Scottish Book Trust asked questions to gather further evidence on each of these points: (1) reaching a diverse audience; (2) equal access to information; (3) safe spaces; and (4) democratically engaged and informed communities.

Reaching a diverse audience

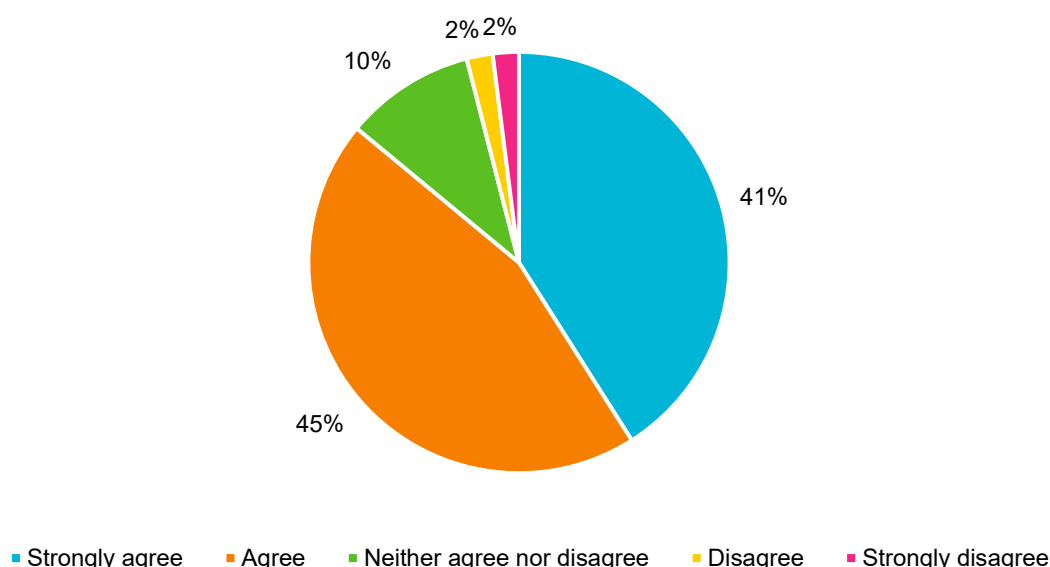
Scottish Book Trust wanted to understand the extent to which Scotland's public libraries are reaching a strongly diversified audience. The public librarian survey asked for librarians to reflect on this:

- 86% of public librarians agreed that their library reaches a diversified audience (whether across race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, class, language, religion, disability, age, education)
- 10% neither agreed nor disagreed
- Only 4% disagreed; many of these commented their answer was on the basis that their library is based in a local authority that is not racially diverse

Librarians were invited to give their thoughts on their answer – of 115 comments, the following themes were prominent:

- Libraries cater to a wide range of customers from varied backgrounds (45% of comments)
- Libraries provide a universal offer and a friendly welcome (44% of comments)
- Their stock is diverse and caters to their customers (18% of comments)
- It is challenging to engage non-library users (17% of comments)

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



Further reflections from librarians commented on their library as a safe space for refugees and asylum seekers (9% of comments), LGBTQ+ people (12% of comments) and disabled or neurodiverse people (16% of comments); the need for libraries to do more outreach to non-library users (13% comments), particularly teens and BPOC communities; and the limitations on outreach posed by restricted hours / staffing / inadequate stock (3% of comments).

Their insights indicate a cross-section of how comprehensive and thorough the library service is in reaching out to under-resourced communities. Some heartening stories include:

- 'We have such a wide-ranging demographic in my area, and we have so many people come through the doors daily, and this makes me happy that we are known by and used by such a diverse reader base.'
- 'Our community is rural and largely white, but our services are well used by local minorities. We have been purchasing a much more diverse range of books in recent years to help support the growing diversity in our readership. We also support local additional support for learning classes in accessing the library, and are mindful of access issues people might have both physically and socially. We provide mental health support literature, offer food bank access through some of our libraries, provide access to council services and space for social workers to meet with their clients. We are also part of the I Am Me initiative, providing safe spaces for disabled and disadvantaged people in need.'

There were also indications of how libraries are attempting to provide a universal offer, balanced against the need to maintain a safe space for people with protected characteristics:

- 'This library is in a village with a strong class divide. We cater to everyone, bringing people together particularly in crochet club. I have worked hard to counter anti-trans talk in the village and am happy to have made the library feel like a safe place for LGBTQ+ youth. This is undermined by reduced opening times meaning that teens can only access the library on holidays.'
- 'The library tries hard to welcome everyone but it is impossible to know if the customers are of a certain sexuality, class, religion or disability. These things are not asked and at the point of service and they are not important for the way that they should be treated. All customers should be treated with respect in a warm, friendly, welcoming environment.'
- '[My library] is well placed geographically in the town centre and is regularly accessed by a diverse audience including student, tourists and locals alike. However there is no disabled / wheeled access so this greatly reduces our ability to serve the whole community.'

Two neighbouring libraries, within 2/3 miles, have parking, wheeled access and public toilets. This does not stop us having to turn people away on occasion which is a great regret and a real problem.'

Some librarians also commented on the barriers and challenges to access they are attempting to overcome:

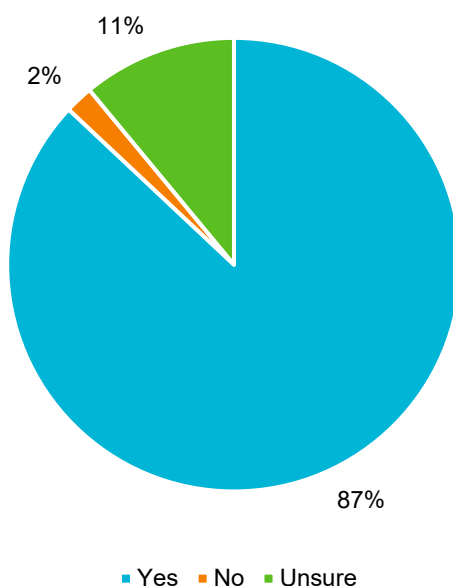
- 'I think there are historic barriers to members from BAME accessing libraries across the country. I think other demographics do engage with library services more easily.'
- 'We see a heavy usage by people who have recently come into the local community, of refugee or immigrant status – whether Ukrainian, Somali, Syrian, Thai, or otherwise. These people tend to use the library service, heavily, as adults, in order to learn and to help their children, who in turn, are encouraged to use the library – often more heavily, from a cultural, or necessary, point of view, than most resident Scots families will do.'
- 'We have a lot of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Nothing is being done to support them.'



Equal access to information

To evidence libraries' provision of equal and free access to information, Scottish Book Trust asked librarians if their library provides equal and free access to trusted, accurate information for the local community.

Does your library provide equal and free access to trusted, accurate information for the local community?



The overwhelming majority of librarians agreed that their library provides equal and free access to trusted, accurate information for the local community: 87% of all respondents.

Of the 'unsure' (11%) and 'no' (2%) responses, the reasons given were primarily centred either on their own uncertainty about the question's aim ('Not sure what you are looking for'), or on the library's service approach:

- 'No focus on accuracy of data / information.'
- 'A senior manager recently said that libraries provide access to all information, including that which is "incorrect, controversial, or even dangerous" so while we're better than the wilds of the internet, I'm not sure this is a priority.'

Their comments gave a broader range of insight, from the emphasis on libraries' 'universal, free, equal access' (40% of comments), librarians' commitment to getting customers the information they need (38% of comments), advertising local

opportunities and organisations (35% of comments), librarians striving to ensure information is accurate and appropriate (29% of comments). Some examples of this:

- 'Our library staff work tirelessly to keep our stock of books and available resources up-to-date. We often provide local knowledge to visitors to the area and give suggestions to locals of where to look for different information.'
- 'We have a lot of leaflets about public services and public consultations and do a lot of signposting to what is happening locally We are always ready to help people research a topic and although we do get a lot of paranoid, conspiracy-minded people coming in (possibly because they have no one else to talk to) we try to set them right.'
- 'As much as we have access to that – we provide less leaflets etc. since Covid.'

As throughout the survey, however, librarians also indicated the impact that funding cuts have had on their facility:

- 'Funding has reduced what we can offer. Previously online resources under used, too difficult to navigate and rise of Google searches.'

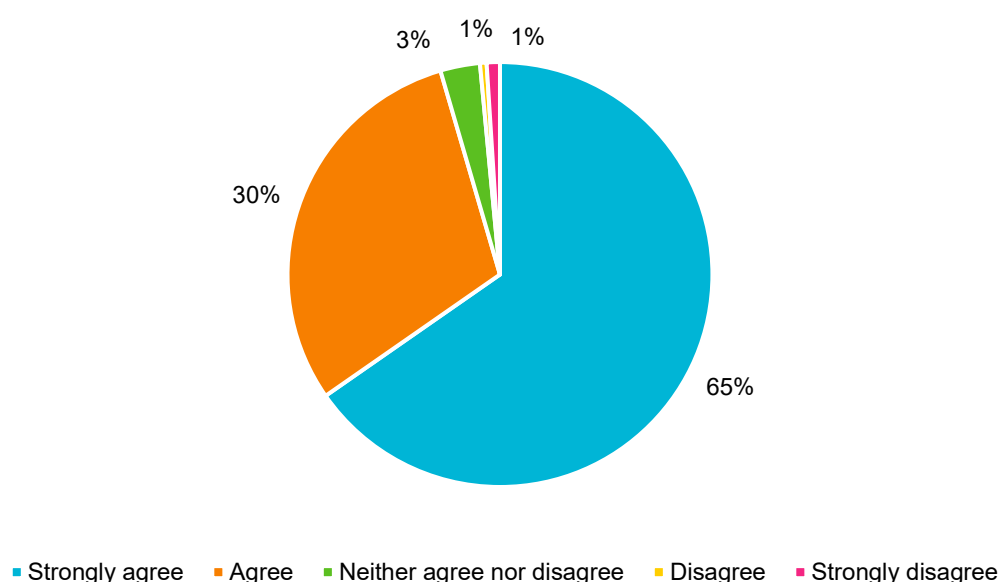


Safe spaces

To better understand the role of libraries as safe spaces – that is, a place that provides a physically and emotionally safe environment for a person or group of people, free of fear, bullying or harassment – Scottish Book Trust asked librarians to what extent, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), they agreed that their library offers a safe space to their community.

The scale was followed by an open comment box encouraging respondents to share how important they feel a safe space is for their community.

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



Over 9 in 10 librarians agreed their library offers a safe space in and for their community.

Of respondents' 108 comments, three key themes emerged:

- Providing a safe space is a unique and/or essential remit of the library (53% of comments)
- The library offers a welcoming space to their community (47% of comments)
- The library is a safe haven for vulnerable people of all ages (39% of comments)

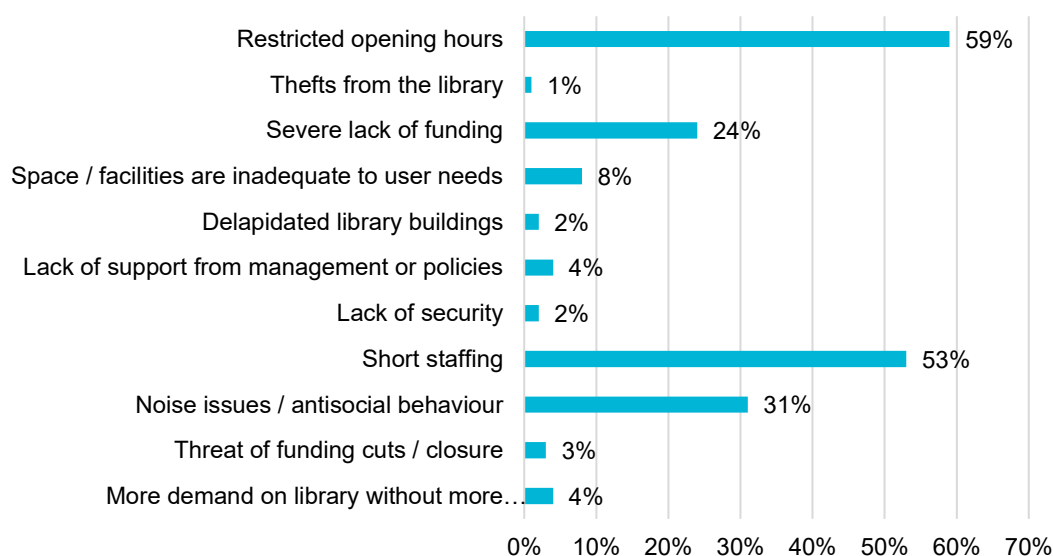
1 in 4 (26%) comments also noted that their library operates as a safe space because people can spend unlimited time there without cost or labour.

Those who felt their library did not offer a safe space expanded on their reasons in their comments:

- 'We're generally a fairly safe space. We're quiet and empathetic, willing to help. I often joke that people ask us about anything, because the public has a perception that librarians know everything. One incident however, has slightly shaken confidence in the libraries among the LGBT+ community. I know that a decision to allow a Gender Critical group to hold an event in one of our branches, despite protests against this, has left some of the community feeling unsafe to visit that branch (and in at least one case, local libraries as a whole).'
- 'I feel that it can be a safe space, but since we have lost security in our building there are a lot of faces I don't see anymore who used to spend a lot of time on their own in the library. We can get aggressive or abusive visitors so they may not feel safe. I know there are often times I myself don't feel safe in the library, and I work here.'

To better understand what potential barriers public libraries face in providing a safe space, Scottish Book Trust asked librarians to provide their insights.

What kinds of barriers to a safe space does your library face?



Well over half of librarians noted that restricted opening hours (59%) and short staffing (53%) were the greatest barriers their library faced in offering a safe space to their community, followed closely by antisocial behaviour / noise issues (31%) and severe lack of funding (24%).

Librarians commented on the impact that short staffing and lack of funding has already had on their service, particularly regarding libraries having to close:

- 'Decreasing funding is always going to have an impact on the library but I do not believe it to impact the safe space the library is. We are currently short staffed and have had to close various branches over the weeks whilst waiting on new staff members to be trained. This has impacted the community as Bookbug Sessions have been cancelled and our opening hours have been impacted.'
- 'Decreased funding is the single largest barrier we face. We have zero funding for relief staff, which means if I have ANY staff members off – through sickness, family emergency or annual leave – the library branch must close its doors to the public. We already close our doors, two full days out of every week, and have only enough funding for a half day, on a Saturday. Now this seems likely to be every second Saturday facing further closure, and an end to weeknight evening opening hours, thereby cutting off access to many families, or working adults, who cannot visit us, 9–5, on the days we are open.

Any further closures impact MASSIVELY, and will only discourage the habitual use of our service, by families and young people – the very same customers in whom we should be instilling a lifelong love of, and eagerness to use, our service.

This will, in turn, provoke and promote a vicious cycle, where less footfall means those who provide our funding see 'less demand for services', and so cut back on our budgets, further still.

There is a constant robbing Peter to pay Paul system in place, already. I buy the branch desk diary, from my own pocket, because there is no budget to do so!

Meanwhile, while mental health and wellbeing are ignored, from this point of view, sport receives massive influxes of cash and funding, because many councillors come from a sporting background, or else view physical health as being far more important and prominent – talkworthy – than the unseen epidemic of mental health, about which people are less likely to be willing to discuss, instead of their expanding waistline. Sport has a significant role to play, in mental health and wellbeing, as well – but not at the utter expense of the library service, which is what we are seeing, at present.

We have already failed our elderly and infirm; by cutting off their access, to our library service, via mobile libraries (in such a massive geographical area as this, it is an essential part of our service), we have isolated and ignored their plight. They simply do not matter enough, it seems.'

Restricted opening hours have impacted the demand on existing service as well as the wellbeing of the library users:

- 'We close at lunchtime on Thursdays and Saturdays, which is not popular in the community. We have problems because we are so short staffed, and people have to queue. (!) There are also areas in the library that we cannot check on a regular basis because we are so short staffed.'
- 'We close for an hour for lunch which I think is a huge barrier – there are some people who come all day, and we have to send them away, and sometimes they just sit out in the cold for an hour waiting for us to open again. I have never worked anywhere that shut for us to have a break, I have always worked with staggered break times, however this would require more staff.'
- 'If our library closes as is a possibility our villagers will have no access to everything mentioned in this survey. If our opening hours are reduced this will have an impact, but not as much as is if the library was to close permanently. Potential for it to be an 'open library' with no staff, does concern us as this could result in antisocial behaviour and a risk to health and safety for any library users who may injure themselves or become unwell in an unattended building.'

Reports of antisocial behaviour has highlighted the strain put on librarians to maintain the space with insufficient resource:

- 'We have had recurrent problems with antisocial behaviour from children and teens at night. Local police and wardens are quick to answer calls of antisocial behaviour, but staff are regularly on the receiving end of abusive language / spitting etc. Unfortunately, because our library is a well-lit, open and encouraging space, it is difficult to dissuade ill-behaved people from coming in, especially with staffing shortages at night.'
- 'We have increasing antisocial behaviour issues and are incredibly understaffed, and during periods where there are antisocial behaviour issues we simply do not have the staff or resources or jurisdiction to make the library feel safe for other readers. We also do not have a dedicated library building, so often find that the safe space we try to offer is invaded by other groups who do not respect the library as its own entity.'

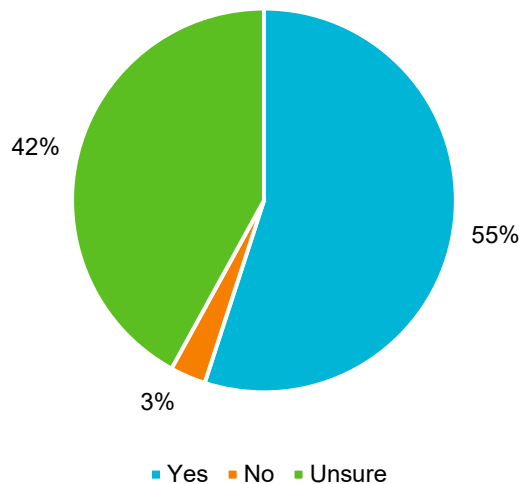
Despite these barriers, librarians try to maintain a note of optimism:

- 'Limited opening hours. Minimal staff cover. Open plan space so may not always suit people with sensory issues. Severe lack of funding. Staff have so many amazing ideas and enthusiasm but almost zero funds to work with.... we are very resourceful!'

Democratically engaged and informed communities

SLIC's Forward Strategy notes that, 'as the mechanics of learning have moved beyond print, the role of libraries as curators of the vast array of information sources has been amplified'. The same strategy envisions a future in which, 'libraries will open access to and build trust in public data to increase participation in the democratic process'⁴⁴. Scottish Book Trust sought to understand how librarians felt about these aspirations as part of this research into public libraries.

'Libraries will open access to and build trust in public data to increase participation in the democratic process.' Do you agree?



Librarians were split in their responses. 55% agreed; 3% disagreed; 42% were unsure.

This ambiguity was reflected in their comments, nearly 2/5 of which noted that libraries help increase participation in the democratic process (39% of comments), but 1/5 comments noted that they were uncertain what the definitions and strategy meant (20% of comments):

- 'The latest research has shown that people understand information better when in printed rather than digital form; the latter has its place, of course, and libraries will continue to assist access to both.'

A further 16% of comments noted that funding, staff cuts and library closures pose a greater and urgent crisis.

- 'Not with funding the way it is going. I would love for this to be true. However, the reality and practicalities of the situation – the crisis – of funding and underfunding, which we are facing, means that this is all but impossible to achieve and maintain. Simply look at the amount of staff cuts and now library closures our service is facing – and that is merely in my own area, rather than across Scotland and the rest of the UK!

Sadly, talk is cheap. and 'visions and strategies' are all very well. But they require the investment and ring-fenced funding – for our children's futures, and their children's futures – that those making such decisions seem singularly unwilling, or else unable, to provide.'

- 'I feel the future looks quite bleak at the moment. Funding is being cut everywhere.'
- 'We can help build trust in data if staff are supported and trained, and our equipment is upgraded and maintained.'
- 'So important given the huge amount of inaccurate information circulating on social media. However, to achieve this we need professionally qualified staff – few and far between these days and so undervalued.'
- 'I would agree that is how it should happen however in the current economic situations where funding and library hours are decreased I cannot see much of a long term future for Libraries, I have worked in the library service for forty years and have seen many changes but this is by far the most dangerous times I have seen for the future of Public Libraries.'

One librarian set a tone of particular hopelessness with regards the future of the library service:

'Not so long ago I underwent an interview for the senior library assistant position I now hold and in one of my questions I was asked how do you see libraries in the future. My answer was "in the very near future libraries will not be libraries, they will be community hubs with books being a very small part of it.".'

Others expressed discomfort with libraries being involved in the democratic process in any way:

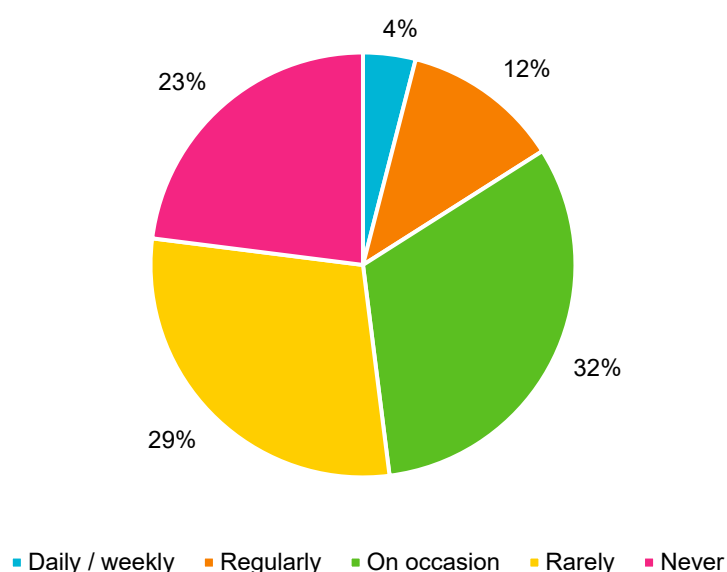
'I think we live in a very cynical world in regard to politics. More people feel their voice makes no difference and don't trust politicians. Not sure I want to see libraries being seen as some place closely aligned to politics. Offer sessions on key topics, local agendas, but fear you would attract those already interested. Need to keep library neutrality.'

It is worth noting that there is a difference between supporting the democratic process (e.g. through providing trusted information and media literacy skills) and spaces for conversation with the realm of politics – the phrasing of the survey question may have misled some librarians to conflate these two aspects, and it is important here to make a distinction between them.

Building from the librarians' uncertainty around the reality of what libraries can achieve, the increasing cuts they're facing, and an ambiguity about their role in the democratic process, Scottish Book Trust asked librarians how often their library operates as a community hub for informed debate / decision-making. This question was presented on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (daily / weekly).

Librarians were exactly split: the overall mean of the five options presented came to an average of 2.5, or 'on occasion'. The breakdown of responses is illustrated in the following pie chart:

How often does your library operate as a community hub for informed debate / decision-making?



Considering the many and varied barriers librarians detailed throughout their survey responses, the range of approaches captured in this question could indicate the impact that service cuts have already had on the sector.

Librarians reported a lack of awareness among the general public that libraries are more than book repositories or quiet study spaces; they are unique local hubs with huge provision in terms of social inclusion, digital access and community wellbeing.

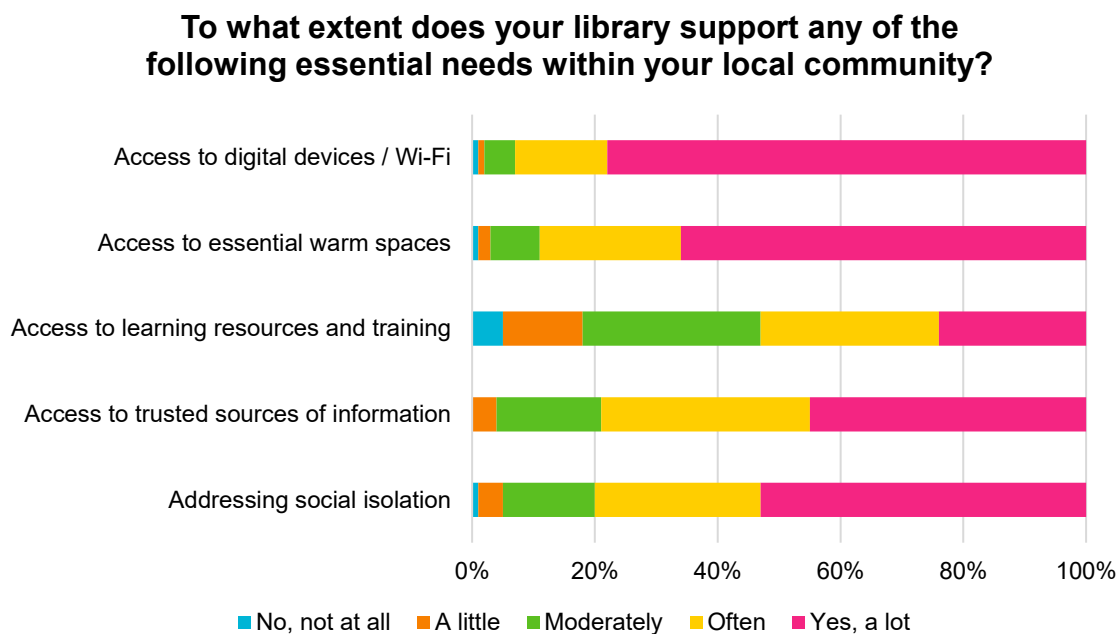
There is increasing stress enacted on librarians where the strategic goal of libraries – as safe spaces where people can be treated with equality and respect, access important documents and paperwork, socialise with their community, and empower themselves through free access to information – is overwhelmed by the insecurity of the sector. Librarians are reporting how much their role is becoming an attempt to bridge the gap between the reality of short staffing, restrictions, cuts and precarity, and the inaccessible goals of the library's full potential.

To participate in informed debate or decision-making, librarians and their customers both have to be in a place where their immediate and urgent needs are met. This is not currently the case in the majority of local authorities across Scotland.

Final snapshot

A final two quantitative questions were asked of public librarians 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 librarians to reflect on the extent to which their library supports five essential needs: access to digital devices / Wi-Fi; access to essential warm spaces; access to learning resources and training; access to trusted sources of information; and addressing isolation.

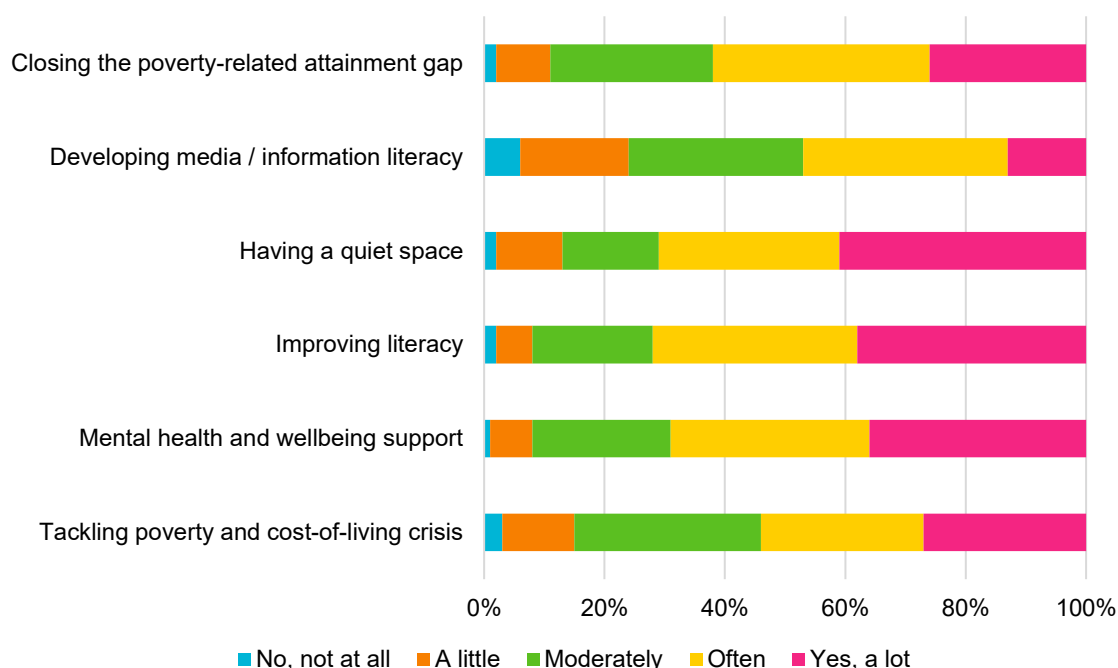


- 93% of librarians agreed that libraries support access to digital devices / Wi-Fi 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 89% agreed that libraries are essential warm spaces 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 79% agreed that libraries support access to trusted sources of information 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 80% agreed that libraries address social isolation 'often' or 'a lot'.
- Over half of librarians agreed that libraries support access to learning resources and training 'often' or 'a lot' (53%).

The overwhelming agreement across these metrics reinforce the stories librarians have shared throughout the survey.

The last question asked librarians to reflect on the extent to which their library addresses the six following issues: closing the poverty-related attainment gap; developing media / information literacy; having a quiet space; 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?



Compared to the previous matrix, a larger proportion of librarians felt that their library does not adequately address the above issues – ranging from 1–6% choosing 'no, not at all', and 6–18% choosing 'a little'.

'Moderately' took up more space in librarians' responses to this question – ranging from 16–31%.

- 62% of librarians agreed that their library addresses the poverty-related attainment gap 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 47% of librarians agreed that their library develops media / information literacy 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 71% of librarians agreed that their library provides a quiet space 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 72% agreed that their library improves literacy 'often' or 'a lot'.

- 69% agreed that their library addresses mental health and wellbeing support 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 54% agreed that their library helps tackle poverty and the cost-of-living crisis. 'often' or 'a lot'.

Conclusion

The evidence gathered from the librarian surveys clearly shows that public libraries have a profound, wide-ranging impact across all four themes of this research – reading for pleasure, learning opportunities, digital inclusion and active citizenship – and that they are crucial in removing inequity across all intersections of Scottish life.

This report identifies a number of enabling factors that are key to the value and impact of public libraries, namely:

1. Free access to all forms of books and information
2. Free access to Wi-Fi, digital devices, digital courses and ad-hoc support
3. Safe, warm space without time limits
4. Space of equity and respect for all
5. Knowledgeable, dedicated library workers
6. All of which create a **unique, irreplaceable provision**

Despite the fact that public libraries are essential – as safe spaces, as providers of digital utilities, as non-judgemental information centres, as community hubs – this report shows that the decades of funding cuts have already taken a toll on both the library service and the communities they serve:

- 1 in 3 librarians reported that their whole service is at risk of reduction or losses
- 82% – or, 4 in 5 librarians – reported a restriction on their funding and resources
- 1 in 3 librarians reported loss of a dedicated librarian and other library staff

The impact of funding cuts, short staffing and de-professionalisation in the sector is already evident – one respondent reported that they 'never' offer reading recommendations to library users:

'We've struggled to get time to offer reader dev[elopment] training to team members. We've also seen appointments at supervisor level take place where no

library knowledge was part of skill set of successful candidate, depleting pool of those who could offer training.'

Libraries are adapting as best they can to ever-increasing demand among ever-increasing funding cuts – e.g. providing shuttle services to/from the space, facilitating crucial additional learning groups for jobseekers, carers, or people in Sheltered Housing, and offering alternative formats like Large Print, audiobooks, or ebooks – all for free.

One respondent also noted a lack of middle management-level appreciation of the library's provision for further learning:

'The service has had budget cuts and vital staff have left so there is no appetite from middle management for offering any other service than the backward "a library is about books and nothing else".'

Libraries are filling their communities' unmet needs in the wake of social cuts, deprivation, and digital poverty, particularly for the isolated or immobile aging populus. The evidence from this research is stark:

- 2 in 3 librarians (66%) reported their community faces digital poverty
- Half of those providing specific individual examples of how their library supports digital access / inclusion within their community (49%) reported that they provide ad-hoc digital support in their day-to-day role
- 1 in 4 of those offering comments on the importance of the library in providing further learning (25%) indicated that there was strong public demand for further education / learning opportunities, many of whom noted, 'more could be done'.

Perhaps most sobering from these reflections is the example provided by one librarian in a local authority with a large rural population:

'Wi-Fi is available outside the building and we often have people hanging around there when the library is closed. There is a space that is covered and I'm arranging to get a bench put there so at least they have a seat to access the Wi-Fi any time they need, rather than crouching on the concrete.'

Research clearly shows that public libraries operate as anchor institutions⁴⁵ for communities – in other words, public libraries reach diverse audiences, empower individuals with trusted, accurate information, offer safe spaces, and promote democratically engaged and informed communities^{46,47}.

This report reinforces the fact that public libraries reach a diversified audience (86% of librarians agree) and that they provide equal and free access to trusted information (87% of librarians agree). Over 9 in 10 librarians agreed their library offers a safe space to their community.

However, this report indicates a clear rupture from the final metric of promoting democratically engaged and informed communities – only 55% of librarians agreed. The reasons for this departure are clear:

- 16% of those offering comments around democratic engagement noted that funding, staff cuts and library closures pose a greater and urgent crisis

The librarians who keep these spaces open, running and relevant in and for their community are bridging gaps for which their role has had to expand without sufficient support or resource.

Nowhere else in modern life, whether urban or rural, is there a public space where anyone can enter and remain without the expectation of payment or labour. Nowhere else is there a public space where people can access information, combat digital poverty, learn new skills, socialise with others, express themselves creatively, and seek to self-improve, entirely for free. These institutions are vital for every person in Scotland, and they are endangered.

Scottish Book Trust recommendations will be published with the final reporting arising from this research project in late 2024.

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