



Libraries Connected

Mr Toby Perkins MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Perkins

Following your letter asking how the Government plans to tackle overheating in public buildings, and your recent evidence session on extreme heat, I wanted to highlight the growing demand for libraries to provide “cool spaces” and to urge the Environmental Audit Committee to examine how the Government can support this role.

In recent weeks a growing number of our member libraries have been acting as cool spaces. Where buildings are appropriately equipped, they have provided safe, accessible respite for people whose homes have become uncomfortably or dangerously hot, alongside free drinking water and comfortable seating.

Libraries are well placed to support a national response to extreme heat. In England and Wales, 78% of people live within a 30-minute walk of a library, and 87% know where their nearest one is. Libraries are free, welcoming spaces offering books, computers, wi-fi, information and advice, as well as comfortable places to sit and rest. Crucially, they are one of the last remaining neighbourhood venues bringing people of all ages and backgrounds together, strengthening local networks and helping communities support each other during periods of stress such as heatwaves. They can also host specially curated activities and events, creating further opportunities for connection.

This role mirrors the well-established “warm spaces” programme, of which we are a key partner to the Warm Welcome Campaign. However, there is a critical difference: while all libraries can provide heating, only a minority have air conditioning or sufficient design features to keep buildings cool. As a result, many services are unable to operate as cool spaces at the scale communities now need.

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Our members are clear that the current estate is not currently equipped to meet the demand for heat respite. In some cases, the challenge is not simply a lack of cooling, but buildings that retain and amplify heat due to their age, design or materials. This has resulted in difficult decisions to close libraries early, suspend services or reduce activity in order to protect staff and the public.

Recent discussions with library leaders highlight the scale and urgency of the issue. Services report having to close buildings at short notice because internal temperatures reached unsafe levels, sometimes exceeding 30°C by mid-morning. Others have had to withdraw mobile services, cancel activities or stand down volunteers due to the risks posed by extreme heat.

In many cases, the majority of buildings within a library service lack any form of air conditioning, meaning that even basic mitigation is difficult. Some older buildings – particularly those with large glass areas – effectively act as greenhouses, while others are constrained by poor ventilation or infrastructure that prevents effective airflow.

Library staff have responded with professionalism and care: undertaking site-by-site risk assessments, introducing regular welfare breaks, providing water and adapting or cancelling services for vulnerable groups. Despite this, they are often left balancing competing pressures – remaining open as a frontline service while managing significant risks to health and safety.

Climate change means that extreme heat is no longer exceptional. The library estate was not designed for sustained temperatures above the mid-20s, yet we are now regularly experiencing temperatures exceeding 30°C, with forecasts indicating this will become more frequent.

As we approach further periods of extreme heat – and the increased demand for cool spaces that brings – we are calling on the Government to recognise the essential role libraries can play and to support the network to fulfil it.

We recommend that the Government:

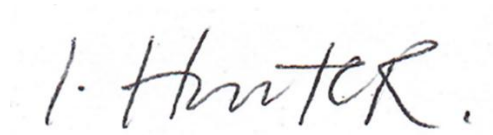
- ◆ undertakes a comprehensive assessment of the library estate, including building condition, maintenance needs, and resilience to extreme heat;
- ◆ prioritises investment in cooling measures, including air conditioning and lower-cost adaptations such as shading and ventilation;
- ◆ targets this investment towards services and communities currently least able to provide safe cool spaces.

Without this support, libraries will continue to face the difficult choice between closing buildings or remaining open in unsafe conditions – limiting their ability to serve the communities that rely on them most.

With the right investment, libraries can provide a nationwide network of safe, trusted and accessible cool spaces, supporting public health and community resilience in the face of a changing climate.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you and the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "I. Hunter." The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

Isobel Hunter MBE

Chief Executive

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Cc: Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

The Baroness Twycross, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Museums, Heritage and Gambling)

Rt Hon Steve Reed MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government