



## Valuing public libraries

**Library services make an essential contribution to local communities and educational achievement. But the service has suffered years of funding cuts, and the threat of closures is growing.**

### A popular service

Public libraries are vibrant and welcoming places where people from all walks of life can access free books, information and learning:

- libraries introduce children to books through baby groups and “story time”
- libraries help pupils with homework clubs and the Summer Reading Challenge
- libraries are playing an increasing role in youth and adult learning
- libraries provide internet access for many who otherwise could not afford it
- libraries also facilitate affordable access to music and films on CD and DVD
- libraries can be a space for community groups to meet and hold events

Total UK visits to public libraries have risen by 6% over the past five years. Every week more people visit a library than attend football matches or go to the cinema.

### A haven in hard times

During the recession libraries will be crucial for maintaining quality of life and learning opportunities for families who can't afford books or a home computer. They also help people access the information and resources they need to find work.

There is already evidence that people are looking to libraries even more during hard times. In the London borough of Westminster visits went up 10%, while in Cumbria new membership applications were up 38% on the year before.

*“My job makes lives better. Libraries are really important places for people because they are for everyone regardless of background, wealth or age. They are gateways to knowledge and I get a great deal of satisfaction helping the public get the most out of the services we offer, whether it is rhyme time for the under fives, help for students with their studies or advice on reading for pleasure for all ages.”*

– library assistant, UNISON

*“The free public library is a rare and beautiful idea. The fact that any of us can walk into one of 5,000 libraries and have access to tens of thousands of books satisfies one of our deepest longings – that everyone at some level should have an equal chance.”*

– **Melvyn Bragg, writer and broadcaster**

## **A service under threat**

Library staff are under immense pressure from local authority budget constraints that have resulted in libraries being thinly staffed, under-resourced or sometimes closed.

- the service is seen as a “soft target” for cuts by many local authorities who spend only 1% of their budget on libraries
- since 1997 the total number of professional staff (full time equivalent) employed in public libraries has fallen by 14%
- the number of library books available to borrow is falling by two million a year, and total stock is now 13 million lower than it was 6 years ago
- in just the past two years more than 80 libraries have closed and more cuts are planned in places like Calderdale, Waltham Forest, and Wirral

## **What needs to change**

Despite the pressures, many libraries are developing innovative and imaginative ways of serving local communities. We need to build on the best practice:

- adequate resources and funding are needed to maintain book stock, embrace technological advances, improve premises and extend opening hours
- staff, users and local communities should be fully involved in shaping services – including unions, ‘Friends’ groups, and outreach to new users
- libraries and councils throughout the UK need to share good practice, encouraging innovative methods within a publicly accountable framework
- all libraries should ensure they are responsive and welcoming to all members of their local communities, as the best already do
- staff training should be expanded and professional development encouraged, to support the delivery of a responsive and high quality service

## **Add your voice**

We need as many people as possible to add their voice to our campaign:

- join your local library – be part of a great public service!
- talk to your friends, family, co-workers and neighbours about the threat to library services
- raise your concerns about the future of the service with your council, local media, and political candidates
- take the campaign to workplace or community meetings – or organise your own – we can help with materials and speakers
- visit [www.unison.org.uk/million](http://www.unison.org.uk/million) for more information, more campaign ideas and to tell us what you’ve been doing

**We have a million  
voices for change  
*add yours***

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