

Libraries and Literacy at the Heart of Recovery and Levelling Up

The UK's 3,667 public libraries are the national reading service – a library card is a sign of everyone's entitlement to literacy and the nation's commitment to lifelong literacy. Public libraries democratise reading for their 6.7 million users. As such, they are a vital resource for a pressing national challenge.

Raising literacy is a national priority for levelling up and post-pandemic recovery

- Low levels of literacy are a key factor in inequality – the life expectancy gap for males between the wards with the lowest and highest literacy challenge is 26 years.
- The pandemic exacerbated the challenge. Over two years:
 - Children from disadvantaged communities have fallen furthest behind
 - School readiness has suffered and more children are starting school with speech and language delay
 - The early language development of babies and toddlers from disadvantaged communities has been particularly impacted by temporary library closures.
- The Levelling Up White Paper recognised literacy as the foundation of its ambitions for a fairer society and announced a 2030 target for 90% of all 11-year-olds to be reaching the expected level in numeracy and literacy – it is currently 65%.

Libraries play a vital role in building a literate nation

- As a free universal service, public libraries give access to books to children from the poorest backgrounds, whose literacy has been impacted most but the pandemic: 1 in 11 of these children don't have a book of their own.
- Libraries have been shown to be a vital component of a strong home learning environment. Library use at the age of 3 has a positive impact on reading skills in the first years of school.
- Libraries engage and motivate young readers: twice as many young public library users enjoy reading and read daily.

Libraries have a specific and unique contribution in addressing this challenge.

They need to be working in partnership with children and young people's services on local educational recovery strategies, working with MATs and local clusters of early years providers. Their contribution is effective because it is:

- **Targeted** on children with the greatest need
- **Holistic**, engaging and motivating young people and their families to read
- **Sustained** throughout their development as readers
- **Local**, bespoke to the unique challenge of each community.

