



**Libraries
Connected**

**For the power of
public libraries.**

2025/2026

Impact report



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About us

Libraries Connected is the national membership body for public library services.

We are an independent charity representing almost every public library service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – 176 services, with around 3000 branches serving over 61 million people.

We bring together the people who run these services to collaborate, share knowledge and strengthen the sector's collective voice.

Our work is led by our members and shaped by their priorities. This means we can respond quickly to emerging issues and provide clear, practical support where it is needed most.

What we do

We provide training, networking, advice and resources to help library services improve, grow and adapt. We prioritise professional development so staff can learn from each other, build skills and share what works across the country. Our national network enables library leaders and staff to connect, solve problems together and learn from real experience.

We also champion public libraries to government, the media and wider society, using evidence to show the difference they make to people's lives. By bringing services together, we provide a strong, collective voice that represents the sector nationally.

Alongside this, we design and deliver national programmes with partners across culture, education and business. These programmes test new approaches, generate evidence and develop practical solutions that can be shared and scaled across the sector.

Everything we do is aimed at realising our vision of an effective, sustainable and accessible library service in every community.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
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Libraries Connected is an Arts Council England Investment Principles Support Organisation, supported through public funding.



Message from our Chief Executive

This is our first impact report and we hope it gives a clear picture of the role Libraries Connected plays in supporting public libraries and the people who run them.

It has been another challenging year for the sector. Library services continue to face financial pressure alongside significant political and structural change, while demand for what they offer continues to grow. In that context, our focus has remained consistent: bringing the sector together, making the case for libraries and providing practical support where it is needed most.

Libraries today are supporting communities in many different ways - from developing a love of reading to improving digital skills, wellbeing and social connection. As expectations continue to grow, so too does the need to demonstrate the impact of this work clearly and confidently.

Our role is to help make that possible. By connecting services, supporting shared learning and building the evidence base, we are helping libraries respond to change, test new approaches and strengthen their position as trusted local services.

This report shows what can be achieved when library services work together, sharing knowledge, building expertise and speaking with a strong, collective voice.

That collective strength will be essential as the sector continues to adapt and develop.

By putting our members first, we are helping to ensure that public libraries remain relevant, resilient and valued – now and in the future.

Isobel Hunter

Isobel Hunter MBE | Chief Executive

A huge thank you to our funders and partners, who made this work possible.

Funders

Arts Council England
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
Greater London Authority
National Lottery Heritage Fund
Natural England
The Combined Regions

Partners

CILIP
GGi
Good Things Foundation
Local Government Association
NCVO
Oxygen Arts
OverDrive
Shapland Coaching
Shared Intelligence
The National Archives
The Reading Agency
Women’s Prize Trust
WSA Community

Our year in numbers



176
member library services

3,000
individual libraries

17,500
library staff and volunteers supported

145,000
participants reached through Know Your Neighbourhood exceeding our engagement target by over
450%



£1.2m
distributed directly to

100+
library-led projects

2,400
peer discussions on our member networks

2,000
online learning enrolments

52
webinars delivered with
3,000
live participants and
3,000
additional on-demand views



700+
staff attended the Universal Library Offers conference

22
leaders in peer mentoring scheme





Membership

Our members are at the heart of everything we do. Libraries Connected brings together 176 public library services, supporting a workforce of around 17,500 staff across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Through this network, we support a connected, informed and resilient sector. At a time of significant change and increasing demand, our membership offer helps library services to share knowledge, learn from one another and respond to challenges with greater confidence.

Bringing leaders together

Our Annual Seminar in June remains the public library sector's flagship event. It brings together heads of service, senior staff and partners to

share insight, discuss policy and consider the future of library services. The theme this year was Resilience in an Age of Uncertainty, explored through a packed programme of keynote speeches, panel discussions and workshops led by sector and external experts. It involved around 200 attendees from 74 services, with contributions from 20 guest speakers and workshop leads.

The Innovation Gathering in March complemented this with a focus on frontline practice and delivery. It brought together around 60 participants from 39 services, supporting peer learning and the exchange of new ideas.

Creating opportunities to learn

Our webinar programme provides accessible and responsive professional development, covering topical issues, policy developments and new research findings. In 2025/26, we delivered more than 50 webinars, reaching around 3,000 participants with more than 3,000 on-demand views.



Elearning remains a core part of our membership offer, with around 2,000 enrolments across courses during the year.

Building and leading peer networks

Our online communities supported around 2,400 posts and discussions across the year, providing a space for mutual support and collaborative problem-solving. Our member platform supports this activity, providing a shared space for news, events and resources.

Sharing insight and opportunities

We provide regular updates through our member bulletin, sharing policy developments, funding opportunities and sector insight. These bulletins reached over 1,500 subscribers during the year.

Celebrating excellence: the Libraries Connected Awards

The Libraries Connected Awards provide a national platform to celebrate the achievements of library workers who have had an exceptional impact on their library service. They also support members to raise the profile of their work locally, resulting in widespread local and regional media coverage for shortlisted and winning services. The Awards continue to grow in scale and profile, with strong participation from members across all regions. For the fourth year running, this year's Awards were sponsored by OverDrive.





Projects and programmes

In 2025/26 our projects and programmes delivered practical benefits for library services and the communities they serve - combining national reach with locally driven innovation. Supported by funders including Arts Council England, DCMS, DSIT and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, this work helps library services strengthen their impact in communities.

Know Your Neighbourhood

The £29m DCMS Know Your Neighbourhood Fund tackled loneliness and boosted volunteering in 27 disadvantaged areas. Libraries Connected was one of three delivery partners, working with Arts Council England, to deliver £5m to arts and culture organisations.

Libraries exceeded engagement targets over 450%, reaching around 145,000 participants. Evaluation found that 52% of participants were first-time volunteers and 89% reported building new social connections. Participants were 18 times more likely to volunteer regularly than a matched comparison group.

The programme has generated strong evidence of libraries' role in improving wellbeing and community connection, alongside embedding new approaches such as co-design and social prescribing. A national conference in March 2026 brought together around 110 in-person and 75 online participants to share learning.

Microgrants Programme

The Microgrants Programme, funded by Arts Council England, supported small-scale, library-led innovation through accessible funding. A total of £232,000 was distributed to 50 projects across England. The programme strengthened fundraising experience across the workforce, with all respondents reporting increased confidence in funding applications and over 70% reporting substantial improvement. In total, 43 services plan to continue or scale their projects, which

delivered outcomes across literacy, wellbeing, digital inclusion and community engagement.

Black British Ballet

Black British Ballet brought new audiences into libraries through exhibitions, performances and creative activity celebrating Black British dance history.

Delivered with Oxygen Arts and funded by a £245,500 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the programme involved 29 library services. It strengthened libraries' role as cultural venues and supported engagement with diverse communities.

Feedback highlighted strong impacts on inclusion and wellbeing, while a national delivery model has created a lasting legacy, with exhibition panels continuing to tour.

Culture Nature Now

Culture Nature Now connected libraries with environmental partners to help people engage with nature. Four library services worked with Protected Site Strategy teams to deliver workshops, walks, crafts and talks. The programme reached a wide range of audiences,

including children, families and people new to engaging with nature. Independent evaluation is in progress.

Poverty Proofing Libraries

This programme, delivered with Children North East and funded by Arts Council England, helps libraries identify and remove barriers for people experiencing poverty. Three services (Gateshead, Oldham and Cornwall) undertook in-depth research and service redesign. Alongside this, around 270 staff participated in training, and a practical framework has been developed to support wider adoption across the sector.

Innovating in Trusted Spaces

This project, financed by a £310,400 grant through DSIT's Digital Inclusion Innovation Fund, explores how libraries can support digital inclusion and public understanding of AI. Working with four services, the programme engaged around 270 participants through tailored sessions and practical tools. 90% would recommend the learning and 81% reported increased confidence. Staff confidence also increased, with 87% better equipped to support users with AI-related queries.

Our Freedom: Then and Now

Libraries Connected played a central role in the 80th anniversaries of VE and VJ Day, supported by £2 million from DCMS and managed by Arts Council England. In partnership with Future Arts Centres, we delivered Our Freedom: Then and Now, working with 20 libraries and 40 arts centres. Communities explored the legacy of the war locally, collaborating with artists to create public events reflecting shared and place-based histories.

Workforce development

Our workforce development programmes support library staff at all levels to build confidence and leadership skills in a complex and changing environment. In 2025/26, 22 participants took part in our peer mentoring scheme, reporting increased confidence and high satisfaction, with recommendation scores of 8.8 from mentees and 9.0 from mentors. Alongside this, the Thriving in Complexity programme supported 12 emerging heads of service, with evaluation showing strong improvements in leadership confidence, identity and ability to navigate complexity.

Universal Library Offers

The four Universal Library Offers (ULOs) set out the core roles of public libraries: reading, culture and creativity, information and digital, and health and wellbeing. Each ULO is led by a group of senior library managers, who drive innovation through new projects and research. In 2025, the ULOs were refreshed with new principles and supporting infographics. A national online conference in November 2025 brought together over 700 participants from 76 services, with 94% recommending the event and 76% reporting a better understanding of the ULOs. This work is helping services apply the ULO framework more consistently, strengthening delivery and impact in communities.





Commercial

In 2025/26 we strengthened our commercial activity, securing investment, building partnerships and supporting sustainable services across the sector.

We secured £360,000 from the DSIT to deliver the Innovating in Trusted Spaces programme (see Projects and Programmes). We also secured £64,000 from Arts Council England to extend work on elending and licensing, building on progress in improving licensing terms for digital content and developing new partnerships with independent publishers.

We strengthened our work with national government partners to increase the role of libraries in public services, including engagement with the Ministry of Justice on prison library services and with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to connect libraries with local employment support.

This work is generating direct income for library services. The UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) service brought £2.4 million to eight library services, alongside £96,000 to Libraries Connected. Activity and income increased by 75%, demonstrating the potential for libraries to deliver commissioned services at scale.

To support future growth, we appointed Amplify Impact as fundraising partners and launched a new strategy focused on increasing income from charitable trusts and grants.

Together, this work is strengthening the financial resilience of library services and demonstrating their growing role as trusted delivery partners in public services, locally and nationally.





Regional development

In 2025/26 our regional development team focused on strengthening regional networks, increasing access to funding and improving the sector's ability to plan and deliver at scale.

Strengthening regional networks and delivery

Through the regional development programme, funded by Arts Council England, we supported all nine regional networks and delivered 40 regional meetings. These meetings have strengthened collaboration, enabled knowledge sharing and supported more coordinated regional planning.

We also supported major regional events. In October, more than 30 staff attended a workshop on

inclusive children's stock, led by sector specialists, with participation from multiple regions. A further 60 staff attended a North East regional conference supported through Combined Regions funding, demonstrating continued demand for shared learning and in-person networking.

The Regional and Universal Library Offer Leads Day in January brought together national and regional leads to strengthen communication and better align strategy with delivery.

Expanding funding and investment opportunities

A new tender pipeline has strengthened how opportunities are identified and developed, highlighting around 150 opportunities for regional leads and heads of service.

We worked with partners to develop bids with four Combined Authorities to expand access to adult skills provision. We also submitted a £300,000 National Lottery Community Fund application and a major regional proposal to extend Business and IP Centre activity.



A £60,000 award from the Greater London Authority is supporting a two-year programme focused on social cohesion, including community events, workforce development and partnership working.

Demonstrating impact and value

The £90,000 Combined Regions funding concluded in June and generated a total project value of £209,000, including £41,000 additional funding and £131,000 in-kind contributions. This supported activity across all nine regions, including digital development, health-focused projects and workforce initiatives.

We also continued to build the evidence base for libraries' impact. The South East report on the economic and wellbeing impact of library activity has been recognised by national bodies including National Centre for Creative Health, and supported the development of tools to estimate social value locally.

Building capacity and expertise

The Social Value Impact Programme, launched in September, has delivered a series of national webinars and established a community of practice with participants from across the UK. Additional support has improved our ability to assess and advise on evaluation work across services.

Together, this work has strengthened regional capacity, improved access to funding and supported library services to demonstrate their value more clearly.





Policy, external affairs and research

In 2025/26 we strengthened our role as the sector's national voice by bringing together our policy, advocacy, communications and research work in a new Policy, External Affairs and Research (PEAR) directorate. This has enabled a more strategic, coordinated approach to our external work and significantly increased our capacity to shape national conversations about libraries.

Raising the profile of libraries

We created high-profile opportunities to showcase the impact and value of libraries to decision-makers

and the media. Our Libraries 175 event in Manchester marked the anniversary of the Public Libraries Act, bringing together national and local politicians, sector leaders and partners. The event secured national visibility, including a ministerial speech, with libraries minister Baroness Twycross publicly reaffirming her support for libraries and their role in delivering government priorities.

This national profile was reinforced through our House of Lords reception, delivered with CILIP and Research Libraries UK, highlighting how libraries support economic growth, from enabling new businesses to strengthening skills and innovation.

The creation of the Libraries Alliance, of which we are a founding member, establishes a coordinated, cross-sector approach to advocacy and sets a long-term national vision for libraries of all kinds.

Alongside this national work, we supported members to secure regional and local media coverage, working through our networks to share stories, provide communications support and amplify the impact of library services in their communities.

Influencing policy and shaping national debate

We contributed evidence to parliamentary and independent inquiries, ensuring libraries were represented in national debates on reading for pleasure, media literacy and community cohesion. We also contributed to the development of the UK Government's Media Literacy Action Plan, securing recognition of libraries as trusted spaces for building digital confidence and tackling misinformation.

We continued to work closely with Arts Council England, contributing to Baroness Hodge's strategic review and supporting the implementation of the Libraries Development Framework, helping ensure it reflects the needs and priorities of library services.

Supporting members through change

We provided practical support to help members navigate a challenging and fast-changing environment. This included guidance on local government reorganisation and targeted support for services facing severe financial pressures.

A core part of our role is to bring the sector together. Through our national and regional networks, we facilitated peer support, shared problem-solving and open discussion, providing safe, trusted spaces where library leaders can explore sensitive issues, test ideas and learn from one another.

We also supported members in managing complex and high-profile challenges, including providing guidance on censorship and freedom of expression, helping services respond confidently while upholding core library values.

Strengthening our voice

Underpinning this work, we launched a new communications strategy to increase our reach and impact. This includes a more strategic approach to national media engagement, a growing programme of blogs and opinion content, and continued development of our social media channels - leading to increased reach and engagement with key audiences.

Together, these activities are ensuring that the impact of libraries is more visible, better evidenced and more widely understood - while also equipping our members to tell their own stories locally. Libraries Connected is increasingly recognised as a leading voice shaping policy and public debate.

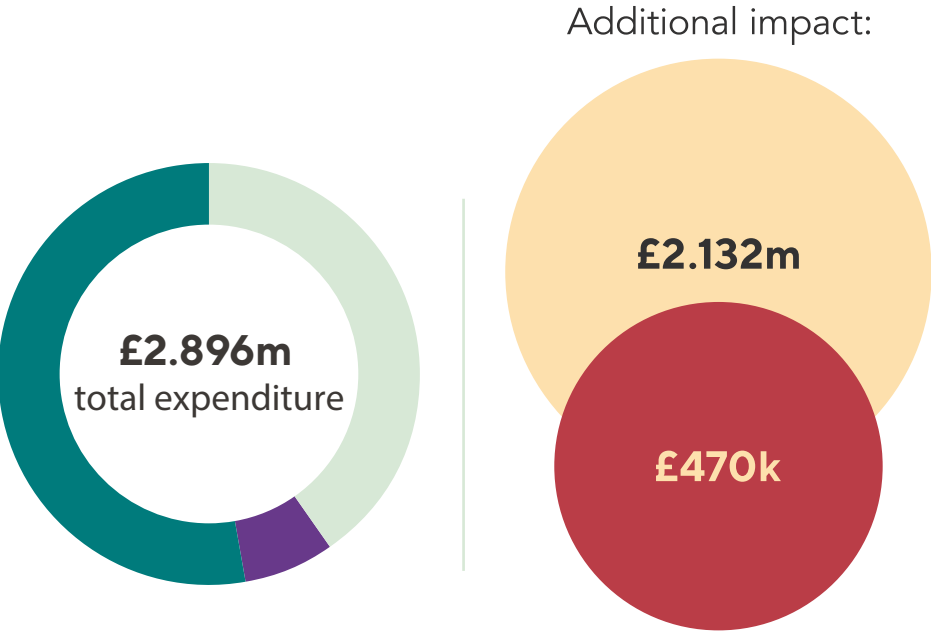
Financial information

Our income

£2.249 million total income from membership fees, Arts Council England grants, other fundraising grants, donations, events, and contracts.

How we spent it

- ◆ **Grants directly to libraries** (£1.169 million). **112 grants** were distributed through programmes including Microgrants, Know Your Neighbourhood and Culture Nature (See Projects and Programmes, page 12)
- ◆ **Running the organisation** (£204k) including governance, overheads and core charity operations
- ◆ **Supporting the sector** (£1.523 million) through services and delivery



Additional impact

- ◆ **UKVCAS service** (£2.132 million generated for 8 library services for delivery of front line visa ID checking, biometrics and document uploading in libraries)
- ◆ **Regional groups** (£470k held for regional groups)

These figures are provisional and remain subject to change pending audit and formal approval by the Board of Trustees.



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