

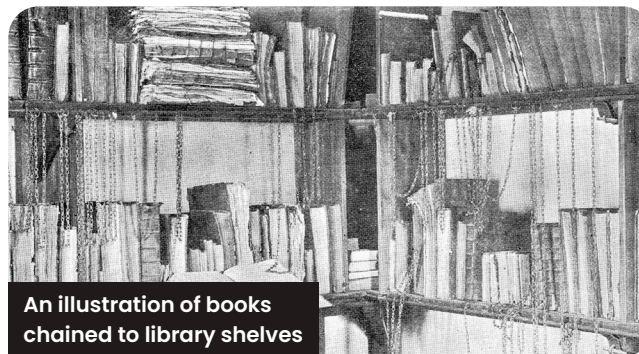
SHOULD EVERYONE HAVE ACCESS TO A LIBRARY?

Libraries have been a key part of the UK's towns and cities for more than a hundred years. They are not only places to borrow books, but a centre of the community, offering everything from internet access and newspaper archives to children's play sessions and job training workshops. However, in recent years there has been a drop in library visits and big cuts in government funding to local authorities. As a result, many libraries have been closed down or had their hours reduced, and lots of others still face the threat of closure. Modern technology means we now have e-books that are cheap and easy to download, and large amounts of information available online. Should everyone have access to a library, or is it time to consider other options?



A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

The history of libraries in the UK dates back around 1,000 years. During **medieval** times there were no printed books yet, but a small number of books were produced using a **quill** and ink. For example, in **monasteries**, monks kept their own libraries of handwritten books, which were often focussed on religion. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge also started small libraries on subjects including philosophy and science. These books were so rare and valuable that they were sometimes chained to the shelves, as they would have been extremely difficult to replace if they were stolen.



In the late 15th century, thanks to the invention of the **printing press**, more books began to be produced. During the 16th and 17th centuries, it became common for wealthy people to collect



books in their own private libraries. During his reign, **King Henry VIII** built up a large collection of books (and later, the **Royal Library** was formally established by **King William IV**).

In the 18th century, subscription libraries were created, which meant people could pay a yearly membership fee to borrow books. Examples include the Library Company of Liverpool and the Bristol Library Society. Things changed in 1850, when the government introduced the **Public Libraries Act**, which allowed local authorities to use taxes to set up free public libraries. The aim of this was to encourage more people to read and enjoy books. After these laws came into effect, Manchester was the first city to set up its own public library in 1852.

As more libraries were established, they started to include things like reading rooms, reference sections, workshops and children's areas, becoming real centres of the community. More recently, as technology has advanced, libraries have begun to offer e-books, internet access and digital archives of things like old newspapers.

LIBRARY CLOSURES

Since 2010, public libraries have been under pressure due to cuts in government funding for local authorities. A recent BBC report revealed that since 2016, more than 180 council-run libraries have either closed or are only being kept open by volunteers. Lots of libraries that have stayed open now have self-service times when people can borrow and return books, but there is no librarian there to help with any queries. Many of the libraries that have closed are in rural areas where fewer people live. The report also found that deprived areas were four times more likely than wealthy areas to have lost their public library. Around 950 of the libraries that are still open have had their hours and services reduced by as much as half. Isobel Hunter, the chief executive of the charity **Libraries Connected**, says: "These figures show the scale of the crisis facing public libraries. Libraries are hit the hardest in the areas we need them the most."

Many more libraries are still facing the threat of closure due to a lack of funding. In response, there are lots of local and national campaigns to save libraries, including **Libraries Change Lives**, the campaign by the library association **CILIP** that aims to highlight the value of libraries to the community. Is it time to accept that it's just not possible for everyone to have access to a library?

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

● The learning opportunities

One of the strongest arguments in favour of libraries for all is that it means everyone has access to a whole range of books, whether it's a child learning to read, a student studying for exams or a pensioner researching a new hobby. Not only that but, for some people, the library might be the only place they can get access to a computer and the internet. Having these library services available for everyone helps to tackle inequality in education, as no-one is excluded from the learning opportunities that libraries provide and there is a place for everyone to access digital technology.



However, some people might say that progress in modern technology means that libraries are no longer necessary. Lots of learning that once relied on textbooks can now be done digitally. In the past, people went to libraries to find out information that's now easily accessed online, and books can be cheaply and quickly downloaded. It could be argued that some of the money that's used to fund libraries would be better spent on ensuring everyone has Wi-Fi and can access things like e-books and online databases. There is also the option of having small mobile libraries that visit now and again, rather than a permanent library building.



● Centre of the community

It's fair to say that libraries aren't always just about books, they are often at the centre of the community. Many libraries host events and activities, from children's play sessions to job training workshops. A library can help people to feel a sense of connection to others and, with the current cost of living crisis, libraries provide a warm space during the colder months for people who can't afford to heat their home. These are just some of the reasons that it's argued that libraries play a role in promoting good mental health and wellbeing.

However, figures from the [Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy \(CIPFA\)](#) show that since 2006, library visits have dropped by 28% and the number of books that have been borrowed from libraries has dropped by 38%. This



includes the period of time that libraries were closed during the Covid pandemic and, although library visits have been rising since the pandemic ended, overall numbers are still down. So, it could be argued that it makes sense for some of the UK's libraries to close or cut back their services to match this reduced demand. There are suggestions that investing in other projects, such as community centres, could be a more efficient way to provide the community benefits that are associated with libraries.



● Culture and history

Libraries play an important role in preserving the UK's history and culture. Historical books, important documents and information about local history can often be found in a library. Some people might argue that it's better to access all of this information online and that museums and galleries can display old documents and historical books for those who'd like to see them. Others would argue that the original books and documents are unique pieces of history and there is no substitute for



being able to access them easily in a local library, where librarians can offer valuable guidance.

● Weighing up the costs

The main reason that so many libraries have closed or are facing closure is the lack of funds to keep them running. The costs of running a library include maintaining the building, paying staff, and buying books and computer equipment. The cost of living crisis means that these costs have risen a great deal over the past few years. With less government funding now available, local authorities have had to make tough decisions about what to spend money on and some people believe that services like healthcare and housing should be the priority. Others might say that the benefits of libraries far outweigh the costs. Without library access for everyone, many people could miss out on the learning opportunities and community services that libraries provide, and this could have serious consequences, including lower levels of literacy, more inequality and a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

GLOSSARY

medieval – relating to the Middle Ages, the time in European history that lasted from around the 5th until the 15th century

quill – a large feather with the tip cut into a sharp point, so that it could be used for writing with ink before the invention of modern pens

monastery – a building where religious men called monks live and worship

printing press – a machine that produces books, newspapers and other printed materials by transferring ink onto paper. It was invented by Johannes Gutenberg around 1400 and had a huge impact on the way knowledge and ideas were shared

Royal Library – the official library of the UK's royalty, which is located at Windsor Castle

King Henry VIII – the King of England from 1509 until 1547, known for his six marriages and for his role establishing the Church of England

King William IV – the King of the United Kingdom from 1830 until 1837, who was nicknamed the 'Sailor King' as he spent many years serving in the Royal Navy before becoming king. He supported reforms including changes to the voting system and the end of slavery in the British Empire

Public Libraries Act – a series of laws that were introduced in UK in 1850, aimed at giving local authorities more power to create public libraries

Libraries Connected – a charity that promotes the importance of libraries and supports public libraries in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

CILIP – an organisation that supports librarians and information specialists in the UK, its full name is the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy – a UK organisation that provides training and sets standards for professionals in public finance

deprivation – the harmful lack of essential resources, often related to poverty

OPINIONS

Author Michael Rosen says: "Every time I hear of a library being closed, I find it absolutely horrifying. Sometimes people see cuts and think it's saving money, or people don't really need it, but I see it as a form of **deprivation**."

Journalist Andre Walker disagrees, writing on social media: "Nobody goes to libraries anymore. Close the public ones and put the books in schools."



YES, EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO A LIBRARY...



1. Libraries make a wide range of books and learning opportunities available to everyone, regardless of their wealth or background. The library is also the only place that some people can access the internet for free.
2. Libraries are about much more than books and learning. They are often centres of the community – a place where people can find out about local history, take part in workshops, keep warm on a cold day and connect with others.
3. The benefits of libraries far outweigh the costs involved in running them. Without the services that libraries provide, there would be more inequality, lower levels of literacy and a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.



NO, EVERYONE SHOULDN'T HAVE ACCESS TO A LIBRARY...



1. The modern technology we now have available means that libraries aren't as vital as they used to be. Books can be cheaply and easily downloaded and large amounts of information can be found online.
2. Local authorities have much less funding available, so tough choices need to be made. Fewer people now visit a library, so it's right that essential services like housing and healthcare are the priority.
3. There are other options that could provide library services in a different way. For example, small mobile libraries, community centre events or making sure everyone has access to the internet and Wi-Fi.

QUESTIONS

Is there a public library in your area?

Is there a library at your school?

When was the last time you visited a library?

Are you surprised that library visitor numbers have dropped?

Do you ever download books?

Have you ever been to the library for an event rather than to borrow books?

Do you prefer to read information on a screen or in a book?

Would you visit a mobile library if it came to your area once in a while?

Do you think it's important for everyone to have access to a library?

Do you think local history books and documents should be in a museum or a library?



FYI

WATCH A VIDEO!

Check out one school trying to tackle the issue of a lack of libraries with a pop-up library! Watch on FYI: Weekly News Show, our partner weekly news show from Sky Kids at: first.news/popuplibrary