

Leading Libraries Strategic Challenge Case Study

Service: Staffordshire

1. Strategic Challenge Focus

How can we provide a voice for young people in our communities to help shape a more authentic, inclusive, and positive library offer for young people now and in the future?

2. Rationale and Context

Through a process of dialogue and sharing perspectives on the impact of lockdown it was decided that the service could work to get to know its user communities better in order to explore ways to make the service more relevant to the needs of local residents.

Through local research, we identified people who were already using the service and where the gaps in usage were. Studies showed that the majority of our visitors to libraries are white British females aged 65 and over, while engagement with young people and people from different cultural backgrounds was very low in comparison.

We decided that our challenge would be to work with teenagers and young adults to explore the possibilities of making our services more diverse, relevant, appealing and useful for young people today.

The main aims of the strategic challenge were to:

- Develop relationships with local service providers for YP to explore possibilities of working together on common aims and objectives
- Devise effective engagement activities to make new connections with young people
- Identify and break down any barriers between young people and libraries
- Provide young people with a safe and welcoming space to exchange ideas
- Find out what makes young people tick – what are their interests, hobbies, etc?
- Find out how young people feel about libraries and explore the possibilities of a library offer for young people in the future

3. Approach and Activity

Consulting with stakeholders

We chose to prototype an engagement activity at Burntwood Library where one of our powerful talents was based and where we wanted to develop more of a relationship with young people locally.

Further consultation was carried out in the local area with a cross section of library staff, community support officers and youth service providers to explore:

- issues facing young people
- what the current offers for young people were in the local area
- what youth group provision there was
- how libraries could make a difference.

We learned about the impacts of covid on young people, some of the barriers & challenges they face and discovered ideas for us to explore, imagine & make sense of the possibilities to take forward.

Key points to take forward for the activity were to;

- take an experimental approach
- include young people in the process
- use creativity as a tool to consult
- create a space for young people - where their voice is valued & listened to
- ensure activity is well organised & facilitated

Engaging and researching to understand the views of young people

Connections were made with a local youth group near to the library that provides opportunities for young people with learning and physical barriers.

The group were keen to make connections with the library and explore possible future opportunities for their young people. With this in mind, we ran a 'getting to know each other' exercise involving fun creative activities, both at the library and at the youth club, to find out young people's views about their local library and how they would like to be more involved in the future.

To ensure young people were fully engaged with the process, we worked with artists who asked each young person, what direction they would like the project to take and the unanimous decision was to create physical representations of what they see as a 'young person friendly' library. Participants shared their views on what they thought about the environment, facilities, equipment and activities & events – they told us what they would like to change, be adapted, and added, to encourage young people to visit and created models to illustrate and share their ideas with others.

"I would make the library better by having big signs showing different categories like 'fantasy'. Like a Harry Potter sign at the end of the bookshelf." - young participant.

"If I could make the library more appealing for my age group, I would make it into a cyber cafe with easy to access wi-fi. I would have laptops on display in the library to show this." - young participant.

4. Examples of outcomes and impact to date

The strategic challenge has resulted in a range of exciting outcomes. These include:

Updates to the library space. The young people placed importance on the colour scheme in the library and shared that clean and modern designs and signage helped to

communicate an inviting atmosphere. Young people also wanted a welcoming and visually stimulating space and to feel part of the community with others who shared their interests and similar life experiences.

Updates to library resources. Artists produced a 'Books and Beyond' report which includes all of the young people's comments, feedback, and recommendations. This provides a valuable tool to share across the wider service, and to explore what changes can now be put in place to make young people feel much more welcome and included within the library spaces.

The strategic challenge has resulted in wider impacts including embedding a new approach to connecting with young people and ensuring they feel much more welcome and included within the library spaces.

"The strategic challenge has given us a blueprint for the future in terms of how we work across our wider service, to involve a wider team of staff, which will help to build capacity and also confidence. And we also now have a really clear way forward as to how we can engage much more effectively with young people who want to use our service". – Catherine Mann, Head of Service.

<https://staffslibrariesculture.wordpress.com/links-to-more-activities/> - Library Resources / Books and Beyond.

Increasing library membership. The young people involved in the strategic challenge have become members of the library:

"We're absolutely delighted that the young people that were involved have now signed up as library members, and the group intend to visit our library on a regular basis as part of their programme". – Burntwood Library.

5. Next Steps

The service aims to build on the learning outcomes of the project by looking at ways we can create more dedicated spaces for young people in our libraries. The Books and Beyond report is helping us to put ideas into action. At Burntwood, we are re-configuring the space with new furniture based on colour schemes chosen by the young people involved.

We will offer the group opportunities to volunteer at the library to increase their involvement and explore possibilities to involve them in developing activities & events.

We intend to expand on this model at other libraries across the service to develop future creative engagement projects and continue to grow our relationship with young people.

6. Lessons learned

Some of the key lessons learned to date are:

- That it is ok to take an experimental approach and try things out
- To include library staff and stake holders at all stages of the process
- That creativity is an effective tool to consult with the community in a fun way

- Working with artists helped bring creative ideas to the project and offered a quality experience for the young people involved
- The benefits of reaching out and providing a voice for young people surprised staff and broke down barriers
- Collaboration and co-creation was key for everyone to feel invested in the project

7. How the Leading Libraries Programme contributed to the delivery of the Strategic Challenge

The Leading Libraries Programme has contributed to delivering the Strategic Challenge in a number of ways including:

Putting theory into practice. The programme as a whole was really effective in providing a framework for action learning and a model for leading within this context in often complex circumstances. The whole experience helped to build everyone's confidence; we learned to value ourselves and each other and to pull our skills and resources together to make a difference.

Dialogue and inquiry. We learned to take a slower paced, more considered approach to developing and running projects with more emphasis on understanding different views, gathering insights, analysing data, exchanging ideas, understanding our own skills set and having more reflective conversations before making any key decisions.

Collaborative approach. Throughout the leading libraries programme, we learned to take a collaborative approach and to explore, understand and learn more about different perspectives and individuals' backgrounds in order to provide a meaningful experience. We learned the importance of allyship and that bringing people in on the journey from the beginning helped to provide the best service and outcomes for everyone involved.

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