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.

Contents List

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Community cohesion – Other Agencies

The state of us: community strength and cohesion in the UK

This "foundational" report[1] was published in July and forms part of the foundation of the work of the new Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion[2].

As the Foreword powerfully puts it:

> "The unrest seen last summer, the racially motivated rioting in Northern Ireland in recent weeks, and the findings of the grooming inquiry this month have all laid bare the fragility of social cohesion in the UK. But these are not isolated events - to treat them as momentary crises is to miss the point. Beneath the surface lies a much deeper and longer-standing set of structural pressures that have been building for decades.
>
> The report presents clear evidence that the bonds that hold society together – civic participation, and a shared sense of belonging – are under growing pressure. This is leaving our society more fragmented, fragile, and less resilient to internal and external threats. At the same time, forces driving division are intensifying: political polarisation is deepening and trust in institutions is declining, while mounting economic pressures – particularly the cost of living crisis – are fuelling widespread frustration, intensified by a widespread belief that immigration policy is in chaos. These trends are inextricably entwined – narrowing the space for constructive dialogue and increasing the risk of further unrest and alienation. Unless we address these forces, the very basis of our democracy is at risk. Examples of history and around the world show us that peaceful, diverse democracy is a journey, not just a destination. There can be no room for complacency or timidity." [p4]

Key findings from the report are:

- "Economic pessimism and widespread concerns about public services, inequality and the cost of living are leading to deep frustrations about the potential of 'politics as usual' to deliver meaningful change […]

- Our increasingly online society is more anxious and vulnerable […]

- Polarised debates divide us, especially on asylum and immigration […]

- Trust in decision-makers is very low. Politicians are seen as self-interested and disconnected from public concerns […]" [p7]

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[1] Jake Puddle, Jill Rutter <u>and</u> Heather Rolfe. *The state of us: community strength and cohesion in the UK: a foundational report by British Future and the Belong Network to the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion*. British Future and the Belong Network, 2025, https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-Us-report.15.7.25.pdf.
[2] See: https://www.livingwelltogether.org.uk/.

In addition:

- "Successive governments have failed to take sustained action on cohesion and communities." [p7]

Also:

- "Progress has been hindered by failures to recognise that this is an 'everyone, everywhere' issue"

    o Current good work on cohesion and community strength is patchy, fragmented and struggles to secure sustained funding [...]

    o Schools and workplaces are spaces where people regularly meet and interact with others from different backgrounds. They could be more closely involved in enabling good relations and social connection.

    o Rural areas, with lower social contact and fewer community meeting spaces, feel less positive about national cohesion and are often neglected by decision-makers.

    o Institutions lack confidence to tell positive stories about social cohesion and also to engage in difficult dialogue about challenges […]" [p8]

The report does identify that there are important innovative solutions being developed and that there are strong foundations to build on at neighbourhood level, in most places. To take all this forward:

- "Greater efforts to build community strength and cohesion are needed everywhere, not just in the areas with highest diversity or deprivation.
- Unifying narratives can help build shared identity and pride, across our differences.
- After the riots, we need to be better prepared to respond to future challenges and threats, avoiding complacency as well as excessive alarmism.
- Everyone has a role to play in strengthening communities and cohesion: Governments, councils, other public services, business, faith and civil society and individuals." [p10]

Finally, the report identifies five "Key reflections for consideration by the Commission" [p10]:

1. Sustained, long-term national plans for cohesion, updated to reflect new challenges and opportunities and backed by funding, are key to strengthening communities and cohesion […]

2. Getting it right on immigration and asylum, in a way that works for new arrivals and the communities they join, would aid cohesion and community […]

3. Online misinformation and hate are undermining cohesion and efforts to address this need to keep pace with its spread […]

4. Investment, growth and effective public services all impact on cohesion and community […]

5. Restoring public trust and respect in politics could have wider benefits […]" [pp10-11]

The report includes several references to libraries and museums, especially in relation to "Community infrastructure", for example:

"People told us about the decline and closure of community spaces over the past fifteen years, particularly in areas with higher deprivation and in more rural areas that had fewer existing community spaces and institutions. Focus group participants reflected fondly on libraries or youth spaces that they had previously utilised, but which now lacked funding." [p27]

And:

"Finally, provision of community spaces was raised as a key issue in local areas. Such spaces provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet and mix and include green space, parks, sports facilities, libraries, museums and heritage assets and community centres. Stakeholders highlighted that there are generally more of these community assets in wealthy areas, a trend supported by Local Trust research […] Furthermore, we were told that not all community assets are well-used, particularly if they were neglected or vandalised. Some participants in our roundtable discussions felt that local authorities had reduced their capacity to provide community spaces by selling-off community assets such as libraries and green space, although this was understood to be a consequence of national cuts to local government." [p89]

The Independent Commission on Community & Cohesion began its work in June; it sets out its brief as:

The UK is a thriving, multi-ethnic and multi-faith democracy where most people in towns, cities, and rural areas get on with each other. But we are also experiencing challenges to our community and local lives, with fresh expressions of old tensions – and new ones – emerging.

In some cases, this includes a decline in trust between neighbours, declining community connections, a growing sense of isolation and loneliness, or a feeling of not belonging either to the UK as a whole – or to England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

In other cases, it includes social exclusion, prejudice, hate crimes, extremism, and the emergence of so-called culture wars – sometimes revealing a society in which a shared understanding of the nation is lacking […]

Over the next 18 months, we will engage communities across the country to understand how to enhance community connectedness, cohesion and resilience — and to uncover the shared stories and vision that can help shape a more united future."[3]

Recommended.[4]

LGBTQ+ issues – Government, Government Agencies and Local Government

Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, and teachers

This new statutory guidance[5] was published in July 2025.

There has been some support for its inclusion of guidance on teaching about misogyny, deep fakes, artificial intelligence, how pornography can negatively influence sexual attitudes, the harms of vaping, and consent.

However, there are major concerns about its main coverage:

> "New statutory Relationships and Sex Education guidance from the Labour government for England has been dubbed 'Section 28 2.0' because it restricts schools from using materials that 'encourage pupils to question their gender', as well as putting pressure on teachers to avoid teaching about parts of Trans+ lives. It also makes it compulsory to teach children the laws about 'biological sex' and adopts a number of other gender-critical perspectives."[6]

Again, according to *QUEERAF*, Gendered Intelligence (with whom a lot of us have worked in terms of their training support) has described the guidance "trans-exclusive" because it puts "pressure on schools to be less supportive of trans pupils", and in turn puts pressure on teachers to avoid teaching about trans lives, even though it doesn't ban it outright.

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[3] See: https://www.livingwelltogether.org.uk/.

[4] Source: LinkedIn.

[5] *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, and teachers*. DfE, 2025, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/687a3d473f4bde279ef4528c/RSHE_statutory_guidance_-_July_2025_.pdf.

[6] Taken from: Jamie Wareham "'Section 28 2.0': New 'transphobic' curriculum restricts teachers from encouraging Trans+ pupils to understand their identity", *QUEERAF*, 19 Jul 2025, https://www.wearequeeraf.com/section-28-2-0-new-transphobic-curriculum-restricts-teachers-from-encouraging-trans-pupils-to-understand-their-identity/?ref=queeraf-newsletter.

Broader issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Banned Book Week

Banned Book Week is returning this year from 5-11 Oct, after a hiatus since the pandemic.

According to Index on Censorship[7]:

> "Around the world, writers face censorship, imprisonment and violence simply for putting words on a page. Booksellers from Iran to Belarus, Israel to Hong Kong have been harassed and silenced. Publishers in China and Russia are being pressured and censored. In places like the USA, Brazil, Hungary and even the UK, books are being banned and pulled off the shelves in libraries because of the ideas they hold and the questions they raise.
>
> Why? Because stories are powerful. Because reading can challenge the status quo.
>
> Banned Books Week UK returns from 5–11 October 2025. It's a week to celebrate the books that have been challenged, removed or silenced, and to stand with the people who write, sell and share them. Join Index on Censorship in honouring the right to read freely and the courage it takes to speak up."

In terms of getting involved:

- "Booksellers and libraries are invited to host displays, organise events or highlight books that have been banned or challenged around the world.
- Writers and readers are encouraged to celebrate books that have come under fire (globally or locally)
- Publishers and literature organisations are invited to join the campaign, whether curating online reading lists, hosting events or posting online"[8]

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"Rediscovering libraries: new insights on engaging non-users"

This is a new blogpost[9] from DCMS, highlighting the findings of recent research[10] by Ipsos UK.

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[7] Index on Censorship "Banned Books Week UK 2025", 10 Jul 2025, https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2025/07/banned-books-week-uk-2025/.
See also: Lauren Brown "Banned Book Week UK to return in October 2025 after hiatus", _The Bookseller_, 14 Jul 2025, https://www.thebookseller.com/news/banned-book-week-uk-to-return-in-october-2025-after-hiatus.
[8] Source: _Public Libraries News_, 20 Jul 2025.
[9] Glenn Gottfried "Rediscovering libraries: new insights on engaging non-users", _DCMS Libraries_, 16 Jul 2025, https://dcmslibraries.blog.gov.uk/2025/07/16/rediscovering-libraries-new-insights-on-engaging-non-users/.

These comments are based on the blogpost.

It starts with looking at key reasons why respondents do not use libraries:

- "Capability" – described as "Many non-users simply aren't aware of the full range of services their local libraries offer beyond book lending. This lack of awareness is particularly pronounced among younger age groups, graduates, and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In fact, 58% of library non-users indicated they are unfamiliar with library services beyond borrowing physical books."

- Opportunity – inconvenient opening hours and access issues (such as parking)

- Motivation – "The ability to access similar resources elsewhere (e.g., online or in bookshops) was identified as the most significant barrier overall […]"

However:

"Despite the barriers mentioned above, the research uncovered several services that could potentially draw non-users back to libraries:

1. Comfortable and inviting spaces (cited by 38% of non-users)
2. Extended opening hours, such as evenings and weekends (35%)
3. A wide selection of up-to-date books and publications (34%)
4. Access to free Wi-Fi and digital equipment like public computers and printers (33%)
5. Comfortable and dedicated spaces for working or studying (26%)"

This is followed by a segmentation of non-users, with areas for potential re-engagement.

Finally, the blogpost highlights "Interventions to consider":

1. "**Widening library reach through strategic social media engagement**: This involves going beyond simply promoting existing library-specific social media channels and actively engaging with non-users on platforms they already frequent. This could include partnering with relevant organisations, participating in online communities, and creating content tailored to specific audience segments. The goal is to increase awareness of the library's diverse offerings and challenge outdated perceptions.

2. **Transforming libraries into vibrant community hubs by hosting partner services**: By hosting services beyond typical library offerings, such as health clinics, early years programmes, or job fairs, this

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[10] *What works to engage library non-users*. DCMS, 10 Jul 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-to-engage-library-non-users/what-works-to-engage-library-non-users.

intervention seeks to increase library visibility and attract new audiences. This strategy also aims to help address the perception that library use is inconvenient by providing the opportunity for individuals to engage in multiple activities during a single visit.

3. **Reframing the library's value proposition to build resonance with non-users**: This requires developing targeted messaging that emphasises the library's relevance in the digital age, highlighting benefits such as sustainability, cost savings, and community connection. By tailoring messaging to the values and priorities of different segments, libraries can demonstrate their personal relevance and encourage re-engagement."

To be frank, I'm not sure it's anything we don't know already – but it's good that there is some focus on libraries, especially as it points towards the need for more funding. As I write this, there is a presentation to Libraries Connected going on, which will, no doubt, get this work even more widely known and discussed.

Abbreviations and acronyms

DCMS = Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport