



The value and impact of Scotland's public libraries

Final report

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**Scottish
Book Trust**

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Background

This report is a result of Scottish Book Trust undertaking independent research into the value and impact of public and school libraries in Scotland, in partnership with the National Library of Scotland (NLS), the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC), and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland (CILIPS). This research took place between late 2023 – officially launched in Libraries Week (2–8 October) – and early 2025.

Scotland's school libraries (primary and secondary) have no legal statutory duty for adequate library provision. Although Scotland's public libraries do have a statutory duty 'to secure the provision of adequate library facilities for all persons resident in their area', they have no uniform standard for what that must offer¹.

As a result, across the public and school library sector, Scotland's communities face a lack of equitable access².

Aims

Scottish Book Trust works across every local authority in Scotland, striving to offer opportunities for all people to share their stories; as such, Scottish Book Trust is uniquely positioned to bear witness. Following an initial literature review, four banner themes were chosen:

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

Through these themes, the sheer breadth of the profound impact that Scotland's libraries have on their communities can be explored, as can the ways they bridge the gaps left by the inaccessibility of – and barriers to – other services as a result of, for example, the cost-of-living crisis³, digital inequality⁴, the consequences of the Covid pandemic⁵, poverty⁶, and wealth inequality⁷.

This report investigates how public libraries address inequality across these four research themes, and through many intersections of Scotland's communities.

[Separate reports on the impact of school libraries are available on the Scottish Book Trust website.](#)

Methods

This report compiles findings from four methods of evaluation:

1. **Open surveys of public librarians** (October 2023 – January 2024)
Across every local authority in Scotland (315 responses total)
2. **Open survey of public library users** (January – June 2024)
Across every local authority in Scotland (1,933 responses total)
3. Quantitative data gathering from **existing FOI requests** and **public domain** information on local authority websites (Autumn 2023 – Autumn 2024)
4. **Research interviews** (March – May 2024)
11 librarians from public settings, and two external experts

Preliminary findings arising from the public and school librarian surveys have already been published and are available on the Scottish Book Trust website⁸.

A note on the term 'librarian': in this report, this term includes both qualified librarians and any other library staff seeking to support their service. The breakdown of qualified and unqualified librarians in the quantitative research serves to indicate those who have had specialised training in information management – it is not a value judgement on the quality of any one service. As such, 'librarian' in this report indicates any library worker.

Furthermore, this research does not specifically cover the value and impact of mobile libraries in Scotland, though these are vital access points, particularly in rural areas. Nationwide studies of mobile libraries and their importance were published by SLIC in 2018⁹ and 2024¹⁰.

Main findings

Public domain information

Public libraries – closures and opening hours

Between 2010 and 2022, according to *The Scotsman*, more than 1 in 8 public libraries in Scotland were forced to close¹¹. Funding over the same period was cut by 30%, even though annual footfall increased by over 40%.

In terms of specific numbers of library closures, the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) have verified that 53 public libraries have closed in Scotland between 2014 and 2024¹².

No other public source of information is available to tally or monitor the numbers of library closures aside from what high-level statistics are published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). CIPFA have cited that in 2008, 604 libraries were open in Scotland, decreasing to 521 in 2018¹³ – however, these figures are unreliable, as they are not comprehensive, they do not have a rigorous definition of service points, and they do not offer a specific breakdown of what public libraries are included.

With this caveat, Scottish Book Trust recognises that the figure of 604 libraries in 2008 is the only available data point stretching back that far as a basis for comparison.

CIPFA's reports in 2019¹⁴ differ slightly from those reported in *The Scotsman* in 2022, which claimed that 627 public libraries were operating in Scotland in 2009/10, decreasing to 544 in 2019/20¹⁵. Both of these sources, however, indicate a similar 13–14% decrease in the number of libraries overall in the period 2008/09 to 2018–20*.

* A caveat is necessary for citing statistics from CIPFA: there is no breakdown available of how they calculate their totals, which library services they count or discount, and whether or not their numbers

Quantitative research undertaken by Scottish Book Trust in summer / autumn 2023 and again summer / autumn 2024 indicates that (taking CIPFA figures as the standard) **the total number of public libraries in Scotland has decreased by 97 between 2008 and 2024** – that is **more than 1 in 8**, correlating with the statistic published by *The Scotsman*.

This means that **at least 16% of public libraries have closed in Scotland** between 2008 and 2024. (See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of further information.)

This statistic – 97 library closures in Scotland between 2008 and 2024 – is one outcome of this project's quantitative study, which tracked public information available on each local authority website across Scotland – this information was compiled into a spreadsheet that compared the total number of public libraries listed between August – October 2023, and again in October 2024, as well as their advertised opening hours.

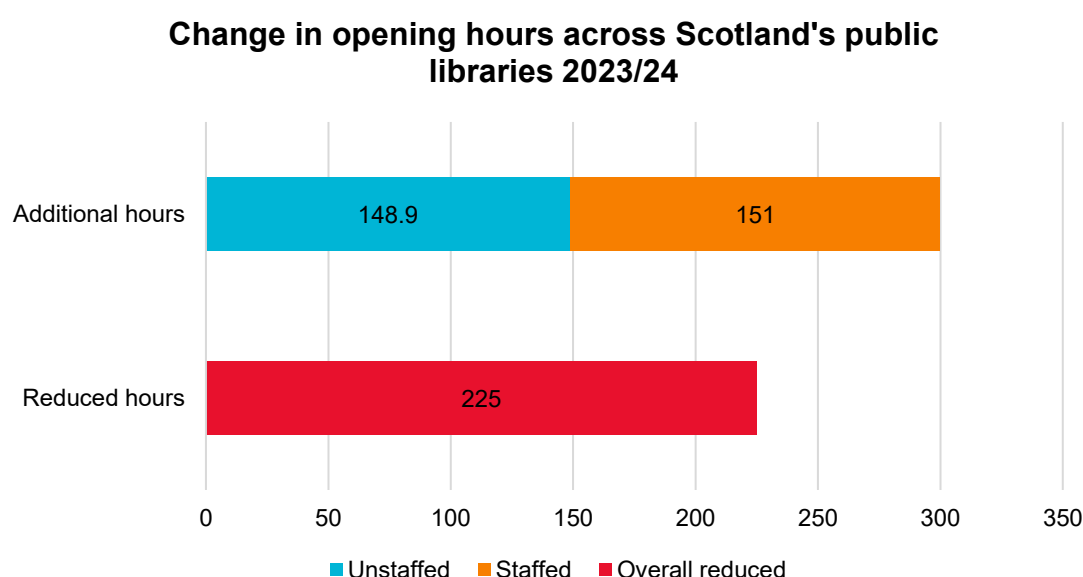
As of October 2024, Scottish Book Trust found there were 470 public libraries operating in Scotland (including five temporarily closed or under construction); this represented another decrease from the audit taken as of October 2023, when there were 472 public libraries operating in Scotland (again, including five temporary closures / under construction). Including the number of mobile libraries reported by SLIC in 2024 – which amounted to 37 – this brings the total number of libraries to 507 as of 2024.

When read alongside the CIPFA figures, there is a calculable decrease of 16% between 2008 (604 public and mobile libraries) and 2024 (507 public and mobile libraries).

Local authorities are obliged to advertise their public libraries' opening hours, and as such, the information published on their websites should be a reliable indicator of the most up-to-date and correct reflection of the public library service.

are comprehensive. Despite this unreliability, they are the only available source of historic statistics. To best mitigate any inaccuracies, key stakeholders in the sector have fed into and advised on this analysis to ensure it is as robust as possible.

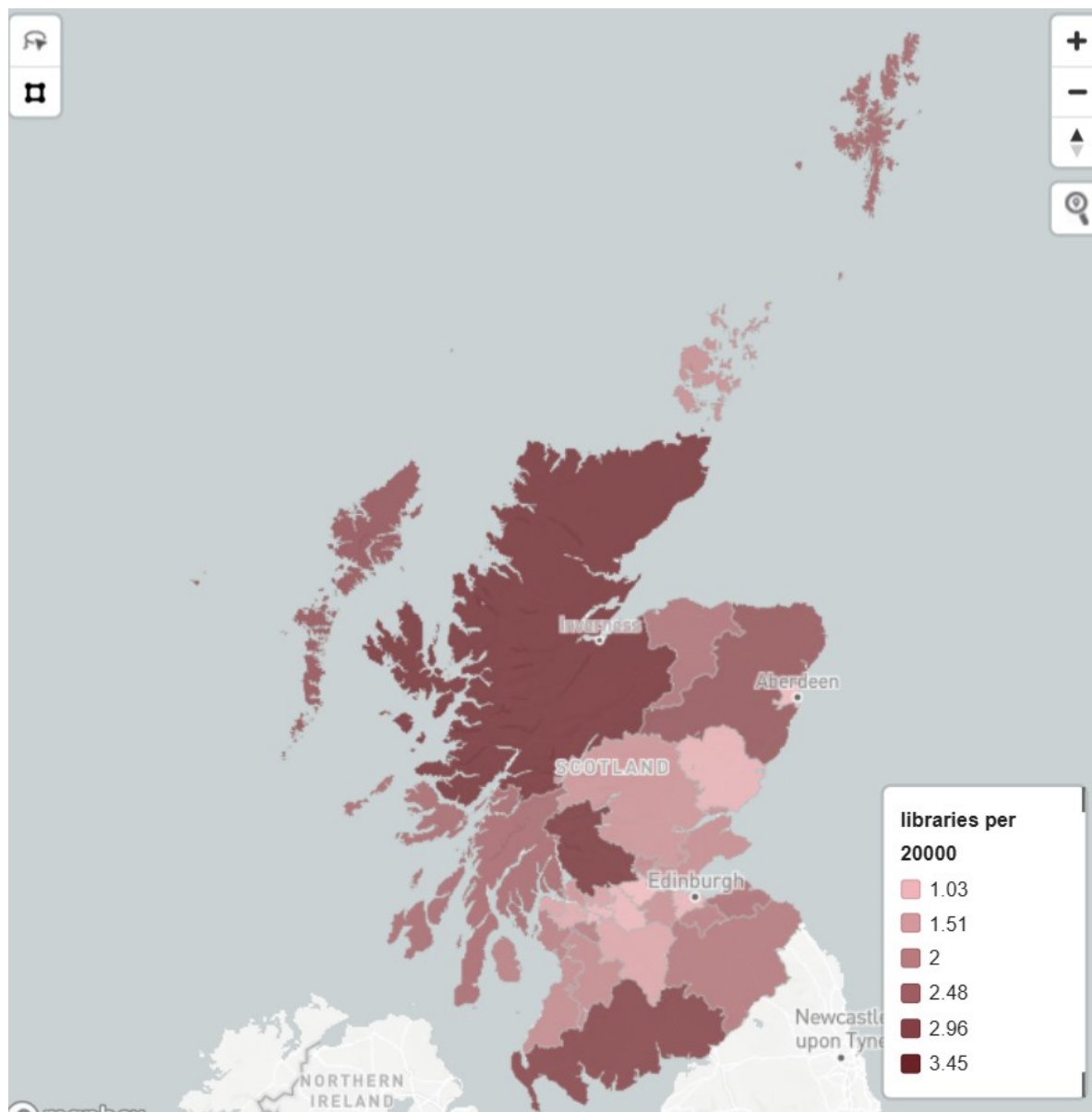
The same quantitative data therefore found a noticeable **decrease in staffed public library opening hours**. Looking at the whole picture of public libraries in Scotland's 32 local authorities, there was a total reduction of 225 hours per week in opening times between October 2023 and October 2024. This reduction does not include the total number of additional opening hours, which amounted to 299 hours and 55 minutes – of which, only 148 hours and 55 minutes were staffed. (See Appendix 2 for a breakdown of further information.)



As of October 2024, Scotland's local authorities added 151 hours of unstaffed time to their public library service compared to the previous October. (Unstaffed hours means the library space is open, but there are no librarians present.)

Looking at the total reduction and total additional staffed hours together, there was **an overall reduction of just over 76 hours per week** in staffed opening times of Scotland's public libraries between 2023 and 2024. The importance of staffing libraries appropriately cannot be overstated: trained staff are vital to help the general public access information, provide ad hoc digital support, offer reading recommendations tailored to their needs and ensure the space is kept secure, safe and fit for purpose.

Public libraries by population



The Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC), as part of their 2021–2025 Public Library Strategy¹⁶, relaunched their Community Planning Insights Tool¹⁷ in 2025, which correlates the number of public libraries per 20,000 people in the population, mapped out by local authority. The map above clearly shows that there are the most libraries per 20,000 population in Highland, Stirling and Dumfries and Galloway; the least served populations are in Falkirk, North Lanarkshire and Glasgow City, followed closely by Edinburgh, Angus and Renfrewshire. The following table pulls data from the same tool:

Local Authority	Libraries per 20,000 people
Highland	3.45
Stirling	3.33
Dumfries and Galloway	3.17
Western Isles	2.91
Aberdeenshire	2.85
Shetland Islands	2.6
Argyll and Bute	2.51
East Lothian	2.41
Moray	2.36
Scottish Borders	2.29
East Renfrewshire	2.21
North Ayrshire	2.18
Midlothian	2.17
East Ayrshire	1.97
South Ayrshire	1.96
Clackmannanshire	1.95
Fife	1.92
Dundee City	1.91
Orkney Islands	1.88
West Lothian	1.83
West Dunbartonshire	1.78

Perth and Kinross	1.78
East Dunbartonshire	1.53
Inverclyde	1.49
South Lanarkshire	1.47
Renfrewshire	1.38
Angus	1.21
City of Edinburgh	1.18
Glasgow City	1.13
North Lanarkshire	1.13
Aberdeen City	1.08
Falkirk	1.03

The tool notes that it is 'a work in progress as more data is continually added', and that it 'draws upon existing open data and can be used to plan local library service delivery'. Its sources for population numbers and open libraries are dated to 2024.

This map gives a clear and helpful snapshot of the lived experience of people across Scotland: in both the capital city of Edinburgh (population as of 2022: over 514,000¹⁸) and the largest city, Glasgow (over 620,000¹⁹), there is effectively one library for every 20,000 people. The same is true for Aberdeen, with its 224,000+ inhabitants²⁰, and just 1.62 libraries per 20,000 people.

What is hidden in the healthier stats – showing 2+ libraries per 20,000 people in rural areas such as Moray, Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Shetland, Western Isles, Dumfries and Galloway and Highland – is the digital inequality in many remote areas²¹, insufficient public transport links²² and limited opening hours and staffing across the library sector²³, all of which will make access to the library and its provision far more difficult.

Public library funding information

Funding of public libraries is devolved to the local authorities or their associated leisure trusts, which are legally obliged to maintain records of their income and expenditure and make them publicly accessible²⁴. However, the mechanism by which these records are publicly accessible is not clear.

Year-on-year, many though not all local authorities or their associated leisure trusts disclose their libraries' finances to the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). CIPFA then prepare aggregated reports of UK-wide public library statistics based on the information they receive, which looks across revenue, expenditure and income, staffing levels, service points open to the public, book stock and audio visual and electronic stock, annual issues, inter-library loans, requests, enquiries and footfall²⁵.

However, CIPFA is not obligated to give the public free access to these summaries. For example: as of October 2024, the summary document for 2019/20 would cost an individual £480 to download²⁶.

Libraries do not have a statutory obligation to provide this data to CIPFA, and anecdotal evidence suggests that some librarians – due to strains on capacity and resource – are unable to prepare and submit these disclosures.



The general public is entitled to submit a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to a local authority, to be given access to the information that they customarily send to CIPFA.

However, there are two FOI exemptions²⁷ that some local authorities or associated leisure trusts have signalled as a barrier to disclosing public library expenditure – namely that (1) the data is reasonably accessible by other means, i.e. the public can obtain the data directly from CIPFA, and (2) the data is of commercial interest, as CIPFA can profit from providing an aggregated report on it.

These exemptions could be – and have been – overturned on appeal, on the basis that the data is not 'reasonably' accessible to the public when it is behind a paywall; CIPFA's commercial interests derive from the value they provide in their aggregated reports rather than the raw data alone; and, according to FOI regulations, even in the case of an exemption due to commercial interest, 'the information must be disclosed unless the public interest in withholding it outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information'²⁸.

Despite the legal barriers, members of the public have persevered in FOI requests to each local authority in an attempt to access information about library expenditure, staffing, stock and footfall. Some of those requests, despite appeals, were not successful, due to the local authority invoking an FOI exemption and refusing to disclose the information. The correspondence – as well as any successful requests – are all available to read online²⁹, as part of the Freedom of Information Act. More information is available on LibrariesHacked.com, a project to promote and help libraries publish their data.

The outcome of this is that there is no comprehensive picture available of Scotland's public library expenditure, staffing, stock and footfall, despite this being public data that should be freely accessible.

This research project cannot provide analysis regarding Scotland's public library funding per local authority, except by citing ongoing reports from local authorities regarding proposed cuts or restrictions to service.

Settings and roles

In a survey of 315 public librarians across every local authority, Scottish Book Trust found that **30%** were **qualified librarians** – someone who holds a qualification obtained from a CILIP-accredited course or has a level of CILIP Professional Registration such as Certification of Chartership.

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 requests³⁰.

This reduction 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 posts³¹. This reconfiguration is not exclusive to Aberdeenshire; survey responses detailed in this report indicate similar trends across all of Scotland, often in attempts to keep costs down. One such example illustrated the impact of this precarity on librarians:

'I'd say there is a very kind of low morale in with my colleagues and I think that's quite worrying. I think customers do pick up on it, you know, and I think when we don't know if a library's gonna stay open or what our new opening hours are going to be or anything, it's difficult to be sure or encourage people to come back to keep using the library, I think.

But also, sometimes there's really talented, passionate people in our libraries that just keep getting told, "no, there's no money for it. No, there's no desire for that. No, no, no."

When asked more specifically about their role, almost half (45%) of responding public librarians identified themselves as 'library assistants' – only 7% of these were also qualified – and barely a quarter (24%) of responding public librarians described their role as 'library manager'. Just 6% identified as 'head librarian'.

Compared to the survey findings outlining how long librarians have been working in the sector – over half (54%) had worked for 10+ years, and a further 18% for 6–10

years – their self-identified **job titles** clearly **do not represent or recognise that experience or seniority**.

A note on salaries: an independent report on Information Management salaries in 2019 noted an average salary of £27,000 p.a. for a library assistant, £32,000 p.a. for a library manager and £53,500 p.a. for a head librarian³².

These figures are dependent on qualifications, experience, location, library size, team structure, chartership and, crucially, local authority (different authorities have different pay scales).

Moreover, there is a significant gender pay gap, with women earning **on average 20% less** than men, though women make up 73% of the workforce³³.

Therefore, despite 72% of respondents having senior-level experience, they are overwhelmingly relegated to a role and salary that is not commensurate with their skills, knowledge and experience.

In the survey of public librarians across every local authority:

- 1 in 3 responding librarians reported their **whole service is at risk of reduction or losses**
- 82% – or, 4 in 5 responding librarians – reported a restriction on their funding and resources
- 1 in 3 responding 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:

'I think always, always at the back of our mind is that, as your local community who appreciates your library, your main issue is always advocating to the Council and the local authority, to justify your existence all the time.'

Already librarians face a lack of capacity, funding and recognition for their work; having to set aside what little they do have in order to 'justify [their] existence' indicates the extent to which the library service is undervalued.

Funding restrictions enact further pressure on library services to prove their achievements in financial terms. However, as one librarian shared, 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.'

This is a key issue cited consistently across surveys and interviews. **Librarians are expected to report on the achievements of their work and service in terms that often fail to evidence their true impact.** Moreover, the headcount of a central library in Aberdeen or Edinburgh will naturally be larger than a small library in the Highlands, or a library that's in decline due to annual budget cuts. A cost-based approach prioritises more populated areas by default and continues to isolate rural areas that are often the most in need of their local library for utilities like bus passes, digital devices or Wi-Fi.

The longer-term impact of these funding restrictions is clearly illustrated in one librarian's anecdotal recounting of their service's **managed decline**:

'It's the [...] financial pressures that make doing my job really difficult. I started a couple of years ago and we were really pushing outreach and engagement. But over the past six to nine months, I think with financial pressure across all the arts, there's been a sharp U-turn on engagement, and we are becoming more of a place to come and put your books, and we're really struggling with getting staff in because we don't have budget. We're not able to do everything that makes the job fun or rewarding and makes the library more of like a hub for the community.'

I think that's what's I'm really struggling with on a daily basis where we've been having to close a lot more, things like that. It's really disappointing.'

Reading for pleasure

'The library makes a huge difference to me and my family. The opportunity to try out new authors and genres is huge but all the other things that the library provides is immense. It is a safe space for many. We would be lost without it.'

– Library user

Scottish Book Trust, among others, has published findings on the importance of reading for pleasure for tackling poverty³⁴, improving pupil attainment³⁵, increasing self-esteem at a young age³⁶, greater mental wellbeing³⁷, building resilience³⁸ and enhancing empathy³⁹. Studies show that adults who read 'for just 30 minutes a week are 20% more likely to report greater life satisfaction'⁴⁰.

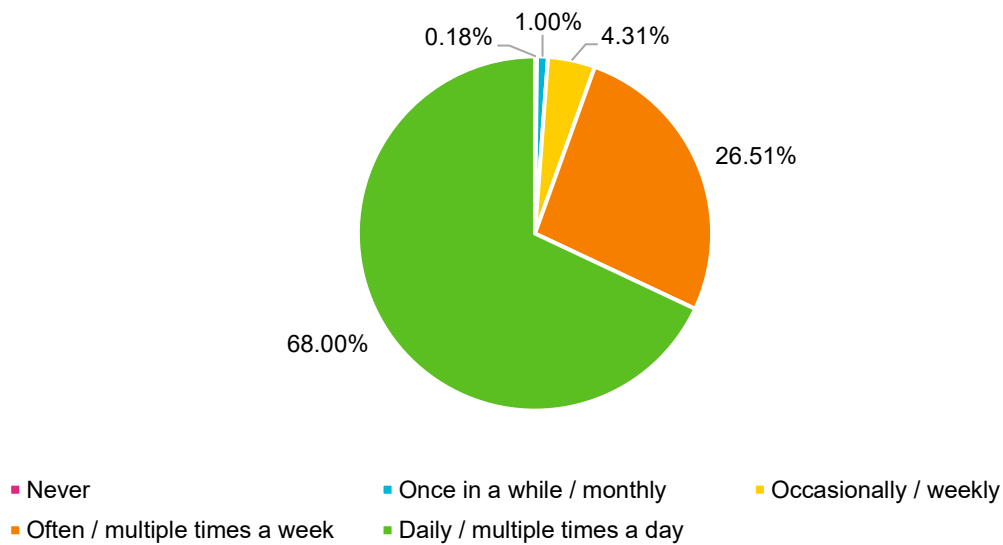
Moreover, reading for pleasure is proven to have a greater and longer-lasting effect on adult literacy than formal teaching⁴¹. In Scotland, over 1 in 4 adults might face challenges due to their low literacy skills⁴². It's estimated that 'the average worker in the UK with very low literacy will earn approximately 7.1% less than if they had a basic level of literacy'⁴³.

By investigating the impact of public libraries on reading for pleasure, this research also indicates potential longer-term impact on these factors relating to health and wellbeing, socio-economic status and personal development.

Library users

In the open survey of library users, respondents self-reported high rates of reading for pleasure, averaging at 4.6 stars ('daily / multiple times a day') out of 5 – or, as illustrated in pie chart form:

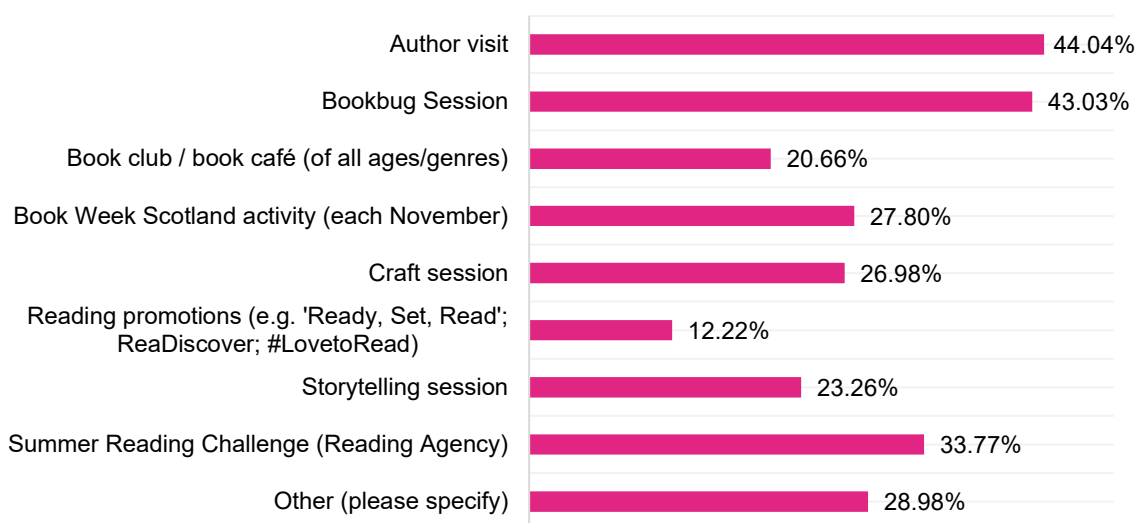
How much time do you (or your family) spend reading for pleasure?
(1,694 respondents)



This indicates a high rate of reading for pleasure, which – given that the respondents are those most likely to spend time at or invested in their local library – is not surprising. It is however encouraging that this data includes responses from all local authorities, and as such also indicates a nationwide snapshot of reading for pleasure, where 68% of the sample group read for pleasure 'daily / multiple times a day', followed by a quarter (26.51%) reading 'often / multiple times a week'.

There were also high rates of engagement among library users regarding reading programmes and activities in their public library:

Have you or your family ever attended any of the following activities in your local library? (Please check all that apply)
(1,694 respondents)



By far the most popular activities for library users are author visits (44.04% of responses) and Bookbug Sessions (43.03% of responses), followed closely by the Summer Reading Challenge (33.77% of responses).

Of the 28.98% respondents who chose 'other', many expressed a lack of awareness about what activities were available through their local library, but often a comparable curiosity about being involved:

- 'Not yet, but currently expecting our first child and so excited to take them to sessions. Used to go to similar things frequently growing up as a child in Cornwall and they were always a highlight.'
- 'I have not as yet but have often thought about it and now do want to look into it as a future activity.'
- 'No. I haven't attended any of these. I don't have children and don't know whether my local library offers events suitable for adults outside of my working hours.'
- 'None of these so far, but I'd be very interested in author visits, craft sessions and storytelling for adults.'

Others noted the impact of library closures on their access to such activities:

- 'Only when we had our local library!'



Library users were asked to reflect on ways **their library supports reading for pleasure**. 1,586 responses to an open comment box, of unlimited length, illustrated the immense affection, gratitude and reliance they felt for their local libraries.

Overarching themes and concerns reflected within these responses include,

1. Accessibility of the library

- i. Importance of high-quality stock
- ii. Lack of commercial interest means stock is trustworthy, verifiable
- iii. Ability to reserve titles
- iv. Access to special collections, archives, newspapers
- v. Online access to ebooks and audiobooks

2. Affordability

- i. People reported being otherwise unable to access books or resources, due to cost

- ii. Lack of cost at the library means people can widen their reading and explore something they couldn't justify buying
- 3. Welcoming and knowledgeable staff
 - i. Recommendations help steer people in the right direction
 - ii. Encouraging and friendly staff build and sustain community
- 4. Literacy is crucial – not just a hobby
 - i. Reading is empowering

There was a particular emphasis on the **affordability** of the library, enabling members of the public to access books and materials that would otherwise be financially unreachable – for example:

- 'I love going to my local library and the staff are always so warm, welcoming and friendly and nothing is too much trouble for them. It's a lovely warm space to spend time in. There is always a wide variety of books of all genres and always a selection of newly published books too. As I'm on a low income and can't always afford as many books as I'd like, it's valuable for me to go to my local library and get the books I want. I also find it's a way to discover authors I hadn't heard about before. The library has also got a very good general reference section as well as a local reference section which contains valuable out of print books, both of which I've been able to look at and read books in.'

Intrinsic in this one library user's response is the direct impact that a welcoming librarian and well-stocked library has on learning opportunities: by providing a pathway to reading for pleasure, there is a direct route to further learning opportunities (which will be discussed further in the next section of this report).

Library users also stressed the direct influence that reading for pleasure has on **supporting mental health and wellbeing** by sustaining community and providing a family-friendly space. They also underlined the importance of library staff for maintaining and encouraging these supports:

- 'Librarians have found many books for me, suggested titles, recommended books. More than that chatted and were constantly friendly and helpful in

times when I felt bad. The library is a haven, a sanctuary from upset and hardship. More than once I have felt that I was saved from real misery by having the library close [by].'

- 'As a carer for my disabled husband I feel very isolated much of the time. I am in a book group and some months going to the library is the only time I get to socialise and speak with people. Our library staff is great at helping me find books that suit my interests and the fact that they take a minute or two to speak with me helps me feel better about life in general.'

Though only a snapshot of the huge volume of responses in the survey, these accounts reflect a Scottish populus that significantly benefits from a library service for more than simply books or resources, but as a stalwart defence against isolation, a reliable support for family growth and community development and a crucial safe space for anyone who needs it.

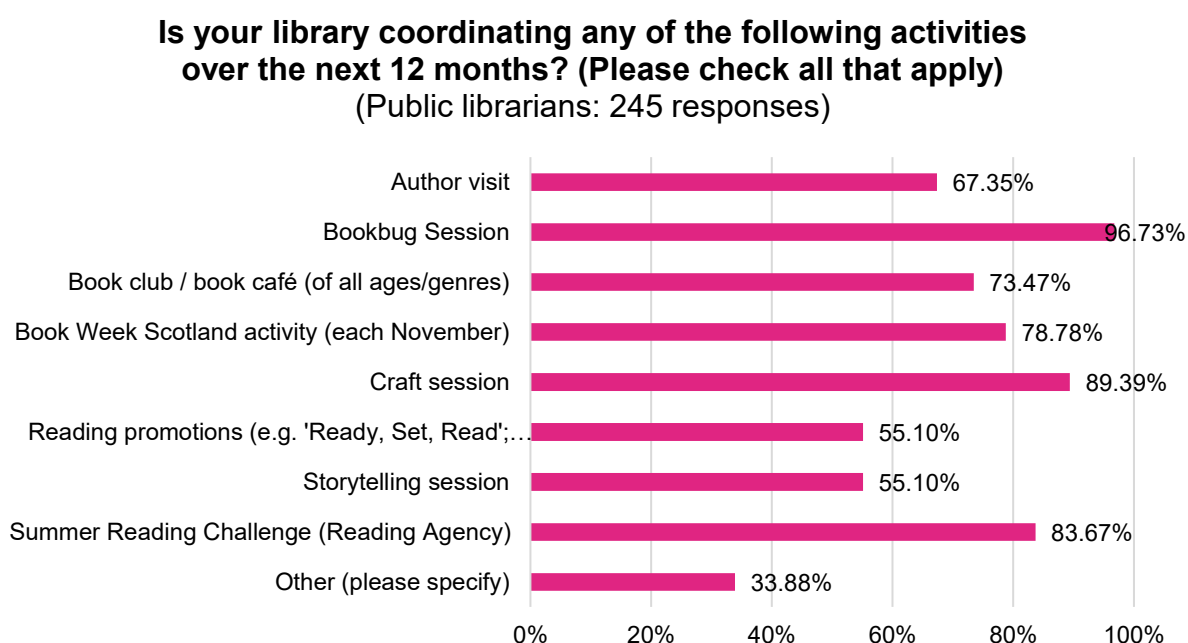
One library user also shared their experience of the affordability and community generated by their local library, contrasted heavily with **the impact of closures**:

- '[My library supports with...] access to books that I couldn't afford to read if I had to rely on buying them. My local library was an absolute lifeline when my children were very young. Somewhere welcoming and enriching I could take them where we could bump into other local parents. I find libraries to be a peaceful relaxing environment which is a vital resource to manage my anxiety. I am so sad that our local [...] Library has not yet reopened. A massive loss to the community.'

It is perennially difficult to gather data on the material impacts to a community in the wake of library closures, due to an absence of comparable spaces which provide such wide-ranging and supportive amenities. Here, a library user indicates succinctly the reliance they have on a library to provide access to books they cannot otherwise afford, to meet with neighbours and friends, to support children and young people and to offer a quiet place for wellbeing.

Public librarians

In the survey of public librarians – for which there are already preliminary findings available on the Scottish Book Trust website⁴⁴ – a healthy diversity of reading activities were reported across Scotland's libraries:



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

The most popular reading activities reported in libraries across Scotland are Bookbug Sessions (96.73%), craft sessions (89.39%), and reading challenges (83.67%) followed closely by Book Week Scotland activities (78.78%), book clubs / cafés (73.47%), and author visits (67.35%).

Open comments for 'other (please specify)' 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, e.g. 'Lego Club. Knit & Nattering groups, always take books when in'.

When asked if, or how, their library **promotes children and young people's reading for pleasure**, Scottish Book Trust received a wealth of responses from passionate librarians. They reported three primary methods of promoting reading for pleasure:

1. Essential provision for neurodiverse children and children with additional support needs, e.g.:

'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.'

2. Co-ordination with local schools, e.g.:

'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.'

3. Inspiring children and teens to read and be involved, e.g.:

'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.'

Another librarian in interview noted the hard work and inter-service support their colleagues offer to their own community, as well as the other branches in their area:

'We have got excellent staff that make up fantastic displays in our libraries to encourage reading for pleasure. There's lots of reading groups as well [...] We have some fantastic displays. We've got some really arty and crafty staff in branches and they come up with some amazing displays [...] We have a small team [...] and they go into libraries where the area librarian – that's the person that manages that area – has maybe said, "there's a branch that's needing a bit of help with tidying and things like that". And they zoom in provide help and support with weeding, bringing new stock, and try and refresh things so yeah, we've got a good selection.'

Librarians were also keen to champion their primary methods of **promoting adult reading for pleasure** through:

1. Activities catering to diverse interests, e.g.:

'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.'

2. Inclusive provision and accessibility, e.g.:

'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.'

3. Partnering with local community groups and organisations, e.g.:

'We host book groups for adults at all [...] 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.'

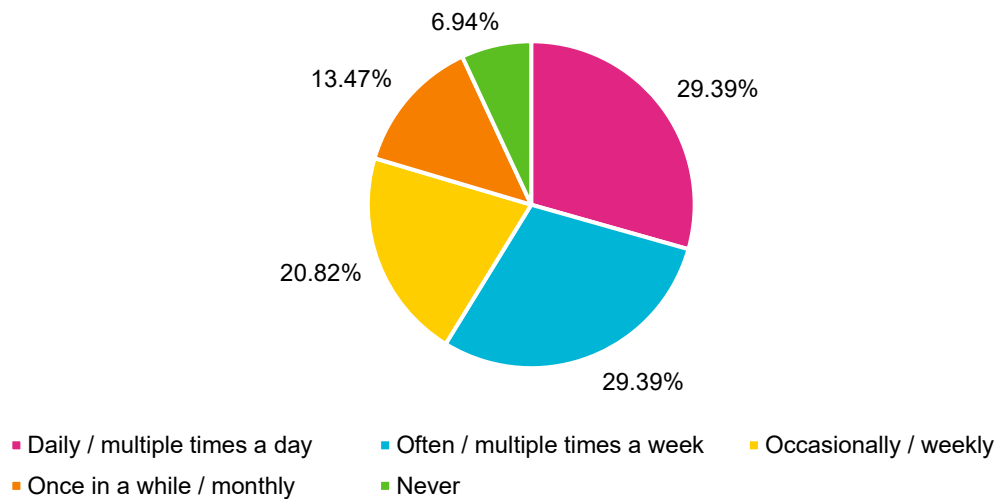
We host regular First Aid classes, Macmillan information sessions, Dementia Awareness Sessions, [...] Carers Centre Sessions, SAMH sessions, Sewing Classes, Lend and Mend Hub, ICT Classes, Job Seekers Group, have a Community Garden and Community Fridge, we host a Tea Dance for those within Sheltered 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.'

Yet, despite these positive and encouraging anecdotes, librarians reported some ambiguity in other findings, such as the frequency of reading recommendations:

How much time do you spend offering reading recommendations, or advice to people, to help them extend and develop their reading?

(Public librarians: 245 responses)



Here, responses are split almost equally between 'daily', 'often', and 'weekly', with over 1 in 5 noting such service happens 'once in a while' or 'never'.

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

- '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.'

- '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.'

Learning opportunities and the poverty-related attainment gap

'In the past libraries were viewed as just a place to borrow books from, but it's so much more than that now. We allow for people to come in and check their emails, for children to come in and use the PCs that they may not have access to at home, to complete their homework. People come in and do CVs or job interviews. We've even had people come in and do online exams, to come in and use the computers to learn English. There's such a huge, huge volume that we do for the community and especially for learning development.' – Librarian

Constraints around literacy and learning opportunities have far-reaching implications for both children and adults.

In Scotland, over 1 in 4 adults might face challenges and limited opportunities⁴⁵ 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 literacy⁴⁶.

The Covid pandemic exacerbated an existing literacy gap between those children and young people from the most and least advantaged backgrounds. The gap was most pronounced for pupils eligible for free school meals⁴⁷.

Libraries are key to closing this 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'⁴⁸.

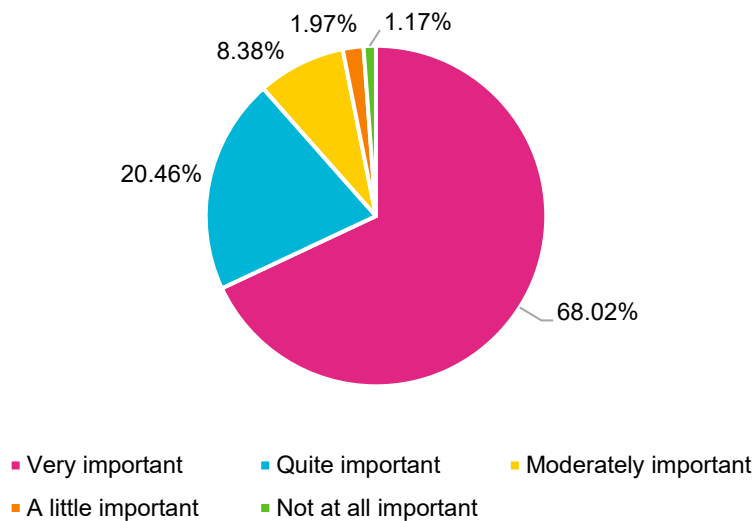
Establishing what public libraries offer for learning opportunities and further education illustrates part of their much broader long-term impact.



Library users

In the library user survey, the vast majority of respondents (68.02%) indicated that a library's provision of further education / learning opportunities is 'very important', to an overall average of 4.5 out of 5 – or, in pie chart form:

How important would you say your library is in providing further education / learning opportunities?
(1,623 respondents)



Beyond the two-thirds majority, a further fifth (20.46% of responses) felt the library is 'quite important' in providing learning opportunities.

Of the 1,223 comments that respondents left to indicate the importance of learning opportunities through their library service, three primary themes emerged:

1. Importance of digital devices and Wi-Fi

- i. To source and submit job applications
 - ii. To research and self-educate
 - iii. To participate in online learning
 - iv. To build a specific skill set, whether as career or hobby
2. Barriers of poverty, cost-of-living crisis or the expense of third-level education
 3. Lifelong reliance on the library for further education and learning

Qualitative responses illustrate the significance to individuals and community through this provision. A large number of respondents noted the **vital support that further education and learning through the library afforded them** and their families' progress:

- 'The dyslexia accessible books for children encouraged my son to read. Without them, he'd have struggled far more to enjoy reading. All my children benefitted from reference books when they were in school and further education. They loved the summer reading challenges. There are so many more things we've not investigated yet, but will!'
- 'I joined the library at five years old and am now 75. I have used the libraries as lifelines e.g. for the first years of my daughter's life I had to live in one room. The libraries were hugely influential in my escape from poverty. That boosted my esteem. I left school in 1963 with no qualifications but now have a BA degree and an adult teaching qualification. That would have been impossible without access to libraries. Reading has helped me throughout my life in many areas: socially, emotionally, intellectually. Without the LIBBY app I do not think I would have coped with the isolation of the Covid pandemic. I have passed on my love of reading to my family who are all avid readers. I believe libraries are very much underrated.'
- 'I studied for two degrees as an adult with young children. It supported both my own and our children's education. It made learning affordable.'
- 'I have taught myself how to code using books from the library and have now published apps as a result.'

- 'I can't afford to go to college and the library has options that work for me with timings etc. I can also access my email and all the things I need to do on the computer which is good as I don't have one at home.'
- 'I worked for a long time at the DWP and the number of people who only had access to a computer or the internet through their library was very high. Learning about digital skills and receiving support was key for many in being able to find work. Learning the basics or being able to apply for retraining / support themselves through a college course with the IT available. Very important to those most in need.'

Library users also reported the library's importance for **access to healthcare information**:

- 'I have used library books to educate myself about how to manage to live better with Long Covid in the absence of such information from the NHS. This has been critical and lifesaving for me.'

And the **importance of marketing** library activity:

- 'I was completely unaware of everything my local library had to offer. The free lessons, learning opportunities, craft sessions, visits etc. are never advertised. Now I am aware of them, having attended multiple times a week for Bookbug Sessions and visits to library and children's library, I can see all of the services are so valuable and so unknown to the general public.'

Other library users also noted the **negative impact** on their community **when the library service is reduced**:

- 'It seems like a long time ago but the public library had so much to offer the residents of the local community. With the change in dynamics and restructuring, the library is no longer open so those that work can access their local library. They are hardly open at all. The range of activities are no longer available.'



These barriers – reductions in service and a lack of marketing / general public awareness – may account for the number of library users who reported that they did not make use of learning opportunities in their local library (46.33% of respondents):

Have you or your family ever made use of any of the following opportunities in your local library? (Please check all that apply)
(1,623 respondents)



The most popular opportunities listed were local history / genealogy resources (25.14% of responses), digital skills / computing and IT (22.06% of responses), and creative writing opportunities / writing clubs (12.63% of responses).

Of the 105 who chose 'other (please specify)', responses indicated a range of support through the library across **self-led learning resources, engagement with the local authority** and **skills development**:

- 'I've borrowed "teach yourself violin" books, learn German CDs, travel guides... the library is always the first point of call.'
- 'Voting in local community PB [participatory budgeting] process, attending exhibitions e.g. if planning applications by developers, or of Council schemes.'
- 'As a volunteer I have helped to teach sewing and mending skills to children and their parents/carers at several libraries (Remade in Edinburgh) and I have also helped teach English (Crisis) at the central library.'

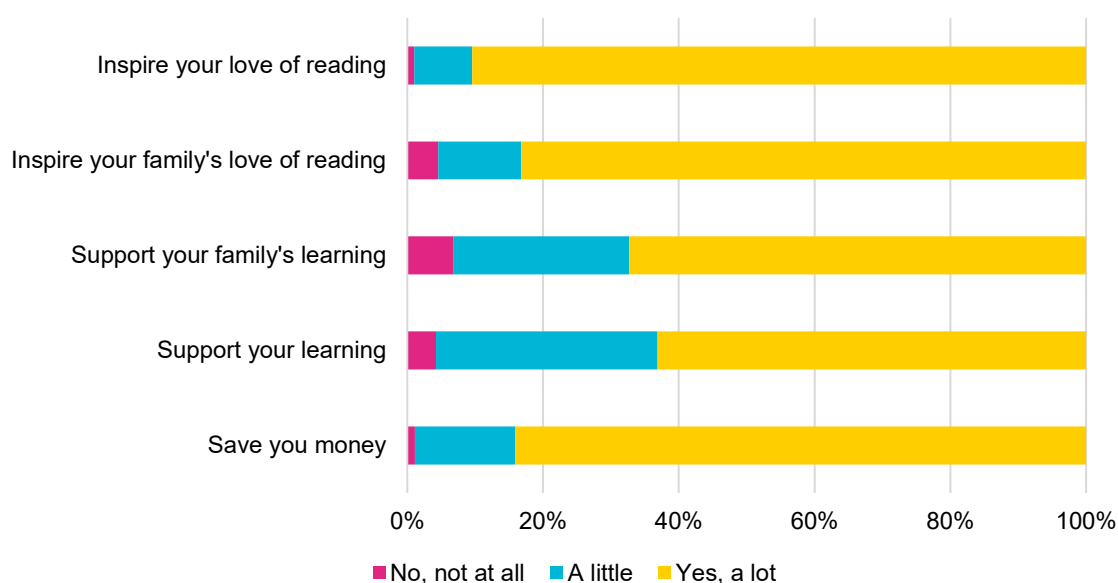
One library user also fed back their need for greater digital provision through their local service:

- 'I haven't because of accessibility issues. I'm now too ill to attend any classes, even if they were virtual. But I wish that it had been possible to attend virtually.'

Another reflected back the impact of the library provision not being more well-known:

- 'No but now that I know I would like to.'

To what extent do you feel libraries help with any of the following:
(1,623 respondents)



To complete reflections on learning opportunities, library users were prompted to rate how libraries help with inspiring a love of reading, supporting learning and saving money.

The quantitative data was distinctly positive around the library's provision, where respondents reported **their library inspires their love of reading** or their family's love of reading 'a lot' (respectively 90.43% and 83.20% of responses).

They further noted that it **supports their family's learning** (67.29%) and **their own learning 'a lot'** (respectively 67.29% and 63.12% of responses).

Remarkably, the vast majority of library users **reported their library saves them money 'a lot'** (84.08%).

Public librarians

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

1. 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. Vital resource for those who can't afford books / technology
6. 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 restricted funding offered to libraries results in an increasing pressure on librarians to deliver while their resources are stripped back.

Reported barriers to closing the gap included: **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).

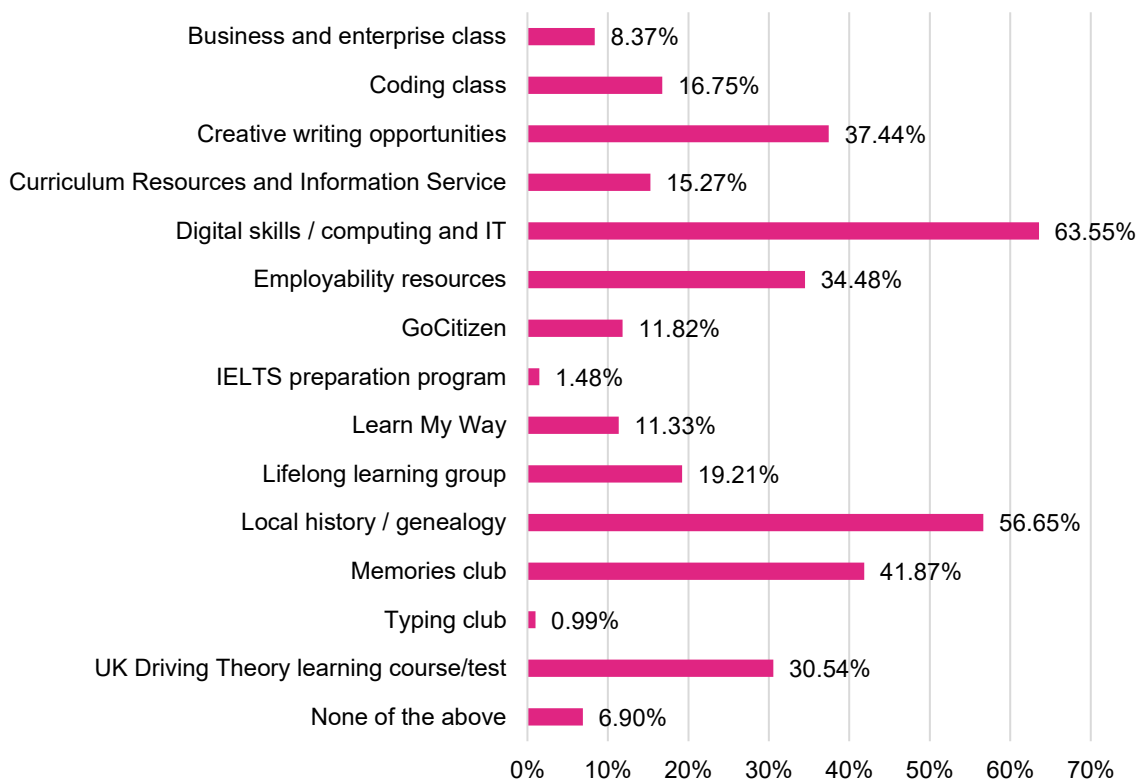
If libraries are to help close the attainment gap and promote further learning, they need top-down support and a nuanced understanding of what they are designed to do. In the words of one librarian:

'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. [...] We are not the right tool at this moment to help much with this.'



When asked about the frequency and popularity of further education opportunities offered in their local service, librarians showed a huge range in their provision:

Does your library offer any of the following opportunities in further education for adults? (Please check all that apply)
(Public librarians: 203 responses)



By far the most popular learning opportunities were: digital skills / computing and information technology (63.55%); local history / genealogy (56.65%); Memories Club (41.87%); creative writing clubs (37.44%); and employability resources (34.48%).

Only 6.90% reported their library offered none of the opportunities listed in the question.

When interviewed, public librarians demonstrated a wealth of learning opportunities available as part of the library service, as well as a need for greater support and resource:

'When I first started, we did our heritage, so that's a series of monthly talks about local history or local culture. There's a really strong core group of older people, retired people that come in, because they want to keep learning about the community. In the feedback we consistently get, they've enjoyed learning about things. We are still managing to run that.

The writing workshops, again, a lot of people enjoyed that. They would learn certain new different writing techniques, they'd be able to develop their work. We've not done those since last year, October time, November time. People really enjoyed that [...]

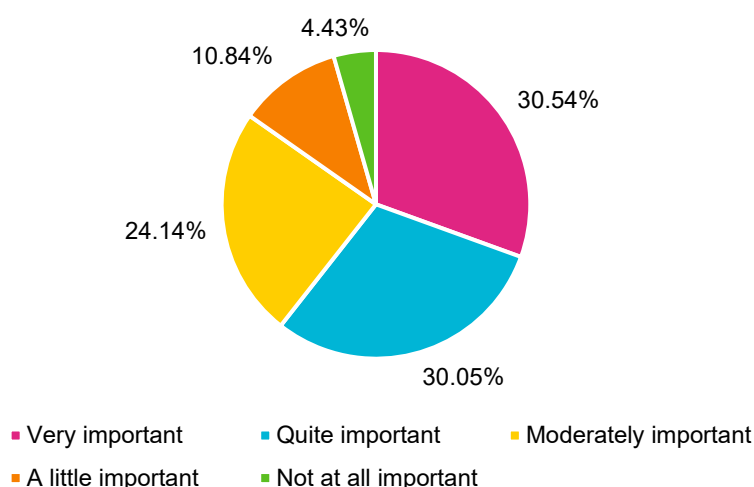
Unfortunately just with all the constraints that I think all libraries are facing at the moment [...] we're being asked not to focus on these things as much anymore.

I'm hoping if the research comes out it'll show the need for funding and library provisions.'

When asked to reflect on the importance of the library in providing further education / learning opportunities – on a scale of 1 to 5 – librarians overall averaged at 3.7, i.e., 'moderately' to 'quite important', or, as illustrated in a pie chart:

How important would you say your library is in providing further education / learning opportunities to adults in your community?

(Public librarians: 203 responses)



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 importance of the library in offering further learning opportunities to adults cannot be overstated. A clear indication of this impact is best illustrated in this moving reflection from a public librarian:

'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.'

Digital inclusion

'I'm studying a post grad diploma as a mature student part time. I'm financially constrained by my additional costs to study. When my laptop broke halfway through my final year of study, the library became an essential resource for me to get through my degree. If it wasn't for two late night openings; I'd have dropped out!' – Library user

Digital poverty is defined as 'the inability to interact with the online world fully, when, where, and how an individual needs to'⁴⁹ 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 inequality⁵⁰ – 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 Glasgow⁵¹.

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

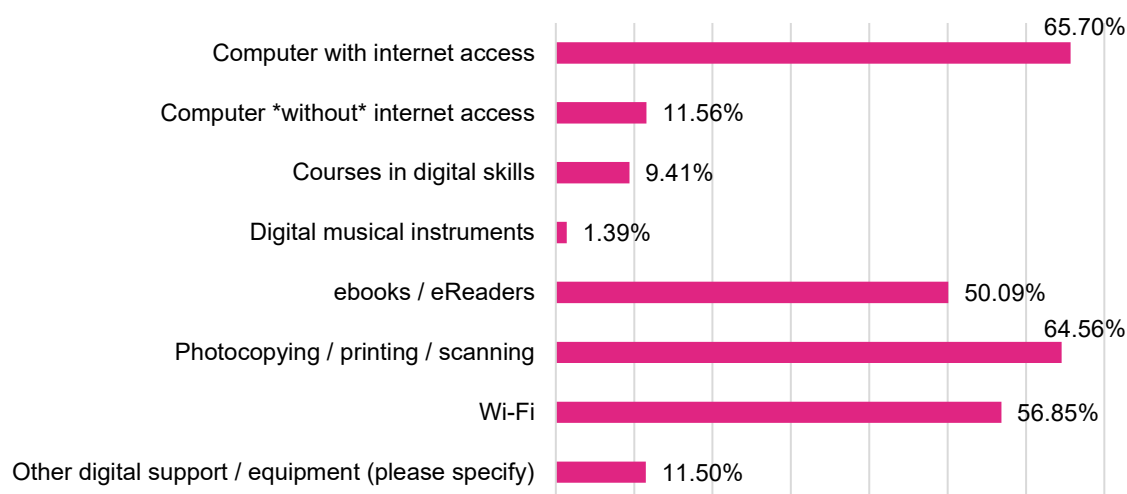
'In Scotland there is a significant portion of households and individuals that do not have the essential skills or infrastructure required to engage in a digital society. Inability to engage means that people are unable to access public services online, are not offered the same opportunities to achieve 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.'⁵²

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.

Library users

Scottish Book Trust asked library users for more insights on how they engaged with the provision of digital devices and Wi-Fi in their local library:

Have you or your family ever made use of the following tools in your local library? (Check all that apply) (1,583 respondents)



An overwhelming number of library users noted they have made use of the library's computers with internet access (65.70% of respondents), photocopying / printing / scanning (64.56% of respondents), Wi-Fi (56.85%) and ebooks / eReaders (50.09% of respondents).

Of the 182 who chose 'other digital support / equipment (please specify)', comments ranged from specific software ('3d-modelling [...] website design'), to specialised provision ('foreign language learning resources') and affordability ('access to online resources that would otherwise be behind a paywall').

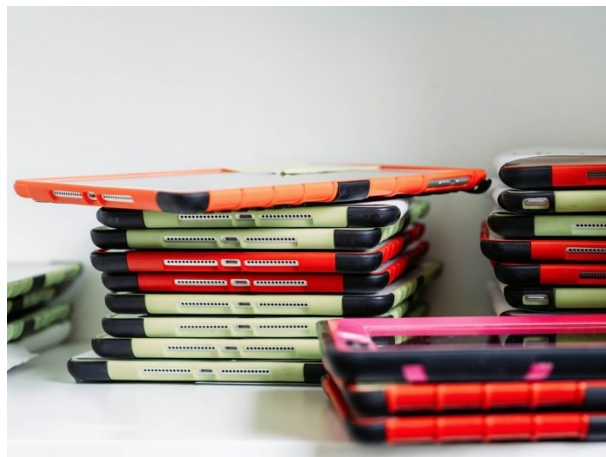
Some library users also shared the impact of digital provision on their individual circumstances:

- 'I've had a borrow of the tablet which was fantastic + amazing as it opened my mind.'
- 'Elderly mother got support to set up email account and book flights.'
- 'I should say that I am dyslexic, and SHOULD seek courses in digital skills.'

Here the practical, tangible benefits of digital inclusion can be seen best – whether it's self-led learning, gaining access to inclusive resources or becoming informed and independent with online infrastructure, library users rely on their service to be autonomous.

One respondent also noted a lack of provision in their local library and the need they have for further inclusion:

- 'I have never seen an option for digital training and am desperately trying to get back into office work.'



Library users were asked to reflect on **ways their library supports them to get online**, use digital technologies and access digital services – **and how important they feel this is**. 1,121 responses to the open comment box, of unlimited length, reflected how libraries are crucial:

1. For many rural communities to get online
2. To develop and sustain digital literacy and access
3. To provide a vital quiet space for work / study with free Wi-Fi
4. To get disadvantaged people back on their feet

Library users were overwhelmingly in agreement that **their library provides a lifeline to them and their community**. Their comments included personal stories of previous unemployment, disability or financial hardship that only the library supported and improved:

- 'When I was unemployed, I couldn't afford the internet or heating to look for jobs, so my library was a vital place for me to job search and stay warm.'
- 'I've in the past used library resources to help find work and kickstart my career; browsing job sites on library computers and printing off CVs and documents such as proof of address (access to these resources also helped me when I was looking to rent a home for the first time) [...]

Support from library staff with job searches, choosing further education courses, and social security applications can be the difference between accessing these avenues for bettering one's circumstances and not [...]

Services libraries provide to help people improve their digital skills are incredibly important for this reason and for allowing people to meet job requirements, stay connected with friends and family, and generally participate in public life and discourse which increasingly takes place primarily online.'

- 'I'm long-term housebound because of disability and am unable to access the library in person. Digital resources, especially eAudiobooks (and to a lesser extent eBooks), are an absolute lifeline for me. Without them, I'd have no access to literature.'

Rural communities – particularly in those 19 local authorities with high likelihood for digital exclusion⁵³ – often **rely on the library** for essential access to Wi-Fi:

- 'It's vital. When I first moved to my remote and rural location, the only way I could get online to look and apply for houses and/or professional support was through digital access in my library. The equipment was provided free and staff were happy to help.'

- 'I regularly visit the building as a quiet inspiring place to work, study and relax. It is one of the few places one can still access without the need of paying, booking, or feeling pressured to consume something. The fact that there is in-person support available from friendly helpful staff is also a great support [...]

I sometimes work in town, 27 miles from my home office, and without the library I simply would not be able to do this.'

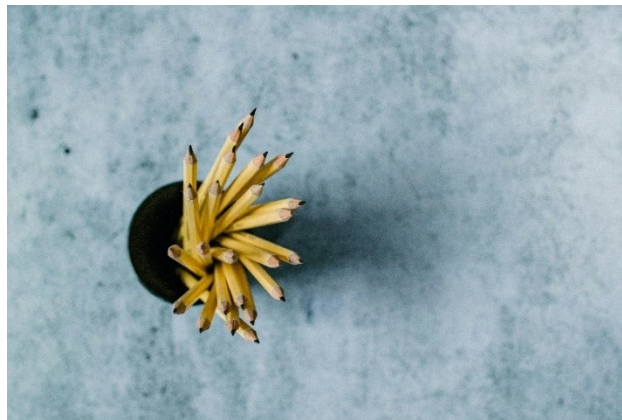
More library users emphasised the value of their library's digital inclusion because of **a lack of digital devices at home, or poor digital literacy**:

- 'Supported me through first modules of an Open Uni course with audiobook versions of set books (I'm dyslexic) and computer/printer access for assignments. I'm now BA(Hons) and first of my family with a degree.'
- 'In the past I did not have a computer so it was extremely important to use the library computers in searching for jobs and creating applications. I am able to do this at home now, however I see the computers being used by other members of the community now for the same vital reasons.'
- 'I've worked home full time since Covid and it's had a significant impact on my health. There is a very restricted opportunity to get a desk in the office now so being able to work from the library and use the Wi-Fi has been a godsend.'
- 'My local library provided training classes for beginners in using a computer, then further training in using a computer, I consider this help / training an essential support for my old age, I am connected to the world, it is a lifeline for me.'
- 'My local library is extremely important to me with enabling me to do things online. If there's something I'm unable to do at home or I'm worried about something I go to my library and the staff are able to advise me or show me what to do in future or do it for me. I'd be really stuck if this service no longer existed as I have no younger members in my family, and I'm a senior citizen.'

There were also comments from those library users not facing hardship or illiteracy, but who nevertheless **depend on their library for essential digital services**:

- 'This is extremely important. I am fortunate enough to have a PC at home, but I still use the library ones for many things, including printing CVs, job searches, learning new things. My children love to access online learning here too, sometimes school related [...] but also their own learning [...]

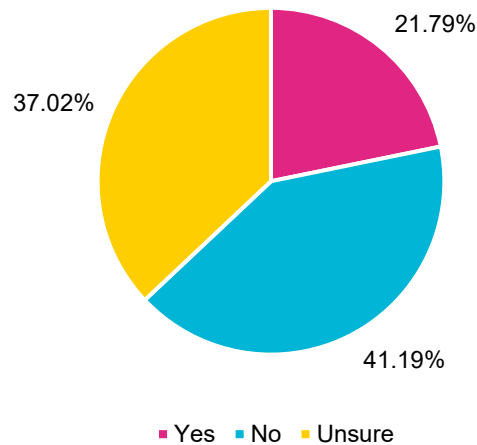
I don't think there is another resource in our society which could offer all the library does, we must not lose them, I believe they should be a priority for funding and seen as the multi-faceted amazing resource they are for our community.'



With digital provision comes the responsibility of 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 fake⁵⁴.

To further investigate this literacy issue, the library user survey asked respondents if they felt their local library helped them understand online information and media. The responses were split – 1 in 5 (21.79%) respondents chose 'yes', 2 in 5 chose 'no' (41.19%), with a further 37.02% 'unsure':

Do you feel your local library has helped you to understand online information and media?
(1,583 respondents)



From 828 comments, respondents agreed that libraries are a **trusted source of impartiality and safety**, particularly librarians:

- 'A scammer posted my Facebook profile picture on his page which had me really worried so I went to my library and they were able to advise me what to do and to reassure me. They take the stress out of being online for me.'
- 'Our library stocks books about information literacy and media which we would otherwise have to pay for. My grandmother has attended a PC course which taught her how to protect herself online, ex: safe passwords, identifying untrustworthy websites and spam emails.'
- 'I'm seeing more people getting taken in with fake news and AI creations. The library and their staff are in the perfect place to help fight the war on misinformation. Misinformation can be dangerous.'

Some library users also conveyed a concern that their **local library is currently unable to provide this kind of support**:

- 'School librarians in [my local authority] are excellent at this and they educate our children through a compulsory programme; however, I do not see much of this organised in the public libraries. When there was a seminar with a leading

speaker it was capped at low numbers, rather than allowing a large audience and was not recorded. Another failure unfortunately.'

- 'I think I am savvy enough when it comes to disinformation but it's clear from comments I see on X and elsewhere that there is a huge part for libraries to play here.'
- 'I have not come across any resources relating to this at my local library, but I'd love to use them if they were available and I think that's a really brilliant role for libraries to play.'

Unfortunately, one respondent noted the importance of their library for information literacy – now lost:

- 'Yes, our local library was very good in all ways until they shut it!'



Public librarians

'What we provide is a basic level. Our systems are quite old, unglamorous, slow. Our community doesn't hammer on the door for lots more.

Digital poverty is very, very real where we are. Lots of people absolutely rely on the library for IT.' – Public librarian

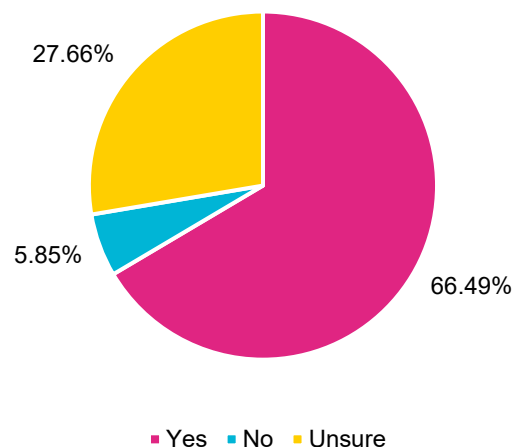
There is a clear correlation between reports from library users and those from public librarians. Digital devices, Wi-Fi, online resources, skills development and bespoke help and support are all in high demand. Scottish Book Trust knows, from working

with public libraries across Scotland, that digital devices and Wi-Fi are crucial points of access that libraries provide to communities in need – they are truly lifelines.

When public librarians were asked whether or not their **local community faces digital poverty**, an overwhelming majority said 'yes' – **66.49%**.

Does your local community face digital poverty?

(Public librarians: 137 responses)



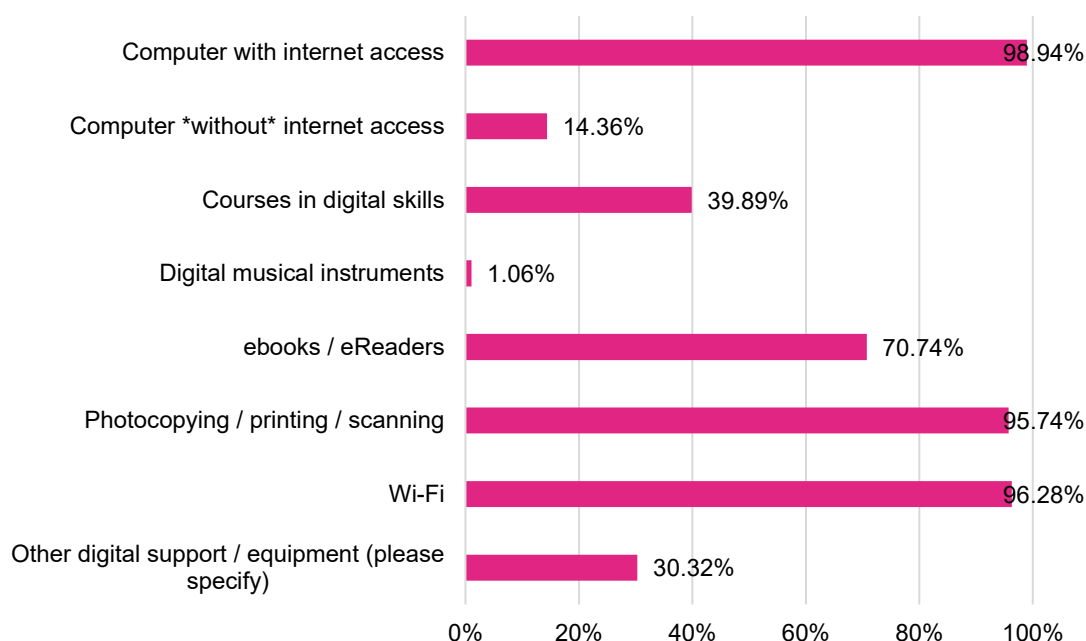
Librarians were asked to reflect on the reason for their choice. Out of 137 comments, five issues emerged as priority concerns:

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

Libraries are bridging the divide posed by this digital poverty across Scotland:

96.28% of librarians reported that their library offers **access to Wi-Fi**, 98.94% to **computers with internet**, 70.74% to **ebooks / eReaders** and 95.74% to **photocopying / printing / scanning**:

Does your library offer access to any of the following for community use? (Check all that apply)
(Public librarians: 188 responses)



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

1. Dedicated access to digital devices, e.g. Hublets, microbits (67% of 'other' respondents)
2. Dedicated library 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.'
- 'Drop in one-to-one support if staffing allows – often doesn't.'

A major barrier posed by digital poverty is not only access to digital infrastructure, but a lack of digital or media literacy. 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.

Librarians in interview commented on the further impacts of the Covid pandemic on digital literacy in their community:

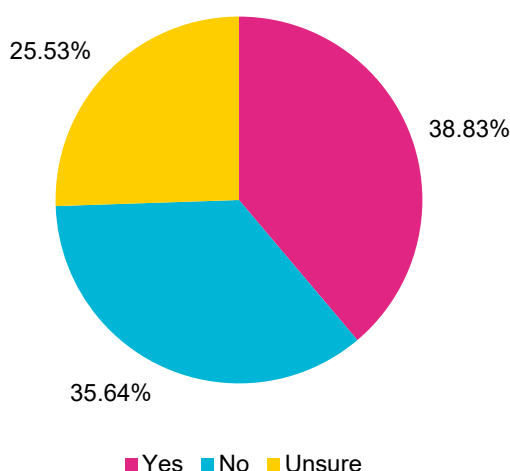
'Especially since Covid – I think a whole swathe of people are being left behind. It's something that really, really angers me because I saw it before I began working at the library and I now see it daily when I am working at the library.

People who are expected to fill in a form online who don't know how to use a computer, sometimes they don't even have an email address, so they can't even get started with what they're expected to do without setting up an email address first. And then they don't know how to set up an email address, so we have to support them with that. And it really, really angers me that so much of our lives are now expected to be online.

And the people who implement these policies have no clue about what it's like for the people who don't know how to access these services. They just think, "oh well, everyone can use a computer nowadays", but they really, really can't.'

In the interests of improving digital literacy, Scottish Book Trust asked librarians if their library currently supports the local community with those skills:

Does your library currently support the local community with media / digital literacy skills?
(Public librarians: 188 responses)



Librarians were almost exactly split in their responses. 2 out of 5 librarians (38.83%) reported that their library does support their local community with media / digital literacy skills. Just over 1 in 3 (35.64%) disagreed.

In interview, public librarians further described their community's immediate need for digital support:

- 'I think it's a huge problem and we probably spend a good fifth of our time helping people on computers and other devices. There's a digital drop-in class once a week as well, so that people can bring in their devices and they get help from our learning access co-ordinator and a couple of volunteers. We could have that running almost every hour we were open and there would be somebody asking for help.'
- 'I can't really even imagine the impact that it would have on our local community if [those digital resources] wasn't to be there – even something as simple as Wi-Fi access. If people come in and they're looking for help with printing something stored on their phone – for them to even access printing from their phone they need Wi-Fi. So many people don't have mobile data enabled on their phone, they just can't afford it. Those ramifications would be so big for our local authority.'

Most sobering from these reflections is the example provided by one librarian in the survey, speaking from 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

As the final theme of research, 'active citizenship' investigates the library's role in supporting 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.

Previous data in this report indicates how library users rely on their libraries for democratic access – 'voting in local community PB [participatory budgeting] process, attending exhibitions e.g. if planning applications by developers, or of Council schemes'.

Research from SLIC⁵⁵ and CILIP⁵⁶ further 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

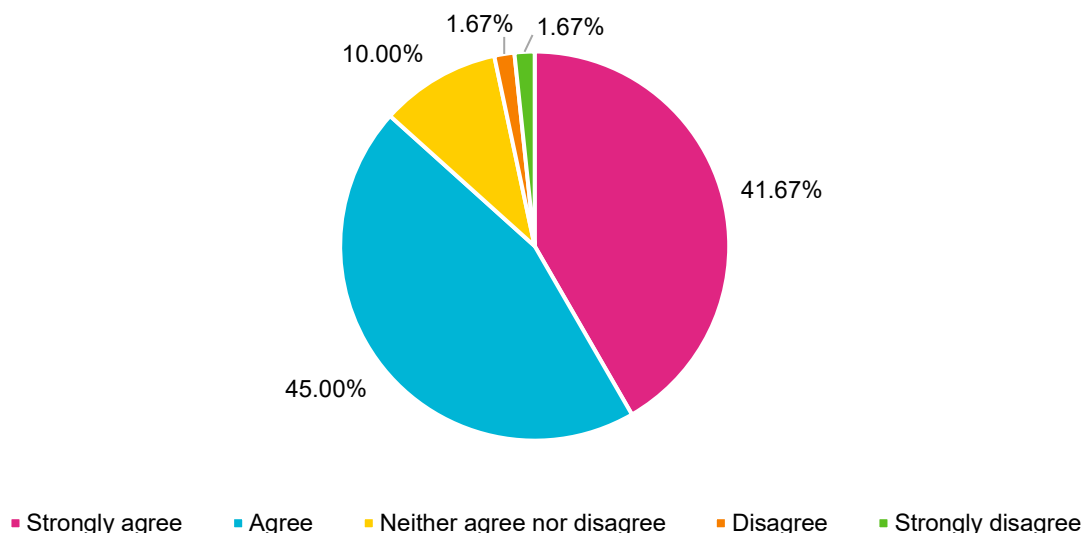
Scottish Book Trust therefore asked questions of both library users and public librarians to gather further evidence on each of these points: (1) reaching a diverse audience; (2) equal access to information; (3) safe spaces; and (4) democratically engaged and informed communities.

Reaching a diverse audience

'I love the way the library welcomes all people, as seen every time I visit. There are many elderly, children, families, people accessing books in other languages (such as Ukrainian) and there is always a wide programme of activities and events.' – Library user

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.)?

(Public librarians: 180 responses)



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

- 86.67% 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 3.34% 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 patrons 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 patrons (18% of comments)

- It is challenging to engage non-library users (17% of comments)

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

- '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.'
- '[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.'

- '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.'

Library users reaffirmed the importance of the library to cater to diverse communities:

'Our community is incredibly diverse. Many members struggle with language and cultural differences. The library is a fantastic safe place for them to learn and feel welcome.'

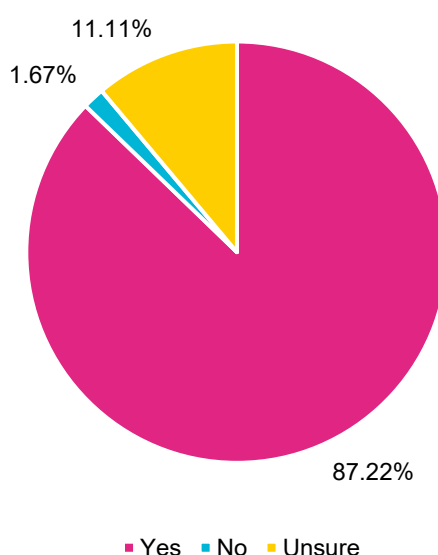
Equal access to information

'Librarians are good at helping to find resources which can pinpoint how to tell what is genuine and what is fake news; their skillset is very important for people as they can help to promote trust in trusted news sources.' – Library user

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?

(Public librarians: 180 responses)



The overwhelming majority of librarians agreed that their library provides equal and free access to trusted, accurate information for the local community: 87.22% of all respondents.

Of the 'unsure' (11.11%) and 'no' (1.67%) 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.'

Library users provided further evidence of their libraries offering **free and equal access** to accurate information – and trust in their librarians to help:

- 'Yes, my local library has significantly helped me understand online information and media. [A] member of staff is always ready to help to make things easier.'
- 'Libraries provide access to a wider range of opinion and perspectives than I would otherwise experience. The curation of the library's collection and resources based on professional principles is more readily trusted than those from places with commercial or political objectives.'

Safe spaces

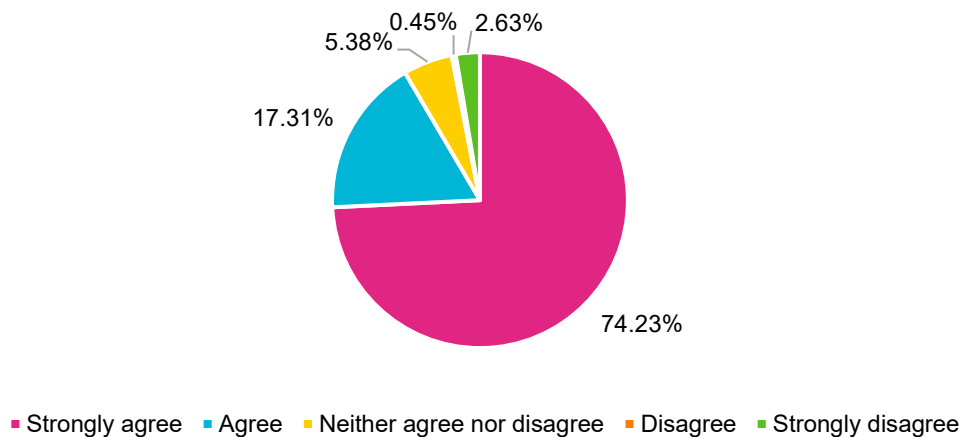
'That's key, just securing the future of libraries, and making councillors and politicians aware of all the different services that we provide. Without them, it's not just the loss of a cultural space, it's the loss of a learning space, it's the loss of a social space, it's the loss of a safe space, a neutral space.'

– Public librarian

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 both library users and librarians to what extent, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), they agreed that their library offers a safe space.

Both groups averaged at **4.6 out of 5** ('strongly agree'), or in pie chart form:

**To what extent do you agree that your library offers you
(or your family) a safe space?**
(Library users: 1,560 responses)



Of the 986 comments written by library users, one clear theme emerged. The **public library is the last haven left** for anyone vulnerable, disadvantaged or in need.

The most vulnerable people in society are naturally those who are most often reliant on a safe space like the library, and they are those least able to self-advocate, or have the ear of someone with power or influence. The public library, its building, service and staff, are all vital to help and support those most in need.

Library users shared stories of how their public library offered **a safe space, particularly crucial for those with protected characteristics** and at greater risk:

- 'My son had a mental health breakdown two years ago. After many months of help and treatment, he began to venture out into the world again. Visiting the library daily when my husband and I were at work, allowed my son to venture into public life again in a safe, quiet way.'
- 'As a disabled adult, I've lived on a very tight budget and could not have afforded to buy books with any regularity. The library has provided me with so much information and entertainment (something everyone deserves to have access to) – and all this for free. The library has a wide range of LGBTQIA+ books, eBooks and eAudiobooks (both fiction and non-fiction). Every request I've made for a queer audiobook to be added to the library's catalogue has been honoured, as long as the book is available for purchase. This has made

me feel safe and welcome at the library as a queer person, especially as one who grew up under Section 28 and didn't have access to explicitly queer books as a young person.'

- 'As a director of a charity that supports ethnic minorities and having volunteered with charities that support the homeless and people with neurodiversity I have first-hand experience of seeing how important libraries are to people with protected characteristics.'
- 'A community with high level of deprivation fought to save this library when [the local authority] decided not to reopen it after Covid. Local community came together to save the library as a safe space as well as other factors.'
- 'Not everyone has a safe space at home or school or at work, having somewhere in the community that is definitely going to be is incredibly important and unfortunately very necessary. That is why I get so upset that quite a lot of libraries are enduring abuse and horrific behaviours from groups of youths and getting no support to tackle it. The streets are not safe for a lot of people either so safety in the libraries should be a priority. Hubs for warmth, a hot drink, and access to opportunities is vital to all.'

They also commented on the library as a crucial **support for their children, and for them in raising a family**:

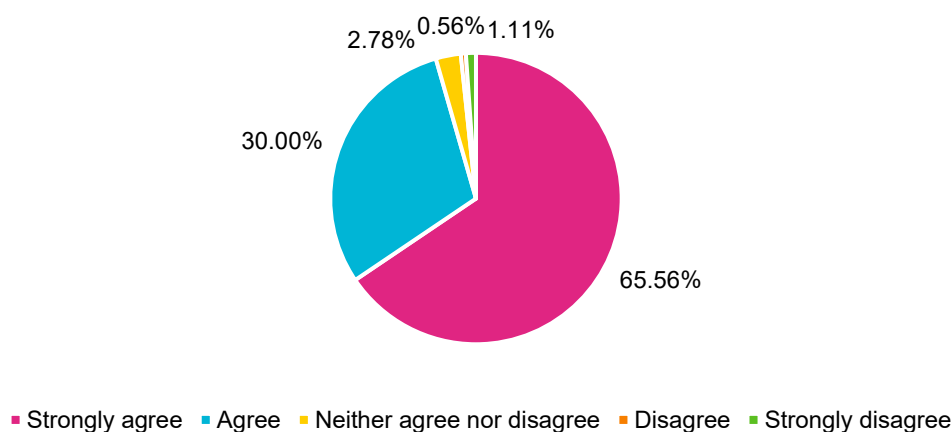
- 'Library has been a lifeline for somewhere free to go with the kids. Just wish they were open more at the weekend.'
- 'It is also a place for getting together. When I had my baby two years ago the Bookbug Session at our local library was the first place I ever took him on my own. He was two weeks old and as a first time mother I had a lot of anxiety about going out in case he was crying or something happened. Everyone at Bookbug was so nice and it was lovely to be around other parents. It gave me the confidence to go out more and be more sociable.'
- 'Vital! Children can't go into pubs or, often, even into cafes, and lots of people can't afford to keep buying coffees etc. Cafes tend to close about 3 or 4 so there is a dead spot in late afternoon, early evening where kids (and others!)

have nowhere to go – libraries are vital! There are few other safe spaces, even community centres tend to be only for groups that have booked rooms – no place for just 'hanging' or doing homework etc. Nowhere for women to be safe.'

Many library users noted the **restrictions their local libraries face**, whether reduced hours or outright closures:

- 'It's very important, there are fewer and fewer safe spaces as community centres shut. Libraries are expected to take on a lot and staff are expected to assume a higher level of responsibility than they are paid for to safeguard vulnerable customers and manage anti-social behaviour.'
- 'A safe space for the community is incredibly important. Libraries are the only public space where different groups of people (ages, background, socio-economic status, ethnicity etc.) can share for free. The tragedy is that this opportunity is being taken away from communities because libraries are closing or having opening hours reduced.'

To what extent do you agree that your library offers a safe space to your community?
(Public librarians: 180 responses)



The librarian and library user rates of agreement are remarkably similar – **95.56%** of responding **librarians agreed** their library **offers a safe space**, compared to 91.54% of library users.

This means that for both groups, **over 9 in 10 agreed** their library is a safe space in and for their community.

Of responding librarians' 108 comments, three key themes emerged:

1. Providing a safe space is a unique and/or essential remit of the library
2. The library offers a welcoming space to their community
3. The library is a safe haven for vulnerable people of all ages

Those who felt their library did not or could not offer a safe space expanded on their reasons:

- '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.'

Democratically engaged and informed communities

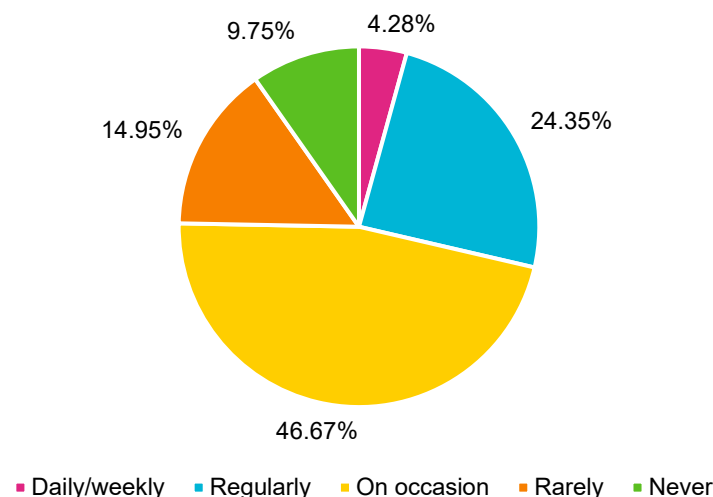
'Reading a book is a form of self improvement and education. Every book a person reads adds to their sum knowledge of the world, of humanity and of art. The library provides democratic access to this knowledge unaffected by an individual's class, affluence or formal education.' – Library user

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'⁵⁷.

To identify libraries' role in this strategy, librarians and library users alike were asked on a scale of 1 ('never') to 5 ('daily / weekly') to reflect on how often their library operates as a community hub for informed debate / decision-making.

Library users averaged at 3 out of 5 ('on occasion'), or in pie chart form:

How often does your library operate as a community hub for informed debate / decision-making?
(Library users: 1,425 respondents)



Library users indicated a relatively high rate of informed debate / decision-making, where over a quarter (28.63%) reported it happens 'daily / weekly' or 'regularly', and a further 46.67% 'on occasion'.

More generally, across the library user survey, there were numerous anecdotes of the library as a central 'community hub':

- 'Libraries are community hubs. As a new immigrant it's helped my wellbeing immensely.'
- 'Our library is home to the galleries / museum, library and cafe. I think anywhere there's a hub in the community for art, education, reading, and safe socialisation that these spaces are vital for nurturing minds.'
- 'It's the hub of the community that everyone can access and use as much as they need for various reasons. Libraries are the heartbeat of a community it's essential for a healthy area.'

- 'Our library is everything to us. A hub after school, a cafe and read when kids are away, a place for a rainy day, a place to borrow books with no fees for kids. It's just magical and we love it.'

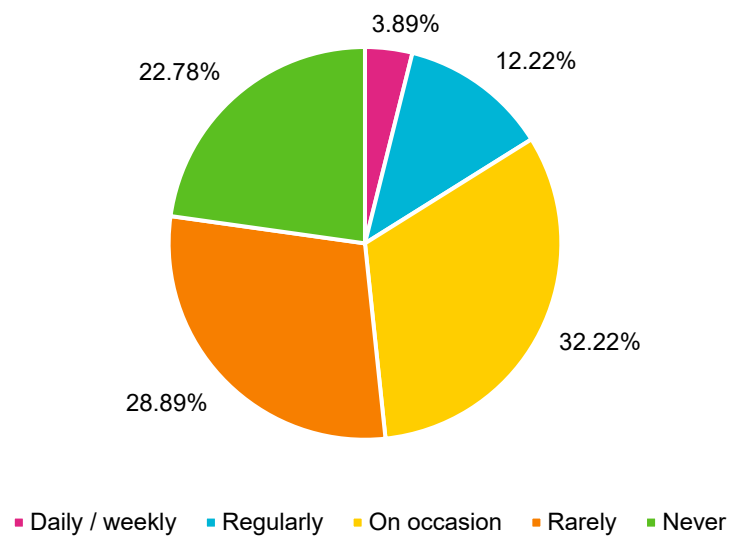
Library users also commented on the centrality of librarians for helping signpost and cater to public enquiries:

- 'Library staff (as familiar, friendly faces) support their users in making informed choices about what we read, and in staying safe online.'

Public librarians were also asked to rate on a scale of 1 ('never') to 5 ('daily / weekly'), how often their library operates as a community hub for informed debate / decision-making – they averaged at 2.5 ('on occasion'):

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

(Public librarians: 180 responses)



51.67% of responding librarians reported informed debate / decision-making happens 'rarely' or 'never', with only 16.11% reporting it happens 'daily / weekly' or 'regularly'.

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

In interview, public librarians illustrated further context for the role their library plays as a community hub:

'We get a lot of people come over [...] I think just to give them a new start. But they do basically start off with a plastic bag of clothes and a room in a sheltered accommodation, it's really basic stuff. So there's been a few people – it's been nice to see that they come in and they say, "oh, I've heard you can use the computer here", and [...] gradually [...] you see them looking better and looking healthier.

And then they come and they change their address cause they've got themselves a flat, and then they've got job applications and they're putting out their CV and it can be really nice to see, and then eventually they're only coming in to borrow books occasionally just like anybody else. So that's always nice to see.

I guess that's the flipside – you hear a lot of complaints about libraries having to fill in all these community service gaps, but it can be rewarding and it can also be helpful for people to have it in one place as opposed to going to different offices in different parts of the town and having to speak to different people and tell the same story over and over again.'

Librarians also 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:

'Most days, we get people in who are surprised by what we offer, surprised by what we do, surprised by what they're able to do within the library service.

I think there's so many users out there that think, "well, that's not for me. I don't need that", that don't realise what we can offer – not even just to them as individuals, but as community groups and spaces and charities and whatever it might be.

Also you would hope, it could also raise awareness for what we potentially could be, about what we can grow into being. In the current climate of so

many local authorities struggling to provide resources for their communities, what could the library go on to achieve (if we increased budget or worked in partnership or whatever it may be) to bring those ideas across Scotland? It's quite exciting.'

There is increasing stress enacted on librarians where the strategic goals 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 – are 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:

'For a while, we were a really big part of our community. A lot of people were noticing how integral we were becoming, how much we changed, how much they appreciated and enjoyed it.

Sadly, that's been changing a lot over the past few months.

When we were that [...] community space it was really enjoyable, made me proud to work in my library, proud to be able to help my community to be able to offer so much to people to make such a difference in so many people's weeks.

That was why I took the job, why I wanted to get in the library service. And over the past few months, obviously with the changes, it's really, really disheartening. It's not the job I went into and it's really disappointing.'

To participate in informed debate or decision-making, librarians and their patrons 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.



This research reinforces the fact that public libraries reach a diverse audience (86% of librarians agreed) and that they provide equal and free access to trusted information (87.22% of librarians agreed). Over 9 in 10 librarians (95.56%) agreed their library offers a safe space within their community, as well as 91.54% of library users.

However, this report indicates a clear rupture from the final metric of active citizenship – how often the library operates as a community hub for informed debate or decision-making ('rarely' or 'never': 24.7% of responding library users; 51.67% of responding public librarians). The 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.'

The impact of public libraries: They are a lifeline

Why our libraries are important

'I can't tell you how many times I have found sanctuary in a library. Having somewhere warm to go where I can use the bathroom and curl up in a chair with a book for a few hours is so important to me. No matter where I am, if I have a few hours to kill there is a library to welcome me. In the depths of winter when I couldn't afford much heating I could go to the library to warm up (some even offered free tea and coffee). The warm, welcoming and friendly atmosphere of a library is so precious to me.' – Library user

The conclusion of the library user survey offered an unlimited comment box with the prompt, 'please tell us anything else here about why your library is important to you (or your family)'. 1,508 responses were submitted.

These responses comprise **the heart of this research**, demonstrating in clear and practical terms the value and impact of the library service. Whether disabled, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, single parenting, old, young, seeking asylum, unhoused, a refugee, or in an area with high or low rates of deprivation, the public library welcomes and caters for you. Regardless of your status, the public library offers inclusive and accessible means to look after, inform and advance yourself and your family.

Many library users declared their **emotional connection** and lifelong reliance on their local library, as well as **the value of their librarian**:

- 'It's hard to put into words how important a space a library is. I feel quite emotional when I think of the support it offered me as a new parent, Bookbug Sessions were great fun, and a social connection, I couldn't afford the fancy children groups but I could always join the library sessions and frequently did. My grown children still regularly visit the library and use its many resources. Their reading ages are far beyond their actual age and I think the regular library connection has contributed to this. The staff are outstanding, and deserve recognition, and possibly a pay rise!'

- 'I have grown up in my local libraries, as will my young family. Local libraries do more than anything else to engender social conscience and collective responsibility, to say nothing of access to books, essential digital services and excellent information professionals dedicated to public service.'

More commented on the direct impact of libraries as a lifeline that **supports mental health** and **access to both learning and recreation**:

- 'As a queer, long-term disabled, housebound person, I feel isolated from society. This has been, and continues to be, very difficult to deal with. The library is like a sunbeam in all of this. Free access to literature is an absolute lifeline for me. It's provided me with innumerable hours of enjoyment and learning.'
- 'Please don't take out libraries away from us. It's the one place people can come to in order to escape the daily grind and it helps with mental health and well-being in such a huge way. It helps families entertain kids at little or no cost.'

More again reported the importance of their library for providing a **safe space to people of marginalised identities**:

- 'Our library is awesome. The staff have changed lots in the last few years... we know where the old staff are (other libraries in [the local authority]) and we are introduced to new staff as we are regular visitors (at least once a week or more)... we love that they know us by name, even the 5yo and that we are welcomed. I wear hijab, I'm Scottish and a wheelchair user, my husband is Black and Bangladeshi... we are still welcome. This matters in a diverse Scotland!'

Unfortunately, there were also multiple comments concerned with the **imminent or recent closure** of their library, and the indelible absence it leaves behind:

- 'Our family love our local library [...] It has inspired a love of reading in my 6-year-old and rekindled my love of reading. Sadly, it is being closed at the end of this week. We are devastated.'

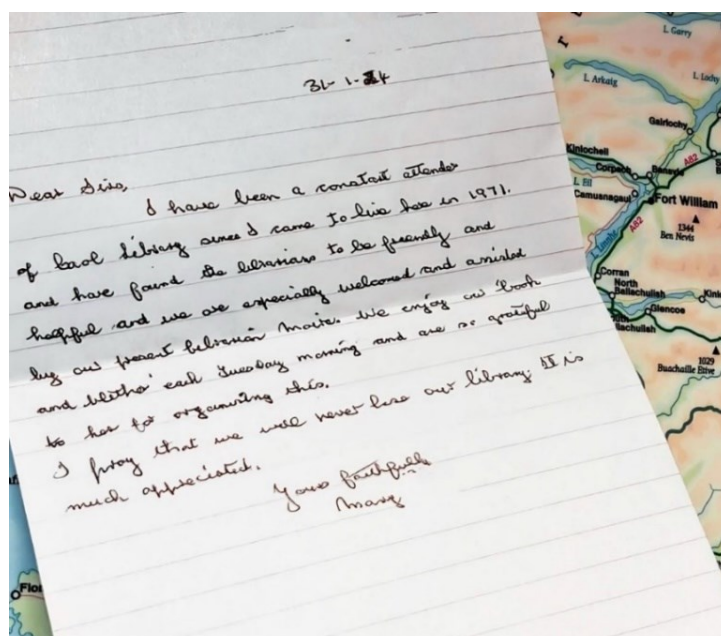
- 'The reason I've answered not at all is because [my local] council shut six libraries and because I have a disability I cannot get to an alternative branch, for the last two years since they were shut, I've not been able to access any of the great services a library should provide. I've registered for home delivery but you don't get all the fringe benefits with that. Just a bag of books each month that the library choose for you. I feel I'm missing out and excluded. I feel it's unjust and probably illegal.'
- 'My son recently attended Bookbug Sessions, which he absolutely loved. It was his first exposure to a library and he's just at the age of being read stories for the first time. This library was recently closed as part of a budget issue at [my local] council. The next nearest library had already been closed a few years prior. The loss of this has been very sad and has made it harder for us to get him to book-based events and sessions. We waste so much money in this country and it always comes at the expense of art, culture and the environment. I think we are hugely poorer for it. My library **was** important, but sadly I can only answer this question like this, as it is no longer open and will never be again.'

Direct testimonials

Scottish Book Trust received handwritten letters over the course of this research project from Scottish citizens wishing to offer testimonials on the importance of their local libraries – such as Mary from Fort William:

'I have been a constant attendee of Caol library since I came to live here in 1971 and have found the librarians to be friendly and helpful and we are especially welcomed and assisted by our present librarian Moira. We enjoy our "book and blether" each Tuesday morning and are so grateful to her for organising this.

I pray that we will never lose our library. It is much appreciated.'

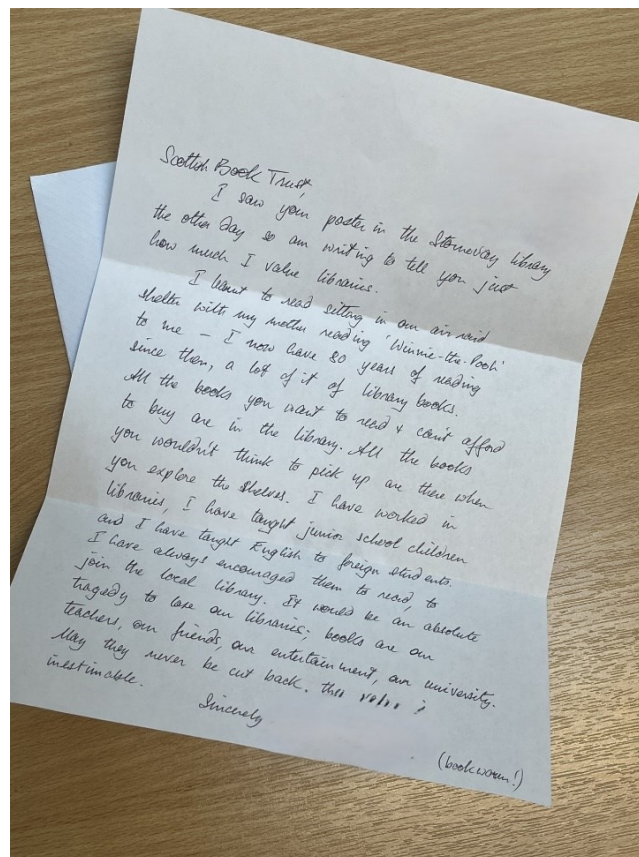


Another letter, from one E. Hayes on the Isle of Lewis, staunchly advocated for the preservation of the library service:

'I saw your poster in the Stornoway library the other day so am writing to tell you just how much I value libraries.

I learnt to read sitting in an air raid shelter with my mother reading "Winnie-the-Pooh" to me – I now have 80 years of reading since then, a lot of it of library books.

All the books you want to read + can't afford to buy are in the library. All the books you wouldn't think to pick up are there when you explore the shelves. I have worked in libraries, I have taught junior school children and I have taught English to foreign students. I have always encouraged them to read, to join the local library. It would be an absolute tragedy to lose our libraries; books are our teachers, our friends, our entertainment, our university. May they never be cut back, their value is inestimable.'



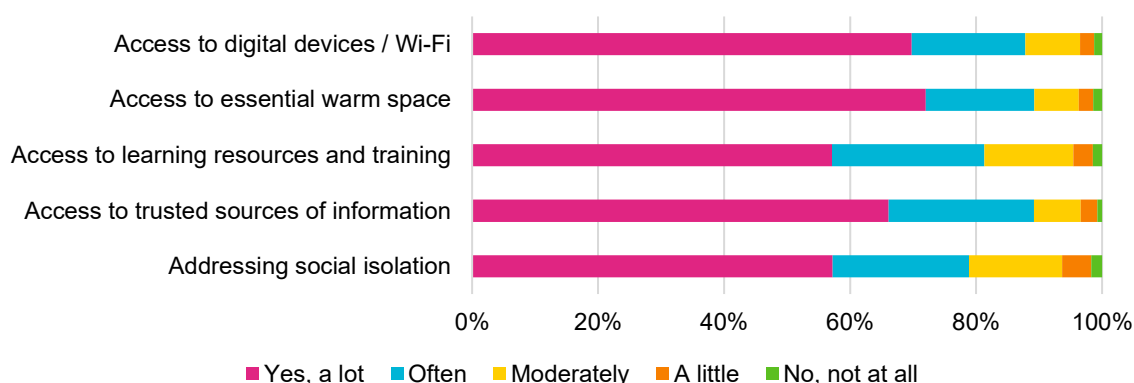
Scottish Book Trust,
I saw your poster in the Stranmillis library
the other day so am writing to tell you just
how much I value libraries.
I like to read sitting in an armchair
with my water reading 'Minnie-the-Book'
to me - I now have 80 years of reading
since then, a lot of it of library books.
All the books you want to read + can't afford
to buy are in the library. All the books
you wouldn't think to pick up are there when
you explore the shelves. I have worked in
libraries, I have taught junior school children
and I have taught English to foreign students.
I have always encouraged them to read, to
join the local library. It would be an absolute
tragedy to lose our libraries; books are our
teachers, our friends, our entertainment, our university.
May they never be cut back, their value is
inestimable.
Sincerely
(booklover!)

Final snapshot

To obtain a lasting overview of how a public library operates in a community, both library users and public librarians were asked to report on a scale – ranging from 'yes, a lot' to 'no, not at all' – the extent to which their library supports crucial needs:

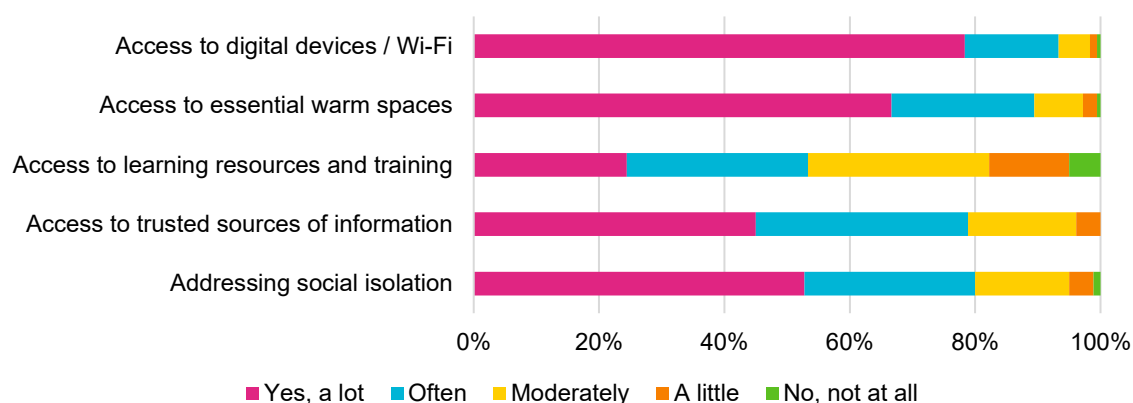
To what extent does your library support any of the following essential needs within your local community?

(Library users: 1,508 respondents)



To what extent does your library support any of the following essential needs within your local community?

(Public librarians: 180 responses)



The comparisons in these snapshots require a caveat – there were over 1,500 responses from library users, compared to 180 from public librarians. Therefore, the data sets do not share a fair baseline for comparison.

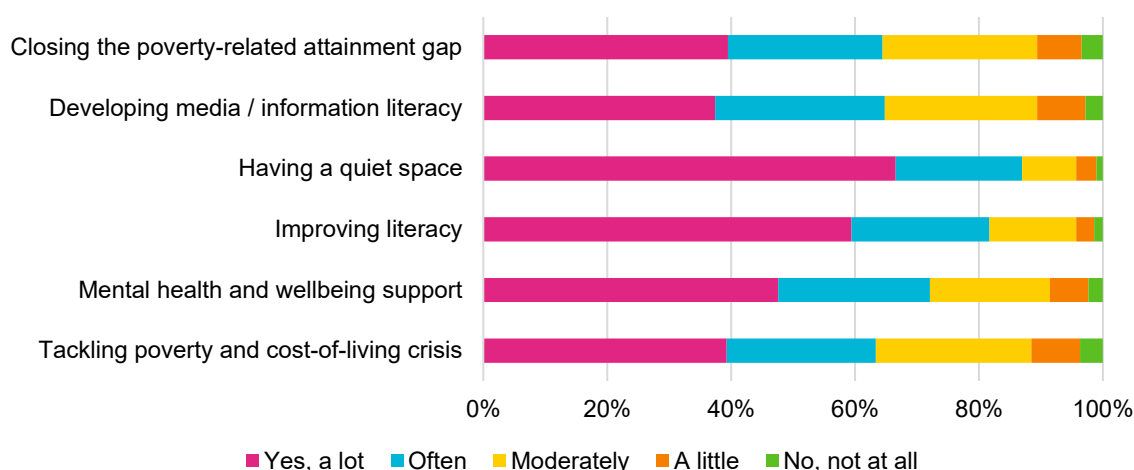
However, what they do indicate is the **strength of the library's provision**, particularly in terms of **digital devices / Wi-Fi** ('yes, a lot', 69.76% library users;

78.33% public librarians), **warm spaces** ('yes, a lot', 72.02% library users; 66.67% public librarians), and **addressing social isolation** ('yes, a lot', 57.23% library users; 52.78% public librarians).

Though library users reported their library supports **access to learning resources and training** ('yes, a lot', 57.10%; 'often', 24.20%), public librarians demonstrated more ambivalence ('yes, a lot', 24.44%; 'often', 28.89%). Moreover, 17.78% of public librarians indicated the library supported access 'a little' or 'not at all' (compared to 4.58% of library users). Again, the discrepancy here may be accounted for due to the varying volume in response rate, but it may also indicate a desire among library users to champion their library's provision, or librarians' concern that there is a lack of training or resource in their local service, that 'more could be done'.

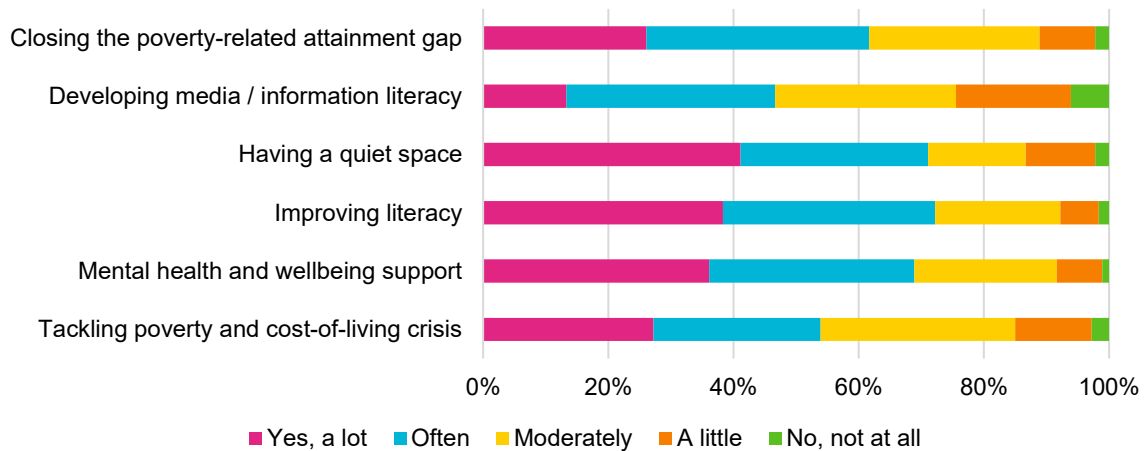
Both library users and public librarians were then asked to report, on the same scale, the extent to which their library addresses a host of diverse issues, from 'tackling poverty and the cost-of-living crisis' to 'developing media / information literacy':

To what extent does your library address any of the following issues?
(Library users: 1,508 respondents)



To what extent does your library address any of the following issues?

(Public librarians: 180 responses)



Again, bearing in mind the caveat of response rate, the similarity between the librarians and library users is striking. By far the highest-rated benefit was **having a quiet space** (library users: 'yes, a lot', 66.58%; 'often', 20.36% / librarians: 'yes, a lot', 41.11%; 'often', 30.00%), followed closely by **improving literacy** (library users: 'yes, a lot', 59.42%; 'often', 22.28% / librarians: 'yes, a lot', 38.33%; 'often', 33.89%) and **mental health and wellbeing support** (library users: 'yes, a lot', 47.61%; 'often', 24.47% / librarians: 'yes, a lot', 36.11%; 'often', 32.78%).

More ambivalent was the response on developing **media / information literacy**, with just 13.33% of public librarians reporting their library addressed it 'a lot' – and exactly one-third reporting 'often' – compared to 37.40% and 27.39% of library users, respectively.

Conclusion

'This is what we can do despite no investment. Just think about what we can do with investment.' – Public librarian

The evidence gathered here 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 three key messages arising from this research across the public library sector:

1. **97** of Scotland's **public libraries have closed** (a total of 16%) between 2008 and 2024 – that is more than 1 in 8
2. Library staff are prized by their community for going **beyond the call of duty** to help everyone who comes to their library
3. The library is **the last haven left** for anyone vulnerable, disadvantaged or in need

Closures

The actual number of public libraries in Scotland has decreased by a total of 16% since 2008 – more than 1 in 8.

This means that **at least 97 public libraries have closed in Scotland** between 2008 and 2024. (See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of further information.)

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

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 librarian also reported the struggle of articulating and advertising what the library can do:

'I think for a long, long time there's been a huge stereotype that libraries have to be quiet and you just come in and borrow books and then you leave them and that's it. And it's not like that at all anymore. It's a welcoming space. You can spend all day in if you want to. There's so much that we do for babies, for toddlers, for children, for teenagers, every single age possible, there's something there for everyone. I don't think, as much as we try and promote it and as much as we try and use social media to showcase everything that we're doing, it's just not enough.'

Librarians – beyond the call of duty

The survey of public librarians, with responses from every local authority, indicated that only 30% of respondents were qualified librarians. Almost half (45%) were 'library assistants' (7% of whom were qualified), barely a quarter (24%) were 'library manager' and just 6% 'head librarian'.

Compared to the survey findings outlining how long librarians have been working in the sector – over half (54%) had worked for 10+ years, and a further 18% for 6–10

years – their self-identified **job titles** clearly **do not represent or recognise that experience or seniority**.

From both sides of the service, however, there is an overwhelming amount of data indicating the ways that librarians go above and beyond their remit to serve and support their communities. One librarian shared an example of an invisible pastoral aspect of their role as a trusted community worker:

'Another older customer, he lives across the roads. He has no nearby family. [...] He's been having some serious health concerns. He comes in almost every day and we chat to him, we make sure he's OK. I don't know if my boss's boss would have approved, but when he was just out of hospital, couldn't get out of bed, my colleague did his shopping for him [...] So my manager was just like, "yeah, go and get him his milk".'

Another librarian shared an example of an older woman in their community whose electricity and gas had been cut off, and she did not have digital access to contact her energy supplier. Her librarian helped her set up an email account, to then use the chat function with her energy supplier, where the customer discovered that she had been signed up to a prepayment meter without her knowledge, and she did not know how to use it:

'And so this poor woman was left during winter time [...] without any heating or electricity. She was wandering around the house using candles and eating sandwiches and fresh orange juice. And I couldn't believe that this was allowed to happen. When we spoke to the online supplier, they just said, "oh well, she'll need to go home and press this sequence of buttons to reset her meter", and it's like, "well, she doesn't understand how to do that. Can somebody not come round?" They said, "no, no one can come round. Has she not got a neighbour?" And I was like, "no, she's a frail, vulnerable woman who doesn't understand how to do this". So, the chat was ended, there was nothing further we could do.

In the end, I went online. I found photos of the meter that she had and wrote her out instructions on how to do it and she went away. And I had decided that on my lunch break I was just going to go to her house and do it for her

because I couldn't [...] leave this woman without power. But as it turned out, before my lunch break was due to start, she came back to the library to say that she'd worked it out using the instructions and she got everything restored. So, you know that's the human impact of digital exclusion.'

Through, and beyond the lengths that public librarians in Scotland go to in order to promote reading for pleasure, provide learning opportunities, ensure digital access and literacy, reach a diverse audience and cultivate a safe space, they clearly earn and retain the trust of their communities.

In a nation where public libraries are not simply repositories of books, public librarians are not simply information managers – they are on the front line of every community, without adequate support, without job security and without recognition, save for from the communities who rely on them.

The last haven left

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 definitive:

- Libraries are key to addressing literacy issues among children and adults, primarily due to their **affordability** in promoting reading for pleasure and their provision of equal access to accurate information
- Libraries in smaller or more remote communities are often the only place for people to find community and support; shutting these libraries down, particularly when based on incomplete statistics such as footfall numbers, fails to recognise the whole and real impact on those that do use the service
- 60.59% of responding librarians, 88.48% of responding library users, indicated that libraries were 'quite' or 'very important' in **providing further education / learning opportunities**. Many of those responding librarians noted, 'more could be done'.

- 2 in 3 responding librarians (66%) reported their community faces **digital poverty**. Library users continually refer to their library as a 'lifeline' for digital access
- **The vast majority** of responding library users **reported their library saves them money 'a lot'** (84.08%)

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 institutions⁵⁸ 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^{59,60}.

This report shows that public libraries reach a widely diverse and inclusive group of Scotland's people, including but not limited to:

- Adult learners
- Children and young people
- Disabled people / people living with ill health

- Families
- LGBTQ+ people
- Neurodivergent people
- New parents
- Older people
- People experiencing homelessness
- People experiencing mental ill health
- People experiencing poverty
- People living in rural areas
- People moving to a new community
- People out of work
- People with caring responsibilities

However, 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.

Recommendations

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

1. That **Scottish Government** publishes a clear legal definition of the parameters required to provide an 'adequate' public library service, thereby ensuring a uniform standard of high-quality provision across the nation.
2. That **Scottish Government** empowers local authorities across Scotland with sufficient funding and resource to uphold the standard as aligned with the guidelines and as a minimum.
3. That **local authorities** or their associated leisure trusts appropriately train and support their librarians to deliver a progressive and accessible library service.
4. That **local authorities** or their associated leisure trusts publish annual reports of data that detail their library provision, e.g., expenditure and income, staffing, service points open to the public, book stock and audio visual and electronic stock, annual issues, inter-library loans, requests, enquiries and visits.
5. That **public libraries** are supported and funded to develop a balanced and qualitative service improvement culture, which embeds consistent data measurement and self-evaluation practices, to align with the requirements of an 'adequate' service.
6. That more **members of the public** engage with and explore their local library, and that **public libraries** are sufficiently funded to reach out to and advertise in their local communities.

Appendix 1 – Total number of public libraries in Scotland

	2008	2018	2024
Number of public libraries	604	521	507
	(incl. mobile libraries)	(incl. mobile libraries)	(470 + 37 mobile libraries)
Source	CIPFA ⁶¹	CIPFA ^{62,†}	SBT review & SLIC 2019 report on mobile libraries ⁶³

	% reduction	No. of closures
2008 to 2024	16%	97

Between July–Oct 2023 and Oct 2024:	
Library closures	8
New libraries	5
Reduction in number of libraries	3

† A caveat is necessary for citing statistics from CIPFA: there is no breakdown available of how they calculate their totals, which library services they count or discount and whether or not their numbers are comprehensive. Despite this unreliability, they are the only available source of historic statistics. To best mitigate any inaccuracies, key sector stakeholders have been consulted and have advised on this analysis to ensure it is as robust as possible.

(not including mobile libraries)	
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Local Authority	Total libraries (not including mobile libraries)		Closed / opened	Notes
	As of Oct 2023	As of Oct 2024		
Aberdeen City	11	11		
Aberdeenshire	35	33	2	2 closures
Angus	7	7		
Argyll and Bute	8	10	-2	2 new libraries
Clackmannanshire	5	5		
Comhairle nan Eilean-Siar	4	4		
Dumfries and Galloway	24	24		
Dundee	14	14		
East Ayrshire	11	9	2	2 closures
East Dunbartonshire	8	7	1	1 closure
East Lothian	12	13	-1	1 new library
East Renfrewshire	10	10		
Edinburgh City	27	26	1	1 closure
Falkirk	8	8		
Fife	35	35		

Glasgow City	32	31	1	1 closure
Highland	40	40		
Inverclyde	7	7		
Midlothian	9	9		
Moray	11	11		
North Ayrshire	15	15		
North Lanarkshire	18	19	-1	1 new library
Orkney	2	2		
Perth and Kinross	12	13	-1	1 new library
Renfrewshire	12	12		
Scottish Borders	13	13		
Shetland	4	4		
South Ayrshire	11	11		
South Lanarkshire	23	23		
Stirling	16	16	1	1 library closed (replaced with mobile library)
West Dunbartonshire	8	8		
West Lothian	15	15		
Temporarily closed/under construction	5	5		
TOTAL	472	470	3	

Appendix 2 – Change in opening times of Scotland's public libraries, between Oct 2023 and Oct 2024

No. of libraries with additional hours	22
No. of libraries with reduced hours	40

Total additional hours	299.91667	299 hrs 55 mins
Additional staffed hours	148.91667	148 hrs 55 mins
Additional unstaffed hours	151	151 hrs

Total reduced hours	225.00	225 hrs
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Temporary closures	5
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	Additional staffed hours	Additional unstaffed hours	No. of libraries with additional hours	Reduced hours	No. of libraries with reduced hours	Temp closure due to RAAC	Temp closures due to refurb
Aberdeen City	18		3				
Aberdeenshire	3.75	0.5	2	9	5		
Angus							
Argyll and Bute	26.5	77	3				
Clackmannanshire				0.5	1		

Comhairle nan Eilean-Siar	5		1	1	1		
Dumfries and Galloway	21		1	6	2		
Dundee							
East Ayrshire	3.167	73.5	4	0.33	1		
East Dunbartonshire	19		2			1	
East Lothian	6		1	48	8		
East Renfrewshire				20	4		
Edinburgh City	10		1			1	1
Falkirk				48	8		
Fife	7.5		3	14	3		
Glasgow City						1	1
Highland				27	3		
Inverclyde							
Midlothian							
Moray				3	1		
North Ayrshire							
North Lanarkshire							
Orkney							
Perth and Kinross							
Renfrewshire							
Scottish Borders	28		2				
Shetland				33.167	1		

South Ayrshire							
South Lanarkshire				12	2		
Stirling							
West Dunbartonshire				3	1		
West Lothian	1		1				
Total	148.917	151	24	224.99 7	41	3	2
<div> <div>148hrs 55mins</div> <div>225hrs</div> </div>							

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