

Support for libraries

OVERDUE

Who are we?

Speak Up For Libraries is a coalition of national organisations and library campaigners working to protect library services and staff, now and in the future.

What are we asking for?

Speak Up For Libraries are calling on MPs to ask the government to:

- Enforce the law that says local authorities must provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service
- Acknowledge that libraries are important to people—especially during a recession
- Give libraries a long term future, with a vision for their development and clear standards of service
- Ensure councils have enough money to provide quality services that are well-planned and sufficiently staffed.

Inside this pack you will find more information about why libraries are so important to people, including facts, quotes and case studies.

Please use this information and help us to Speak Up For Libraries!

SPEAK UP
for libraries

— The provision of library services is a statutory duty for local authorities.

— The government is neglecting its responsibility to ensure adherence to the law.

“Libraries hold up lamps by whose light we expand and grow, grant us glimpses into other lives, support our skills and our understanding, speak across distance and time and race and culture”

“They are the heart and soul of our community – so much goes on in the library and the adjacent meeting rooms – reading opens the soul – we should be encouraging it!”

— 1850: The first Public Library Act gives local authorities the option to rate-fund public libraries.

— 1964: The Public Libraries & Museums Act places a clear duty on local authorities to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service. The Secretary of State (DCMS) has a legal duty to supervise the service – and intervene if standards fall too far.

— There have been some calls to repeal the 1964 Act. But the current Secretary of State and his (Labour) predecessor declared their full support. The duty remains. Removing it would enable councils to cut services drastically, leading to a ‘post code lottery’ of provision – quite possibly the complete disappearance of libraries in some areas.

— Even with the 1964 Act in place, services are being broken up. Some councils are crudely cutting costs without regard for the long term consequences for their communities. In some areas, half the libraries are being closed. In others, more than half will be closed unless local people can run them – as volunteers working for free.

— There has been almost universal local opposition – and several high profile campaigns. There have been numerous direct appeals to the DCMS to help. But there has been little or no reaction from the government.

— Campaigners have been forced to challenge councils’ decisions through the courts, in expensive judicial reviews. For instance, Gloucestershire and Somerset and more recently Lincolnshire were found severely wanting.

— Still there is no input or intervention from the government.

How much damage to the library service will it take to make the DCMS carry out its legal duties?

— Libraries are uniquely accessible public spaces.

— They offer a wide range of services, to communities and individuals alike.

— They contribute to key priorities such as education, health, youth, social mobility & more.

— In a recession they are a vital public resource.

“Libraries are places where people of all ages, outlooks, backgrounds, incomes, circumstances and opinions meet and mix”

“They are a place for everyone, toddler to senior citizens – to meet and learn. A friendly and welcoming environment for reading books and using the latest technology”

“My library card is probably as valuable as a credit card”

Public Libraries lend 262.7m books a year. There are 10.3m active borrowers. 60% of 5-10yr olds and 77% of 11-15yr olds visit the library. Children’s fiction borrowing has risen for 8yrs running.

Libraries routinely score highly in surveys of residents’ satisfaction with local authority services.

— Libraries remain the lynchpin of communities in villages, towns and cities alike. Often they are the only public building left in the area. As a flexible, free-to-use public space they are open to people of all ages and backgrounds. They offer social interaction or a safe place to come to alone. They are a uniquely trusted source of impartial information and advice.

— Libraries have always been about access to education, knowledge and enjoyment, most often through books. Books remain their mainstay. But they are adapting. There is almost no limit to the services they can provide to different groups, at very low cost.

— All libraries offer the internet and support to access it, usually for free. One third of homes still do not have access to the internet. Increasingly, jobs and benefits can be applied for only online. Education demands internet access. And, of course, the internet makes a vast collection of resources available at micro-local level.

— Far from being obsolete, libraries are more important than ever. Literacy is just one example. Libraries play a crucial role in getting pre-school children into reading, and are popular with school children and teens. The National Literacy Trust reports that one child in three does not own a book (compared to one in ten seven years ago), and that a child who visits a library is twice as likely to read well.

— Some people are lifelong library users. Others dip in and out of the service when it suits them. As with other public services (such as schools, hospitals, care homes), we don’t always need them. But we expect them to be there for those who do.

Properly planned and funded, public libraries’ reach is almost limitless and represents good value for money.

— The statutory duty should be underpinned by a national vision for a modern library service.

— This should include set standards, and a ‘national offer’ framework to support local delivery.

“They are the portals of all knowledge and culture. They’re open to us all. They will never be reprinted once closed, and must be safeguarded for the future”

“I love libraries because of the three ‘E’s: Education, Enlightenment, Entertainment. All available at the library”

— Scotland and Wales have core standards for the library service. Local authorities are free to adapt services to local needs; but core standards must be met. This prevents ‘post-code lottery’ provision. People have a clear idea of what they can expect from their library service. Such standards used to exist in England. We want to add our collective voice to the call for standards to be re-established.

— The lack of leadership in the library sector has been described as ‘woeful’. There have been numerous calls for a coherent development programme. Even before the recent cuts to local government funding, many local authorities cut book stock, opening hours and staffing levels. No doubt they were emboldened by the lack of central oversight from government.

— Staff report that libraries are seldom marketed, and often exist in isolation from other council services – ignoring their huge reach. Despite this, libraries still have a significant following. They have developed innovative services, embraced the digital age, yet retained the core values of access, information and knowledge.

— The statutory duty, far from being a burden, shows just how important the public library service is. The powers of the Secretary of State are there for a reason. They are needed to set out – and put into practice – a clear vision of what a public library service should be and how it will be developed into the 21st century.

— Without such guidance there is now a very real risk that the public library service will be fatally fragmented, and damaged beyond recognition. There are already wide regional and local disparities, meaning some local authorities’ services are far from ‘comprehensive and efficient’.

— Now is the time to address this issue. We need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the public library service. Standards do not mean uniform provision. They set out the minimum level of service local people can expect. From there it is the responsibility of local authorities to engage with communities, users and staff to design services that meet the needs of the area.

— **Public library services provide a wide range of services that support the most vulnerable, and serve many local authority priorities.**

— **They should be resourced by government to enable local councils to deliver services that are sustainably planned, well-staffed and tailored to the needs of local communities.**

“They are the heart of the community, supply information, look after historic documents, the first point of contact for new people to the area, as well as providing for both old and young, computer access, books... It costs much more to reinstate a library as it does to maintain one. This is about short term gain, very shortsighted”

— Public library services typically amount to 1- 2% of an entire council budget. This is good value for money, given the wide range of services provided, the number of people accessing the facilities and the number of other local authority priorities that benefit from them.

— Libraries host scores of initiatives that support the most vulnerable members of society – study space, health information, mental health reading groups, memory cafes for people with Alzheimer’s disease, clubs for teens, older people, ethnic minorities, people with learning disabilities – the list goes on.

— Such services are preventative, helping to keep people (and, crucially, their families and carers) well and less likely to become isolated or experience a crisis. In the long term, these initiatives save money. It may be difficult to quantify in crude figures, but it is short-sighted to suggest otherwise.

— Since the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review central government funding to local government has been severely reduced. For every £1 a council received in formula grant in 2010-11 it will get 67.6p in 2014-15. We are concerned that as councils face difficult choices, library services are seen as an easy target.

— Libraries have already taken a disproportionate hit since 2010. An estimated 600 English libraries currently face closure. Those that escape the axe often face significant reductions in resources, stock and staffing. These will affect libraries’ ability to meet the needs of local communities. At a time of severe recession, we argue that public libraries are an essential resource – a place to access books, the internet and lifelong learning at no cost.

— During 2011/12 the Government identified £250m for weekly waste collection and £805m for a Council Tax Freeze in 2012/13 – but £0 for libraries. The Local Government Association estimates that the Government will have £1,100m in 2013/14 and £3,500m in 2014/15 from business rates. Decisions on what this money will be spent on have not yet been made.

¹2010/11 Formula Grant to local authorities was £20.074bn; 2014/15 Formula Grant to local authorities will be £13.573bn – figures exclude previous specific grants ‘rolled in’.

Quotes provided by the National Federation of Women’s Institutes and Voices for the Library.

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Public libraries are an essential safety net. We call on the government to look again at local authority funding, and ensure there are funds to enable libraries to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

Case studies

Domestic Violence, How Surrey Libraries Can Help

"With their dedicated staff, libraries are trusted, safe and much-needed public spaces. Domestic abuse is often ignored or overlooked but that has to stop. This is a very powerful example of how librarians are helping those who need it the most."

With their award-winning project, Surrey County Council Libraries offers support and guidance to those experiencing domestic abuse and to survivors of domestic abuse, providing vital information and resources in a safe environment. They help those who have experienced sexual, emotional, physical, financial and violent abuse, forced marriage and genital mutilation. They also work with frontline domestic abuse professionals to support their work and jointly develop services to increase awareness throughout the Surrey population of the scale of domestic abuse in the county. Highlights of Surrey County Council Libraries work includes: Information through specialised book stock, dedicated web pages and signposting to other local and national services. Events for residents experiencing domestic abuse, including self-esteem workshops, poetry sessions run with a local survivors support group, and a poetry and art session run with the local youth support group service. A domestic abuse survivors reading group. e-book readers and e-book downloading training for refuge residents.

KidsHub Library Sessions - Hertfordshire Library Service in partnership with the charity KidsHub

"We want to reach those families that aren't yet using the service"

This project runs closed library sessions and special tailored activity sessions for children aged 0-19 and their families, who have additional needs such as autism, cerebral palsy and profound and multiple learning difficulties, recognising that this community was not typically part of their visitor profile.

Working with KidsHub, Hertfordshire Libraries learned that many parents of children with special needs worry that their children would be disruptive of other visitors in the library space, and that the children themselves are often unsettled by new environments and experiences.

The tailored closed sessions allow these members of the community to use the library without feeling anxious or uncomfortable.

This has opened the library up as a welcome place for the projects' families to visit during regular opening hours and many of the children and their families now have enriched lives with access to books, reading & the library's electronic resources and a welcome place to visit, socialise and integrate with other members of the community.