



**Libraries  
Connected**

# Written evidence submission by Libraries Connected

**Digital Poverty Alliance Inquiry into Digital Inclusion and Health**

**July 2025**

## Introduction

Libraries Connected is an independent charity that has been supporting, promoting and representing public libraries for almost 30 years. Our work is driven and led by our membership, which includes almost every library service in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies. Across the areas we serve there are 176 individual library services with around 3,000 library branches serving over 61 million people.

Our unique approach is to bring the leaders of these services together to share experience, expertise and evidence – driving innovation and impact across the public library sector. As well as providing practical support, training and advice to libraries, we represent them to government and raise their profile in the media. We also develop and lead national library projects with cultural, academic and corporate partners.

As an Arts Council Investment Principle Support Organisation, part of our core funding in England comes from the Arts Council to help embed their Investment Principles across the library network.

## About libraries

There are around 4,000 public libraries (static and mobile) in the UK, most of which are run directly by local authorities.

In England and Wales, approximately 78% of the population are within a 30-minute walk of a public library. Across the UK, 87% of people know where their nearest public library is (poll conducted by Survation on behalf of Libraries Connected, 2024).

In England, 30% of adults aged 16 and over used a public library service at least once in the previous 12 months. That's around 13m adults, 27% of which brought a child to borrow, browse or return books.

Libraries have a unique place in our communities: free, safe, universal spaces, often in prominent locations, with strong links to local civic and voluntary organisations. Their mission is to inspire lifelong learning, support health and wellbeing and enrich our economic and cultural life. Books, literacy and reading remain at the heart of the modern library service, which also offers a wide range of essential community support: free

computing and internet access, family and early years activities, business advice, arts events, social clubs and much more.

For all these reasons, the library network is one of the most effective and efficient means of delivering services into communities. That is why public libraries frequently act as a "front door" to information and services, with signposting to dedicated specialist support if required.

Libraries are a statutory service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. All upper-tier and unitary councils must, by law, provide a "comprehensive and efficient" library service for everyone who lives, works or studies there. Under the Act, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is responsible for ensuring councils fulfil this duty. Library services are largely funded, however, by local authorities through the Revenue Support Grant from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

## **Libraries and digital inclusion**

Public libraries address all aspects of digital inclusion: connectivity, devices, skills and confidence. They are the leading provider of digital skills support, through one-to-one assistance and training courses such as Good Things Foundation's Learn My Way - free bite-sized courses covering online basics, including for health. They offer free internet and PC use and the vast majority also offer support with completing online tasks. Main and larger libraries will usually offer more structured skills support, including workshops and drop-in sessions. Many also offer device loans (20%) and free data (30%), primarily through the National Databank and National Device Bank run by Good Things Foundation.

Libraries deliver this wide range of support directly, and also in collaboration with expert and community bodies. Strong partnerships with local organisations mean libraries can reach those most at risk of digital exclusion and provide tailored support.

The crucial role of libraries in supporting digital inclusion was affirmed by government in the Digital Inclusion Action Plan, published in April. It has also been recognised by the Lords Communications and Digital Committee, whose report on digital exclusion recommended greater investment in libraries as community-based digital inclusion hubs. Build Digital UK's analysis of Get Online Week, which is the flagship annual digital inclusion campaign run by Good Things Foundation, also stressed the importance of public libraries in collaborative work that seeks to close the digital divide.

As essential services become digital-only, however, and basic computer skills are increasingly expected by employers, libraries are struggling to meet demand. Staff invest on average a third of their time supporting users with online tasks, a rate that is increasing in over 40% of authorities. Yet local authority spending on libraries has halved since 2009/10, leading to the loss of specialist roles and cuts to digital inclusion programmes. Around one in 10 library services are not able to provide the digital skills support they would like and only half have a digital inclusion strategy.

## **Libraries and access to health services**

Health is one of the key areas with which people seek digital support from libraries: seven in ten library services support people to use the internet for information about their health. The support provided can include assistance searching for (and evaluating) health

information, making GP appointments, requesting repeat prescriptions, accessing health records or understanding local health services.

Public libraries offer an accessible, welcoming, nonclinical space where people can get help to access digital health services. [Librarians are one of the most trusted professions](#) so have a particularly important role in supporting people to access information about their health.

Feedback from our member library services consistently highlights that digital exclusion is a persistent barrier to equitable health access. This is confirmed by [academic and research data](#). Many individuals lack the confidence or ability to navigate online health information and services, or make informed decisions about their care. Our members frequently encounter users who are unable to complete basic health-related tasks online without the tailored, one-to-one support offered by libraries.

As most health services can now be accessed through an individual's NHS account, libraries are increasingly playing a key technical and functional support role for the NHS app. [Libraries Connected worked in partnership with NHS England](#) to provide library staff with the tools and support they need to help people access the app and so far 1400 libraries have joined the programme. We are pleased that the recently published [10 Year Health Plan for England](#) confirms that this partnership will continue.

## Online health literacy

Health literacy has been a particular focus for the public library sector, which is committed to ensuring the public has the skills and confidence to access, understand and use health information. The [Health and Digital Literacy Partnership](#) was a collaboration between CILIP, the NHS Knowledge and Library Services team, Libraries Connected, and Arts Council England. It supported several small scale pilot projects, including the development of NHS England's [Misinformation UnMASKED checklist](#), a guide for checking the reliability of health information.

The volume of mis- and disinformation, particularly in relation to health, is growing and its impact is exacerbated by the UK's low levels of digital and media literacy. Public libraries are well placed to counter this trend by supporting individuals to critically evaluate information. (The crucial role of libraries is developing the nation's media literacy has recently [been recognised by the Lords Communications and Digital Committee](#).) However, the scale and complexity of the challenge requires sustained investment in training and development for library staff.

## Effective approaches

The experience of our members, confirmed by the emerging evidence base, demonstrates that the most effective support for accessing online health services is informal, flexible and ad-hoc, without the need for appointments or formal enrolment. Libraries provide this through drop-in sessions, one-to-one help and community health initiatives such as befriending services with volunteers. This highly tailored approach is critical to reach those who may be reluctant to seek help in clinical settings or who face language, disability or other barriers. This is especially important as we know that digital exclusion in health often coincides with other social and economic inequalities.

The key features of successful all digital inclusion programmes, including those that focus on health, are: strong leadership and a comprehensive strategy; clear identification of

excluded groups; investment in staff training and well-managed volunteer programs; a holistic approach recognising that digital exclusion often intersects with other disadvantages; longer-term support beyond helping with one-off tasks; libraries serving as lead partners; and dedicated digital inclusion coordinators to manage delivery and partnerships.

Our view is that national government should provide investment, leadership and co-ordination to allow local networks to develop and respond to local need. The digital inclusion and health challenges experienced by communities vary significantly by demography, geography and cultural factors so a top-down approach is unlikely to be successful.

Our members also emphasise the need for offline options in all health services. A significant proportion of the population either cannot or chooses not to engage with digital platforms. Removing offline options risks deepening existing inequalities. Libraries often act as a bridge for these users, but they cannot replace the need for accessible, non-digital pathways to essential services.

## **Conclusion**

Libraries Connected welcomes this important inquiry. We would be happy to expand on any of the points we have made here and would welcome the opportunity to facilitate a visit to a library service to see first-hand some of the work described in this submission.

## **Contact details**

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