

Written evidence submitted by Libraries Connected [FSF 007]

A. Introduction

1. Libraries Connected is independent charity that has been supporting, promoting and representing public libraries for almost 30 years. Our work is driven and led by our membership, which includes almost every library service in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies. Across the areas we serve there are 176 individual library services with around 3,000 library branches serving over 61 million people.
2. Our unique approach is to bring the leaders of these services together to share experience, expertise and evidence – driving innovation and impact across the public library sector. As well as providing practical support, training and advice to libraries, we represent them to government and raise their profile in the media. We also develop and lead national library projects with cultural, academic and corporate partners.
3. As an Arts Council Investment Principle Support Organisation, part of our core funding in England comes from the Arts Council to help embed their Investment Principles across the library network.

B. About libraries

4. There are around 3,000 public libraries (static and mobile) in England, most of which are run directly by local authorities ([Arts Council England basic dataset 2023](#)).
5. In England and Wales, approximately 78% of the population are within a 30-minute walk of a public library ([Access to local amenities in England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics, Ordnance Survey, 2024](#)). Across the UK, 87% of people know where their nearest public library is (poll conducted by Survation on behalf of Libraries Connected, 2024).
6. In England, 30% of adults aged 16 and over used a public library service at least once in the previous 12 months. That's around 13m adults, 27% of which brought a child to borrow, browse or return books ([DCMS Participation Survey 2023/24](#)).
7. Libraries have a unique place in our communities: free, safe, universal spaces, often in prominent locations, with strong links to local civic and voluntary organisations. Their mission is to inspire lifelong learning, support health and wellbeing and enrich our economic and cultural life. Books, literacy and reading remain at the heart of the modern library service, which also offers a wide range of essential community support: free computing and internet access, family and early years activities, business advice, arts events, social clubs and much more.
8. For all these reasons, the library network is one of the most effective and efficient means of delivering services into communities. That is why public libraries frequently act as a “front door” to information and advice on a range of council services, with signposting to dedicated specialist support if required.
9. Libraries are a statutory service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. All upper-tier and unitary councils must, by law, provide a "comprehensive and efficient" library service for everyone who lives, works or studies there. Under the Act, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is responsible for ensuring councils fulfil this duty.

Library services are largely funded, however, by local authorities through the Revenue Support Grant from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

C. Response to your questions

10. Bearing in mind our particular focus, we have only responded to the questions where we believe our perspective will help with the Committee's work. Our responses relate primarily to unitary and upper-tier local authorities, which are responsible for delivering library services.

Is the local government finance system fit for purpose? If not, what needs to change?

11. As is now widely recognised, the current system for funding local government is unsustainable. Years of funding cuts combined with increased demand and costs has created a multi-billion pound funding gap. This has left local library services particularly vulnerable, despite them being a statutory service, as councils struggle to balance their budgets.
12. In total, net expenditure by local authorities on public libraries has fallen by almost half (47%) in real terms between 2009-10 and 2022-23, from £1.2 billion to £673 million in 2022-23 prices (DCMS analysis of [LA revenue expenditure and financing](#), MHCLG). Since 2016, there has been a net loss of 183 static libraries in the UK that came under councils' statutory services. Of those, 27 have moved from being entirely run by the council to being run by an independent community organisation ([BBC Shared Data Unit](#)). Around 2,276 FTE library posts have been lost across the UK since 2016 ([BBC Shared Data Unit](#)).
13. There is evidence that poorer areas are disproportionately affected by library cuts and closures. Across the UK 7% of libraries in the most deprived decile have been closed since 2016 compared to 3% of libraries in the least deprived ([BBC Shared Data Unit](#)).
14. The future of the public library network will remain precarious until there is fair and sustainable funding for councils, at a level which supports: a well-stocked and equipped service that meets the needs of local library users; a fairly rewarded, diverse and skilled library workforce; and safe, accessible and adaptable library buildings.
15. Additional funding announced in December's provisional Local Government Finance Settlement is to be welcomed, but little – if any – of this will find its way into neighbourhood services such as libraries. And while we welcome the government's pledge to introduce multi-year settlements, which will allow councils to plan better, this must be accompanied by a significant increase in overall funding.
16. The current system drives a wedge between “front-line” social care and neighbourhood services such as libraries, parks and leisure. We would like to see a funding approach that recognises the interrelatedness of local services and particularly the preventative (and therefore cost-saving) impact of libraries, alongside other cultural and leisure services.

Where are the most significant funding pressures in local government, and how does the finance system address them?

17. The most significant funding pressures in local government are widely known: children's services, adult social care, homelessness, SEN and home-to-school transport. The demand for these services has risen so dramatically that they now account for most council spending, squeezing the amount that can be spent on all other service areas. As a result, two-thirds of

councils ([LGA](#)) warn that communities will face cutbacks to local neighbourhood services - which includes libraries - due to struggles addressing funding gaps this year.

18. Given these severe financial pressures, there is a concern among our members that local government is withdrawing from large areas of responsibility, such as libraries, to focus almost entirely on social care.

Does the current statutory regime for identifying and responding to financial distress in local authorities support local authorities to get out of financial distress?

19. There is a growing body of evidence that public libraries have an important preventative and “upstream” role. This includes supporting early literacy development, helping jobseekers, supporting entrepreneurship, tackling social isolation and digital exclusion, and providing high quality cultural experiences. This is in addition to the well-established health and wellbeing benefits of reading for pleasure.
20. The current approach to local government funding, however, and particularly the regime for identifying and responding to financial distress, incentivises short-term savings over long-term investment in communities. While some of our members operate within progressive authorities that recognise the preventative impact of libraries – eg allocating public health grants to library services - many are focused on short-term cost cutting.
21. The problem is not only with those authorities that have already issued Section 114 certificates, but also those who impose severe spending constraints to avoid doing so. Members are increasingly being asked to model drastically reduced library services, including several who have been asked if the service could continue with just one library branch. This is deeply concerning as it suggests these councils are unaware of their legal duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.
22. In-year cuts to book budgets, travel and training restrictions are now commonplace. One member was barred from entering their library service for awards in case it won and the authority would need to pay for travel to the prize-giving ceremony. This has a destructive effect on both staff morale and customer satisfaction, leaving the service even more vulnerable.

D. Questions that the committee should ask the Government.

23. How will the Government ensure the library network is adequately funded and supported as it addresses the crisis in social care?
24. How will the Government incentivise “upstream” and preventative investment in neighbourhood services such as libraries?

E. Conclusion

25. Libraries Connected welcomes this important inquiry. We would be happy to expand on any of the points we have made here, and to assist the inquiry in any way that would be helpful.

January 2025