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The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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Equality, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Inviting & inclusive school libraries

This new report¹ outlines a project to improve school libraries in Gloucestershire, organised by Read for Good², Gloucestershire Libraries and Little Box of Books³.

The report sets out the challenges in schools in Gloucestershire:

“Despite an enormous commitment from staff, with a number of staff using their own time and money to source and purchase new books, primary schools were confronting significant resource constraints.

14 of the 15 primary schools on the project had no reading for pleasure budget. As a result, the initial audits of primary school libraries revealed ‘unloved’ spaces. Many libraries were full of outdated and inaccurate books, had a lack of inclusive books, books muddled together and books in boxes or on the floor rather than on shelves. As a result, the libraries were often totally uninviting and unusable for children. Libraries lacked books that children would choose to read - with many children unable to find books that spoke to their identities, experiences or interests.” [pp5-6]

Through this project:

[...] the 15 primary schools received 4,500 brand-new books, including 1,500 specially curated inclusive titles. Gloucestershire Libraries provided each primary school with 2-3 days of specialist, bespoke in-person support. This included removing inaccurate and outdated books, including books containing harmful stereotypes, and organising book collections and spaces to create ‘welcoming’ libraries.” [p6]

¹ *Inviting & inclusive school libraries*. Read for Good, 2023, https://readforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/LIBRARIES_REPORT_2023_email-1.pdf.

² “READ FOR GOOD is a national charity based in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire. Our vision is for all children in the UK to be given the opportunity, space and motivation to develop their own love of reading. This will benefit them throughout their lives – for good. One of the reasons kids don’t read is lack of motivation. One of the things that motivates kids is helping other kids. Our simple (but brilliant) idea is to link the two. And it works!

We encourage children through our sponsored Readathon in schools, which helps us provide books for school libraries, and books and storytellers for children in hospital throughout the UK. Freedom of choice, reading without assessment and reading with purpose underpin the success of our work with children.” Taken from: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/read-for-good/?originalSubdomain=uk>.

³ “Little Box of Books curates collections of books so that more children see themselves in the stories that they read and learn to expect and accept the diversity of our population. They find representative, inclusive, brilliant books from a diverse range of authors and work to diversify school bookshelves so they truly reflect society.” [p2] See: <https://littleboxofbooks.co.uk/>.

The impact on the children and the schools was immense:

“100% of respondents said that, as a result of the new books, their book collections now ‘completely’ or ‘very nearly’ reflect the identity and experiences of children in their primary school, and the diversity of the wider UK population. The impact of the new collection was particularly marked for children who saw themselves reflected back within the stories [...]”

Significantly, the project changed the reading habits of children who don’t normally choose to read. 85% of schools told us the new books and comics had encouraged ‘reluctant readers’ to read more.” [p6]

Drawing on this evidence, the report sets out why reading for pleasure and libraries matter, and how you can develop libraries that foster a love of reading. It also focuses strongly on the very poor state of the school libraries before the project, and shows, drawing on some case studies, the impact that the project has had. It also demonstrates the importance of focusing on children in the greatest need.

This short report makes a good case for the importance of reading – and of school libraries. Highly recommended.⁴

Health & Wellbeing issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Libraries for living, and for living better: the value and impact of public libraries in the East of England

This new report⁵ has had some media attention, particularly because of the estimate of national social value that libraries create.

“Libraries Connected Eastern Region commissioned the production of a research report and development of an evaluation tool that would help measure, manage, and evidence the impact of social connections in libraries in May 2022.” [p9]

The report focuses on three key themes: digital inclusion, health and wellbeing, and children’s literacy.

The key findings in relation to each of these are:

Theme 1: digital inclusion

⁴ Source: *Teen Librarian Newsletter*, 18 Jul 2023.

⁵ John Gordon et al. *Libraries for living, and for living better: the value and impact of public libraries in the East of England*. UEA Publishing Project, 2023, <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/sites/default/files/Libraries%20for%20Living%2C%20and%20for%20Living%20Better.pdf>.

a) “Libraries offer individuals and communities many forms of help and support for communication (e.g. email, social media), printing (e.g. CVs, returns labels, tickets) and engaging with government services (e.g. bus passes, blue badges, passports, housing, schools). For many people, the help available through digital services and resources also addresses wider health issues they may experience, particularly isolation, and enables them to participate in society.

b) The main factors inhibiting better digital inclusion are poor user interfaces and lack of accessibility, task complexity and process design of digital-only processes and keeping pace with rapidly changing technology. The net effect is that people who are older, disabled or with literacy needs may be excluded from many digital services, including statutory government services which are digital-only, which risks being discriminatory.

c) Library facilities and support are critical and often effective in reducing the impact of these factors. However, the support offered varies because of perceived privacy or data protection concerns, staff skills and availability. Improvements in process and systems design could address these barriers.” [p20]

Theme 2: health, wellbeing and independent living: the impact of providing activities and events for adults in libraries, including the significance for social prescribing models

a) “Throughout the Eastern region, many partnerships and initiatives seek to improve health and wellbeing for adults and maintain independent living. These cover diverse activities, though some library professionals reported that most are attended by older people. Library services offer activities that impact directly on the wellbeing of adults, such as physical activities and mental health initiatives. They also offer activities which impact indirectly on them and their social networks, through adult education, convening groups to support parents, carers and families, people with long-term health conditions and their carers, and intergenerational group activities.

b) Libraries offer information on health and wellbeing and signpost people to other services. This support has the potential to help people to live independently, to reduce the risk of falls, and to reduce NHS and social care costs. Overall, library services provide social care that is central to existing social prescribing and its development. Library services often initiate activities to address wider population ambitions such as to level up society or improve the health and wellbeing of less affluent communities. One example is the mobile library service that provides contact for many people in rural communities.

c) Tangible outcomes for participants joining these activities include physical activity, socialisation and finding employment, which can improve their wellbeing and reduce mental health issues. Many less tangible impacts include the effects of trust, volunteering, experience of leading groups, learning new skills, community service and long-term

intergenerational benefits. Library services provide opportunities for people to improve their employment, health and to socialise. These are three key indicators for wellbeing outlined by the Office of National Statistics, which also link the three themes investigated for this report (health, children's literacy, and digital inclusion).

d) Library professionals are creative in providing a range of activities within tight financial constraints. Circumstances vary between localities. In some, limited staffing and current challenges to volunteer recruitment and staff training may limit what could be achieved." [p21]

Theme 3: children's literacy and associated outcomes: the impact of targeted library programmes for children and young people that supports literacy recovery following Covid

a) "Library programmes have value and impact on post-Covid literacy recovery by providing rich experiences and stimulating environments for speaking, listening, reading and writing. Literacy activities are interactive and face to face, with impacts on children's socialisation and confidence.

b) Library programmes for children are creative, fun and motivating. They build from basics, introducing children to libraries and helping them become confident and familiar with them. Children learn to find their way around libraries, make return visits, and begin to use libraries habitually. By introducing children and their families to libraries and collections, library services encourage autonomous and motivated information literacy through life.

c) By addressing the whole family unit, libraries provide services and advice which help families to support their children's literacy at home and beyond their direct involvement in specific library programmes. For many children and their families, library programmes provide free access to a wealth of books and resources that they would not otherwise encounter. This is shown by new or increased borrowing of library books by children participating in programmes, by children's use of 'creator spaces' for art and digital making, and in the involvement of parents, carers and grandparents who are sometimes surprised that libraries today can be very different from what they knew as children.

d) Library programmes have important impacts on children's literacy that complement but differ from the impacts of literacy learning in schools. Library programmes develop 'living literacy', for example, by linking literacy with day-to-day experiences like making a meal at home, or by providing the kit for children to try out science experiments with household objects. The programmes link literacy with family relationships, and help develop science and health literacies. Importantly, the model of literacy in the evaluated programmes is non-judgemental.

e) Some programmes are modelling collaborations with two or more organisations (council services, charities). They improve programmes by linking the expertise of different organisations for making grant

applications that secure funding for literacy provision through sponsored programmes.” [p22]

The report also has a number of recommendations to help public libraries to improve; these include:

- Review marketing, signage and online access for library services
- Develop liaison and sharing best practice between library services and other partners
- Improving digital provision
- Understanding the impacts of library services on health, wellbeing and independent living
- Extending the reach of services supporting children’s literacy – this includes: “Library services could consider how to develop the offer of programmes for teens and older teens to match the success and variety of programmes available for younger children.” [p89]
- Further evaluation of services

The headline-grabbing stats from the report are:

“Library services in England can generate social benefits to their communities to a value of at least £3.4bn per year in relation to the three value dimensions we investigated. This is based on a conservative estimate of 50% of libraries offering services in the way that aligns with the methodology we have used.

The return on investment calculated from our benefit modelling suggests a conservative figure of at least six times the known annual cost of running libraries nationally.” [p18]

The report also includes some ‘worked examples’ to demonstrate how this has been calculated.

This is an important report with not only the estimated value that libraries provide but also a lot of detailed information to support arguments about the importance of libraries to three key areas – digital inclusion, health & wellbeing, and children’s literacy.

Recommended.⁶

⁶ Source: *News from CILIP*, 12 Jul 2023.

LGBTQ+ issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Banning of LGBTQ+ books and other library materials [continued] and Protests against Drag Queen Storytimes

A year of hate: anti-drag mobilisation efforts targeting LGBTQ+ people in the UK

This important new report⁷ has just been published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue⁸.

“Research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has found that in the year since June 2022, anti-drag mobilisation in the UK has become a key focus for a variety of groups and actors. Antivaxxers, white nationalist groups, influential conspiracy theorists and ‘child protection’ advocates have at times formed an uneasy – even fractious – coalition of groups opposing all-ages drag events. The driving force behind these protests is a mix of far-right groups and COVID-19 conspiracists.

While public debate about what is appropriate entertainment for children, and at what ages, is absolutely legitimate and deserves fair hearing, the identified tactics used by these actors only serve to undermine that discussion with chilling consequences for free expression, and create fertile ground for a potential uptick in violence. Furthermore, our analysis has found evidence that the UK is importing anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and strategies from similar movements in the US, with the ‘groomer’ slur – used to frame LGBTQ+ people as a danger to children – becoming commonplace among anti-LGBTQ+ campaigners.” [p4]

The findings are an important reminder of the impact of these protests:

ISD found a total of 57 all-ages drag events targeted during the period analysed. Of these 57:

- Protesters were present at 51 events
- 10 of these events were cancelled ahead of time
- The protests regularly involved harassment and abuse of performers, staff, parents and police, with a number of violent clashes as well as arrests reported.
- The majority of these events (49) took place between the end of July 2022 and the end of August 2022 when Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) embarked on a tour across libraries in the UK.

⁷ *A year of hate: anti-drag mobilisation efforts targeting LGBTQ+ people in the UK*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Anti-Drag-Mobilisation-Efforts-Targeting-LGBTQ-People-in-the-UK.pdf>.

⁸ “The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to safeguarding human rights and reversing the rising tide of polarisation, extremism and disinformation worldwide.” Taken from: <https://www.isdglobal.org/about/>.

- The protesting and harassment of drag events was organised and attended by individuals with varied ideologies and beliefs, including white nationalists, sovereign citizen groups, conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists and child protection groups.
- The events targeted in 2023 also drew the attention of a number of Conservative Party politicians, a noteworthy example of how such activity is being mainstreamed.
- In April 2023, a man involved in anti-drag mobilisation was convicted of hate crimes for publishing statements online accusing a drag queen of ‘grooming children’.” [p5]

The report identifies the key groups/organisations/individuals involved, and also looks at the key narratives which are:

- Drag performers are paedophiles or hurting children
- Drag performers are “indoctrinating” children, eg:

“In an email campaign created by an organisation that researches ‘family breakdown’, DQSH events are alleged to have the true purpose of ‘indoctrination in the transgender agenda.’ [...] In the same vein, activist Piers Corbyn has claimed that the promotion of LGBTQ+ issues is part of a wider plan to encourage the ‘breakup of society.’” [p16]

The report concludes by noting the similarities with protests in the US and elsewhere, but also says:

“While this kind of activity has the potential to become mainstreamed further in the UK, it is also important to acknowledge the presence of counter protesters, which often outnumbered those opposing the drag events. Moreover, the vast majority of events tracked by ISD went ahead as planned despite threats and intimidation, a sign that despite the use of intimidatory tactics, this kind of activity has had little material success so far.” [p17]

An important read.⁹

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⁹ Source: Left Foot Forward *Right Wing Watch*, 1 Jul 2023.