

Briefing: Birmingham Needs Public Libraries

- A network of well-run public libraries is essential in a city with low print and digital literacy and high levels of poverty.
- The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 places a duty on Birmingham City Council to provide a “comprehensive and efficient library service” overseen by central government.
- The proposed cuts to Birmingham’s library service will be irreversible and costly in the long run.
- Community libraries are well-used services distributed across the city.
- Libraries need to be run by trained staff as part of an interconnected service.

The national picture

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

A Library Authority such as Birmingham is required by the 1964 act to provide a **comprehensive** and **efficient** service to all who **live, work or study** in the area.

Comprehensive means wide-ranging content, accessible to all audiences, on an extensive range of subject matter, up to date and verifiable. This is crucial in areas such as law, health, personal finance, science and technology, and academic topics for homework or study. It is desirable in areas of interest and demand like biography, family history or leisure pursuits. Delivering promptly, by all means available – in person or remotely through print, archival or digital.

Efficient means delivered competently by qualified librarians and/or trained staff; informed and well-judged in selection, acquisition and delivery of print and digital resources. Participation in nationally negotiated deals to secure cost-effective access to resources from publishers and suppliers.

To meet these requirements, a library service requires qualified staff. Staff require leadership, experience, and training. They need to engage in and with the community the library serves; they need to be in touch with the library sector regionally and nationally to understand how to meet a wide range of needs.

NATIONAL NETWORKS and REPORTS

Under the supervision of DCMS, national agencies offer vision, training and additional funding to local library authorities. They include Arts Council England (as development agency), Libraries Connected (as the membership body of senior librarians), and CILIP: The library and information association (responsible for professional accreditation and development).



This briefing has been prepared by Birmingham Loves Libraries, an umbrella campaign uniting Birmingham Friends of Library groups, Save our Libraries campaigns, and library users and city residents campaigning to protect and champion our libraries and library services.

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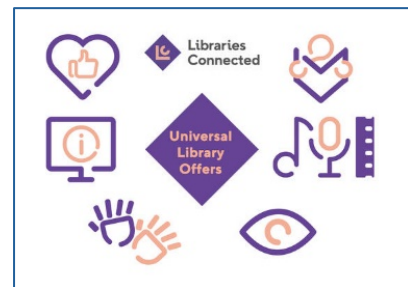
THE VALUE OF LIBRARIES

The government's **Libraries Taskforce (2015-2020)** identified seven outcomes to which libraries contribute:¹

- cultural and creative enrichment
- increased reading and literacy
- improved digital access and literacy
- helping everyone achieve their full potential
- healthier and happier lives
- greater prosperity
- stronger, more resilient communities

Libraries Connected sets out the *Universal Offers*² for all authorities as a minimum service “to connect communities, improve wellbeing and promote equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity”:

- Culture and creativity
- Health and wellbeing
- Information and digital
- Reading
- Children’s promise
- Vision and print impaired people’s promise



The **Local Government Association (LGA)** emphasises that libraries reach and support the whole community regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status or educational attainment. Libraries and the people who work in them support other public services to achieve the outcomes needed for individuals and communities to flourish.

The **National Literacy Trust and Libraries Connected** underline libraries’ importance for raising literacy, “a national priority for levelling up and post-pandemic recovery”: “The UK’s 3,667 public libraries are the national reading service – a library card is a sign of everyone’s entitlement to literacy and the nation’s commitment to lifelong literacy. Public libraries democratise reading for their 6.7 million users. As such, they are a vital resource for a pressing national challenge.” **They are essential for children: “Library use at the age of 3 has a positive impact on reading skills in the first years of school.”**³

How much are libraries worth? “Libraries in England generate at least £3.4bn in value a year through services supporting children’s literacy, digital inclusion and health, a study has found. Researchers at the University of East Anglia discovered that the services that a typical branch provides in a year are worth £1m, and that libraries’ value could equate to six times their running costs”⁴

¹*Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021>

² <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/universal-library-offers>

³ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/public-libraries-and-literacy-recovery/>

⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/07/study-finds-english-libraries-generate-at-least-34bn-in-yearly-value>

Why Birmingham Needs Libraries

BIRMINGHAM NEEDS ACCESS TO BOOKS

- **Access to free books** is critical in a city with high and increasing poverty and social exclusion. This library unique selling point remains the foundation of literacy, learning and discovery for children, parents and carers, young adults, and adults learning to read later in life. People with learning difficulties, the isolated, older people, and people with other protected characteristics will all find relevant books free at the library in a place close to home.
- Reflecting the city's diversity and critical to supporting literacy of multilingual households, **Birmingham libraries have books in 50 languages, selected to meet local needs.**⁵
- Stories – books, reading, literature – are at the heart of human communication and understanding and remain central to why people use libraries. **Books are costly: an adult book is £10-20 while children's books cost £5-15. This is unaffordable for most families in Birmingham.**

BIRMINGHAM NEEDS INCREASED DIGITAL INCLUSION

- Birmingham's library service was a leading player when the UK was the first country to establish a national programme of computer provision, staff training and content creation in public libraries. We must build on this legacy.
- **Digital poverty impacts 45% of Birmingham's population.**⁶ **Libraries provide access to computers, the internet, assisted technologies, scanning and printing.** Skilled library staff increase digital inclusion by supporting people to fill out forms and applications, upload photos, and navigate complex sources. These skills are especially important in deprived areas where costs are a barrier, free support is absent, and there is no space to study or work at home.

BIRMINGHAM'S CHILDREN NEED LIBRARIES

- Through learning resources in print, digital and audio, children and adults develop their literacy and learning skills, helping them achieve in education, work and life.
- **Children's basic literacy is established before they reach school, with library use at age 3 predictive of school-age reading skills.**⁷ Libraries hold story times, author events and reading programmes to instil reading skills, avoiding disadvantage later. *Bookstart*⁸, which starts parents reading to and with children early in life, was co-developed by the Birmingham Library Service and research at the University of Birmingham.
- **The library is the only place to learn and study when there's no room at home.** Libraries are especially important for children and young people living in temporary and/or overcrowded accommodation, children out of school, and students studying from home. Libraries organise in-library Homework Clubs run by staff trained to help children learn for themselves. Birmingham was among the first library services to introduce Homework Clubs and worked with others and the Department of Education to design standards and national training resources.

⁵www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50136/children_and_young_people/1521/about_the_childrens_library/2

⁶<https://digitalbirmingham.co.uk/enabling-a-digital-birmingham-an-evaluation-of-the-birmingham-digital-inclusion-strategy/>

⁷ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/public-libraries-and-literacy-recovery/>

⁸ *Bookstart* showed reading to babies makes them better readers at school. It is now copied all over the world. <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-and-campaigns/bookstart/practitioners/history/>

LIBRARIES ENABLE LIFELONG LEARNING

- **Some 1 in 6 adults have difficulty reading in the UK.**⁹ Birmingham libraries provide access to print resources to improve literacy. The national scheme Quick Reads publishes novels written discretely at lower literacy levels, introducing new readers to books through libraries. Charities such as ReadEasy rely on library spaces to coach adults to read.
- Libraries play a unique role for sources of information. National purchase schemes negotiated by the library sector at national level to reduce costs deliver 1000s of magazines, e-books and other resources for personal, learning and work needs.
- **Changing technologies extend routes to learning and discovery.** Libraries have long had "talking books", once for people with visual impairment, now used by many and available as downloads (via the Borrowbox service). Birmingham Libraries now offer e-Books, eMagazines, and eNewspapers to borrow (via Overdrive and Libby).
- Access to computers, books, learning activities and job information help people build knowledge and develop skills. Help writing CVs and job applications supports people looking for work while dedicated business information supports start-ups and the self-employed.

LIBRARIES ARE ALREADY CRITICAL COMMUNITY HUBS

- Research has emphasised digital remote access cannot replace the physical space of a library.¹⁰
- **The library has credibility as a safe civic space.** It is innately community oriented, democratic in nature, non-judgmental and free to enter. An astounding legacy of municipalisation. An ultimate public service; the NHS of the mind.
- **The library is a community identifier,** named after its location and close to home for those less mobile or less able to use or afford public transport. Libraries provide warm safe spaces for all, especially for the most vulnerable among us.
- **The library has become one of only a few free or cheap places for community groups and organisations to meet:** a simple offer rarely available elsewhere that enables older people's coffee mornings, art classes, local history clubs, young adult groups, and children's play.
- **Libraries democratise arts and culture.** The library is used as a performance space and is often the venue for affordable community music, crafting, exhibitions, poetry and creative writing. Libraries underpin other art forms with books and information about every area of creativity.

"The library is a sanctuary for me. It helped me keep my sanity when I was looking after a baby and toddler as it was somewhere else to go where I could meet other people for free."

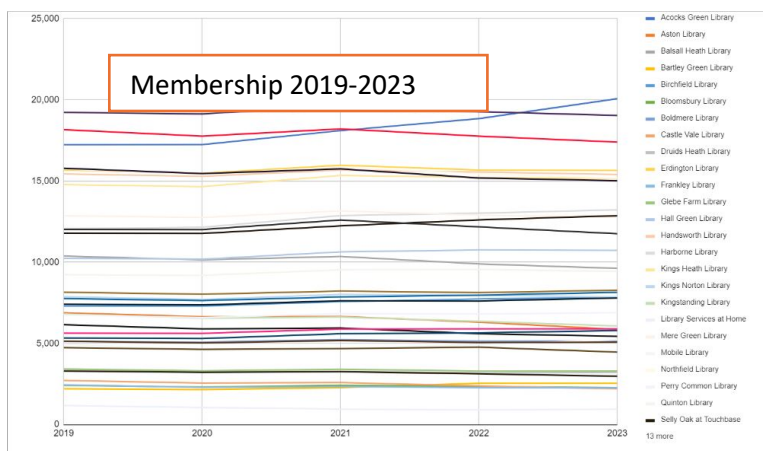
"I need libraries to survive. I am a pensioner on benefits...Nowadays you have to apply for benefits online, there is no other way...If there are no public computers, then no income, I wouldn't get my rent paid and I'd be homeless. As would many others like myself."

"The ability to read almost anything and to know that my children can do the same is only viable with access to a library."

⁹ National Literacy Trust, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>.

¹⁰ Ruthven, I., Robinson, E., & McMenemy, D. (2023). The value of digital and physical library services in UK public libraries and why they are not interchangeable. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 55(4), 1143-1154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09610006221127027>

Birmingham Libraries: Continuing use amid deep cuts



RESILIENT PATTERNS OF USE

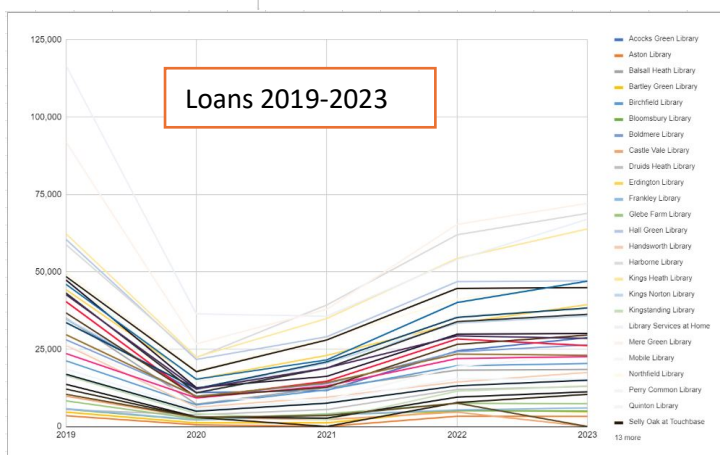
Membership, walk in and online use has remained steady or is increasing for most community libraries.

Libraries are used and in demand, with footfall and loans returning to previous levels since the end of the pandemic lockdowns. This is despite already savage cuts which have closed libraries and slashed opening hours.

BIRMINGHAM CANNOT AFFORD TO LOSE MORE LIBRARIES.

Birmingham's library service has already been downsized and downgraded. In 2010 we had 39 community libraries, most open full time. Four have been closed (West Heath, Wylde Green, Kents Moat, and Castle Vale (community asset transfer c. 2015, not currently operational)).

Opening hours have been slashed, some libraries put in shared premises (Bloomsbury, Selly Oak), and others moved to smaller buildings (Aston, Birchfield). There is already an increased reliance on volunteers and charities to provide additional hours (Stirchley).



For over two decades, spend on community libraries has been cut repeatedly, reducing staff, resources and services. This is primarily due to central government cuts but has been compounded by choices by Birmingham City Council. Localisation in 2003 fragmented community libraries from a single service, merging libraries with other community-based services managed by District (constituency). Library budgets were disaggregated, pooled with others, and then spent disparately with no consistent library thinking applied (except for the library IT system). This meant:

1. No planned building maintenance programme; hence the subsequent calamities with boilers and leaking roofs, frequent and long-term "temporary" closures (e.g. Spring Hill) and costs.
2. Little or no promotion to counter low awareness of the extensive range of services.
3. Reduced number of qualified librarians (from 30+ to 6) with less capacity for skilled library work, outreach, development, promotion, and work with schools and community groups. Reduced staffing reduced capacity for enquiries, community, learning and cultural activities.
4. Cuts to senior library management, librarians and service delivery staff rendered the Library of Birmingham impossible to operate fully and reduced capacity for local and external engagement.

Elected members need to recognise the value of libraries, how the service is run, the interconnectedness of the service, and how the service supports the 15-minute neighbourhoods idea and Prevention First outcomes.¹¹

Elected members urgently need to recognise the implications of the proposed cuts:

- A drastic reduction in the number of libraries, making it much harder for people to visit a library
- Further degradation of library services due to lack of qualified staff
- Further fragmentation of the service, impeding interlibrary loans and data management
- Overwhelming of core library services and related safeguarding arrangements of vulnerable users by needs of other adult-focused advice services
- Loss of statutory status for libraries transferred out of Council ownership
- Unsustainability of un- or under-funded volunteer services
- Increased inequality and barriers to inclusion in a city where over 45% of children grow up in poverty.¹²

Urgent Questions for Birmingham City Council

Budget irresponsibility

- Why has Birmingham City Council set a budget for community libraries that ensures the city cannot provide an accessible service of reasonable quality – or meet its legal requirement to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service? Why was no prior thinking applied to creating a viable budget?
- **Can BCC extend the period for dealing with the budget shortfall to four years to help avoid destructive and irreversible measures that will later be a source of deep regret?**

Get to know your service

- Since Localisation, library spend has been slashed repeatedly, reducing staffing, resources and services. It appears that elected members and officers have not understood the value of libraries, how the services are run, and the importance of the interconnectedness of the libraries network – nor the implications of multiple and repeated cuts. **When will members stand up for our public libraries?**

Gamble versus informed risk

- Why would Birmingham City Council lose a service delivered by experienced, trained staff – a service the council is required to deliver by statute – and expect volunteers to run it now and into the future? There is no evidence presented that the proposed model can be sustainable. Only Castle Vale is quoted in the current proposal as an example of a community asset transfer; it has not worked.



¹¹ <https://www.bvsc.org/neighbourhood-network-schemes-in-birmingham>

¹² Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, quoted in <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/cost-of-living/one-two-brummie-kids-now-28511099>.