

# Briefing: Libraries in Primary Schools

December 2025

**Joint briefing from the School Library Association (SLA), Libraries Rising, Libraries Connected, and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)**

## Overview

We strongly welcome the Chancellor's announcement to fund a library in every primary school in England, by the end of this Parliament, as a landmark commitment to educational equity, literacy and the transformative power of reading. With an estimated [one in seven primary schools currently lacking a library](#), this pledge has the potential to embed a culture of reading in primary education and improve outcomes for children across the country.

We also welcome the [£5 million books for secondary schools that was announced in the Budget by the Chancellor](#). This is a welcome first step that will provide £1.36 per current secondary school pupil for book supplies.

The new announcement comes at a critical time for children's reading. A 2025 National Literacy Trust survey found [only one-third of children aged 8-18 enjoy reading for pleasure](#), and government data shows that 25% of pupils leave primary school unable to [read at the level expected](#). There is now a [large research base](#) evidencing the positive impact that libraries, both school and public- could have on these concerning figures.

As the details of the programme - which will be co-designed by the National Lottery Community Fund - are being considered and finalised, this briefing sets out key principles to ensure the long-term success of the policy.

## What is a school library?

School library provision varies significantly across the country, but a well-functioning school library should be a dedicated space other than the classroom, managed by suitably trained staff. It should offer a wide, inclusive and regularly updated collection of books and other reading materials covering diverse genres and interests, with regular timetabled opportunities for children to participate in reading and learning activities. While classroom book corners can enhance and extend reading provision within a school, they are not a substitute for a library space with dedicated expert staff.

## What is a Schools Library Service?

Local authority-run or commissioned School Library Services provide critical support and resource rotation in many parts of the country.

In the 1980s and early 1990s School Library Services (SLS) were typically part of the offer to schools in every English Local Authority and provided a range of book loan services to enhance school library stock and to add resource to different curriculum areas. Qualified librarians provided advice and expertise for schools and both primary (age 5-11) and secondary (11-18) schools were entitled to the service. In most cases these services were run and managed as part of the public library service, although in some cases they were part of the Education service.

Given the fragmentation and academisation of schools, this universal offer is now a discretionary service which is offered to schools often on a commercial basis by local authorities, though many services still receive local authority funding as well.

There is no government-held data on how many School Library Services there are, what their offer to schools is or how many schools are served, however, recent research by the University of Leeds, commissioned by Libraries Rising and supported by Arts Council England, shows there are 60 local authority-run School Library Services. ([Schools Library Services - LibrariesRising](#))

The services offered by School Library Services include book loans and resource boxes aligned to the curriculum, advisory support including professional training, reading promotion activity, specialist stock especially to SEND pupils, and artefacts loans. By pooling the expertise and offering it to a variety of schools, the services offer excellent value for money and significantly support teaching, learning and curriculum delivery in schools.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, Schools Library Services remain a vital and highly specialised part of the wider learning ecosystem. While the ways schools operate and invest in support services are changing, the value of Schools Library Services remains clear. Their expertise, wide range of resources and cost-effective support are unique and would be impossible to replace if lost.

These services should be maintained, promoted and valued for the expertise and resources they provide. Continued support on local and national levels will enable these services to thrive and keep supporting teaching and learning across the country.

## Key recommendations

This pledge is a vital step toward ensuring every child has access to books, a reading space and the proven benefits of reading. To realise its full potential, the policy must be backed by sustained investment, access to suitable staff, new guidance, improved data collection, and strategic partnerships with public library services and school library support organisations.

### 1. Ensure sustainable funding for school libraries

The erosion of schools funding coupled with rising costs means many schools face severe financial constraints. This initial investment in school libraries is warmly welcomed but the long-term success of the programme depends on sustainable funding for staffing, development, stock renewal and maintenance. Currently, [almost two thirds \(62%\) of primary schools do not have a dedicated library budget](#). The DfE should outline its vision for the ongoing support and funding of these school libraries so that this initial investment can be built upon

### 2. Promote and expand the role of School Library Services (SLS)

Schools Library Services are a vital part of the educational ecosystem, enabling schools to develop libraries that are sustainable and support a school's reading culture. There are around 60 local authority-run or commissioned SLS, which provide rotating stock, expert advice, and cost-effective support to school libraries. Leeds School Library Service, for example, serves 180 primary schools and delivered 9,514 boxes of resources throughout the academic year 2022-23. However, [SLS coverage is patchy and financially insecure](#) and only a small proportion are confident that they are sustainable in the long term. This is an ideal opportunity to promote and expand the role of SLSs across the country.

### 3. Introduce comprehensive data collection on school libraries

Despite their importance, there is currently no official data on how many schools have libraries, what resources they hold or how they are staffed. This frustrates efforts to improve provision, target support and increase accountability. Adding school library-related questions to the Department for Education's school census would provide a baseline for future planning and investment.

### 4. Develop a new best practice framework for school libraries

There is no statutory requirement for schools to have a library ([86% of parents said they would support introducing one](#)) and Ofsted does not systematically report on library provision in its inspection reports. In this context, there is a compelling case to develop a new accessible best practice framework for school libraries working with expert organisations – covering equipment, stock levels, staffing, pupil access and how the library can support curriculum outcomes alongside the new school libraries introduced through the programme.

## Other considerations and areas for development

### Professional staffing

A dedicated school librarian is essential to a well-functioning school library. School librarians curate collections, deliver library lessons, support curriculum delivery and promote reading. They are also perfectly placed to support the renewed commitment to media literacy in the curriculum. However, of those primary schools that had a designated library, [only 29% have library staff](#) – and only 8% of those staff members had no other role within the school.

### Training and CPD

Teachers and school library staff need ongoing professional development to manage collections, align libraries with curriculum goals, and engage reluctant readers. Yet, training opportunities for teachers and library staff are limited and inconsistent across the country – largely reliant on charity-led programmes. Partnerships with SLA, CILIP, Libraries Rising, and School Library Services can help deliver high-quality CPD tailored to school needs. This is vital to ensure the National Year of Reading grows and sustains its impact.

### Time and space for use

School libraries must be embedded into the school day, with time allocated for pupils to explore and enjoy them. However, research shows that [two thirds of primary libraries \(65%\) are open for six hours or less during the week](#). Pupils should have regular, timetabled access to the library for independent reading, research and library-led lessons. [Research demonstrates](#) the positive impact dedicated time for reading can have.

## Case studies

These school libraries were shortlisted for the School Library Association (SLA) Peter Usborne Primary School Library of the Year Award 2025.

### Dorrington Academy, Perry Barr, Birmingham

Dorrington Academy's school library has created real impact over the short time it has been open. The library staff have created multiple opportunities to engage school pupils. Teachers and students alike use the reference library as an important learning resource – and the creation of a dedicated parents' library has helped to build reading culture at home as well as at school.

### Mangotsfield Church of England Primary School, Bristol

Mangotsfield's journey of taking the library from a disused space to being an integral part of daily life is inspirational. Described as "the heart of our school's reading community", the library demonstrates what a primary school can achieve when enabled by the senior leadership team and whole school community.

### Upton Meadows Primary School, Northampton

Upton Meadows Primary School have positioned their library at the physical and educational heart of the school. The pupils are regularly experiencing quality books, as well

as many of them holding the position of library helper, further developing their sense of responsibility and community.

These further examples of best practice show how Schools Library Services are developing to meet the needs of local school communities:

### **Warwickshire Schools Library Service**

Warwickshire SLS are enhancing resources for children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream and specialist schools, to meet growing needs. They have delivered taster boxes of resources to 4 specialist schools and 13 specialist resource provisions (SRPs), giving them the opportunity to try a range of resources and see what works for their children. Feedback from children and teachers is positive.

### **Hull Schools Library Service**

One 'Hull' of a Read is a city-wide transition initiative focused on reading and stimulating curiosity to ensure that children continue to read, learn and are encouraged to make new friendships over the summer holidays. It is run in partnership with the publisher Scholastic, Hull Libraries, Hull Schools' Library Service and local schools. Hull SLS also deliver the annual James Reckitt Hull Children's Book Award and annual reading conference, rated as inspiring by 100% teachers in attendance.

### **Tower Hamlets Schools Library Service**

Tower Hamlets SLS provide a consultancy and advisory service, supporting schools with library strategy and planning, designing libraries, stock development, staff training, and library IT support. Additionally, they offer a professional librarian to work in schools for a few hours a week to manage the school library. One teacher said this service "has impacted directly on the children; their involvement and enthusiasm for reading as well as our participation in enrichment activities and the maintenance of the reading environment."

## **Contact details**

We would be happy to expand on any of the points we have made here, and to assist in any way that would be helpful.

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## About the organisations

**Libraries Connected** is the membership body for public library services across England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Crown Dependencies. It represents nearly every library service in these regions, encompassing around 176 services and 3,000 branches serving over 61 million people. As an independent charity, its mission is to support, promote, and advocate for public libraries.

**The School Library Association** is dedicated to supporting everyone involved in school libraries, from librarians to educators. Its core mission is to ensure that every child has access to a well-resourced and professionally managed school library. SLA provides training, resources, and advocacy to promote the role of school libraries in improving literacy and learning outcomes.

Contact: Saira Aspinall, Publicity and Partnerships Manager, [info@sla.org.uk](mailto:info@sla.org.uk)

**Libraries Rising**, formerly known as the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL), is a collaborative network focused on shaping the future of libraries for children and young people. Its vision is to create inclusive, inspiring spaces where young people feel understood, inspired and empowered. The charity works with public and school library services, as well as cultural partners, to co-design services and programs that amplify youth voices and promote engagement.

Contact: Tabitha Witherick, Chief Executive, [info@librariesrising.org.uk](mailto:info@librariesrising.org.uk)

**The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)** is the UK's leading professional body for librarians, information specialists, and knowledge managers. Guided by its Royal Charter, CILIP works to improve library and information services, develop professional expertise, and advocate for the sector. It offers membership, professional registration, and continuing professional development opportunities to individuals at all career stages. As a registered charity, it acts in the public interest and serves as the independent voice for the UK's information profession.

Contact: Louis Coiffait-Gunn, Chief Executive, [press@cilip.org.uk](mailto:press@cilip.org.uk)

## Further reading

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