



Image credit: Luca Sage

# Supporting business and enterprise

Briefing note  
February 2023



**Libraries  
Connected**

# Introduction

Politicians of all parties have announced their ambition for Britain to be the best place in the world to start and grow a business. There is remarkable consensus that if the UK economy is to recover and grow after recent economic shocks, we must drive innovation and make the most of entrepreneurial potential.

This briefing shows that public libraries are central to realising this ambition. Through Business & IP Centres and other localised services, the library network has become one of the country's most effective and accessible sources of support for new and growing businesses. As the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee recently put it, libraries act as "engines for entrepreneurship, economic growth and job creation"<sup>1</sup>.

Libraries are welcoming, non-judgmental spaces and most of their business services are completely free. It's understandable that first-time entrepreneurs can feel more comfortable seeking advice from a library than from a bank, trade association or consultant. That's why the businesses that libraries support are more likely to be run by women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

As they focus on building a more resilient, dynamic and inclusive economy, local and national decision-makers have much to learn from public libraries and the many thousands of businesses that have benefited from their support.



*I. Hunter.*

**Isobel Hunter MBE**  
Chief Executive  
Libraries Connected

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda](#), November 2022 (HC 155)

# Key findings

- **Almost every library service in our survey (98%) offers some form of specialist support to entrepreneurs, startups and SMEs. This makes the national library network one of the leading providers of services to new and growing businesses.**
- **Over four-fifths (84%) of library services give free access to leading business databases, significantly reducing the time and cost of developing a business plan.**
- **More than three-quarters (77%) provide networking opportunities, helping entrepreneurs build strong business relationships and find new clients.**
- **Almost three-quarters (73%) offer one-to-one personalised business advice, including coaching and mentoring.**
- **Three-quarters (75%) offer specialist advice on intellectual property, helping entrepreneurs protect their business ideas.**
- **Three-quarters (75%) provide free workshops, seminars and training for those starting or growing a business.**

See full survey data on page 11



# Delivery models

The majority of library services in our survey provide business support through the Business & IP Centre (BIPC) Network.

Funded by local authorities and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), the BIPC network is led by the British Library with support from the UK Intellectual Property Office. BIPCs are library-based hubs providing free specialist support to entrepreneurs, start-ups, self-employed and small business owners.

Trained staff deliver a range of activities: a walk-in reference and enquiries service, workshops, one-to-one support, sector-focused projects and networking events. They also offer comfortable and convenient spaces to meet, work, research and plan.

The BIPC Network currently consists of 21 regional hubs (outside of the London BIPC at the British Library) at large centrally-located libraries and 90 BIPC Locals. In 2021-22 they supported over 23,500 people to start up, grow and protect their business, helping to create a diverse and vibrant small business community across the UK.

Some library services have developed different models of business support outside the BIPC network, in response to local need and economic priorities. Whatever model library services choose, many are able to leverage further funding from national and regional economic development agencies.

## BIPC Bristol

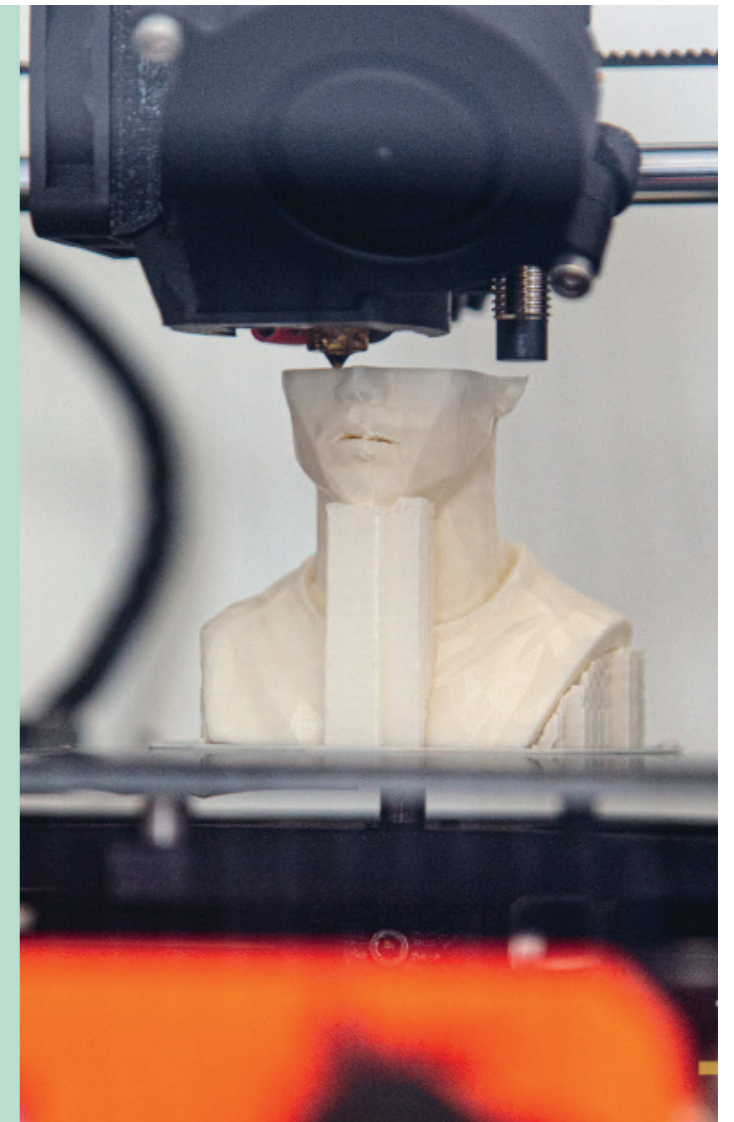
BIPC Bristol opened in November 2021 at Bristol Central Library, with three BIPC locals opening at Knowle, Junction 3 and Southmead libraries during 2022 a year later. Three full time staff are supported by pro bono "experts in residence", including patent and intellectual property lawyers. In the first 12 months of opening it supported over 280 pre-starts, start-ups and SMEs and has forged strong partnerships within the business, education and community sectors, including West of England Growth Hub, Black Southwest Network, Prince's Trust, City of Bristol College, University of the West of England Business School and ACH Migrant Business Support. As with many BIPCs, Bristol has been particularly successful at helping under-represented groups get started in business: 51% were led by female entrepreneurs and 22% by BAME entrepreneurs, compared with just 20% and 5% respectively across the UK.



## Gloucester Growth Hubs

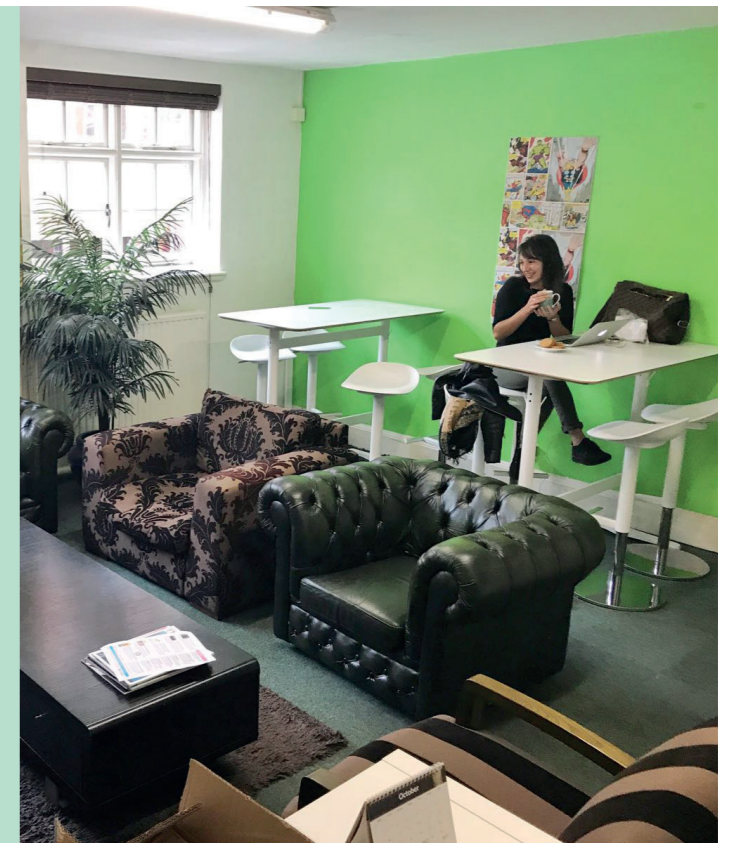
In partnership with GFirst local enterprise partnership, Gloucestershire County Council has embedded Growth Hubs in each of its 31 libraries across the county. They are a focal point for business owners seeking the information, support and knowledge needed to grow. Funded by central government, the European Regional Development Fund and partner organisations across Gloucestershire, the services provided by Growth Hubs are free at the point of use. Selected libraries have co-working spaces and business areas.

The Lab at Gloucestershire Libraries is also available at six libraries spread across the county. These are friendly community spaces, offering accessible digital skill development for all ages and abilities including business support. A lab experience can include 360° immersive film, 3D design, print, scanning and prototyping, coding, virtual and augmented reality, and skilled lab technicians on hand to help deliver digital development. This is a core part of a network that has supported over 4,000 local businesses.



## Wimbletech

In 2012, when app developer David Fletcher got tired of working from noisy cafés and a cramped home office, he approached Merton library service with the idea of turning an underused meeting room above Wimbledon Library into a co-working hub for local businesses. The result was Wimbletech, a centrally located 24-hour work space with hi-speed wi-fi, complementary drinks and business events programme. Ten years later Wimbletech is a community interest company and a key council partner with 10 sites across London, supporting thousands of entrepreneurs as they launch and grow their businesses. The model has been so successful that a new location has been established in Mitcham Library, which is located in a deprived part of the borough.



# Business support provided by libraries



Image credit: Luca Sage

## Access to business databases

Getting a business idea off the ground, and persuading banks or investors to fund it, requires thorough market, customer and competitor research. Over four-fifths (84%) of library services in our survey offer free access to subscription-only business and research databases, such as COBRA, Mintel and GrantFinder. This can significantly reduce the time and cost of developing an idea or business plan.

## Networking opportunities

For those just getting started in business networking events are an important way to become part of the local business community, make new contacts and meet potential clients. More than three-quarters (77%) of the library services we surveyed provide these networking opportunities, which can be a crucial source of advice, support and leads. Many libraries opt for a relaxed approach, encouraging informal conversation over coffee or refreshments.

## Intellectual property advice

Intellectual property is vital to the business process. Knowing how to protect your idea, whether it's an invention or a brand name, can save considerable time and money. Three-quarters (75%) of the library services in our survey provided specialist IP advice on copyright, patents, trademarks and registered designs.

## Working space

Libraries are also convenient places to work and do business: two-thirds (66%) offer meeting and interview rooms, over a third (36%) house co-working spaces and 18% have private office space for hire. With many small businesses concerned about rising bills, libraries offer a low-cost alternative to the home office. Such working spaces not only provide a quiet, convenient and comfortable place to work - they are bring users into contact with other entrepreneurs and businesses, providing another valuable networking opportunity.

## Training, workshops and seminars

Three quarters (75%) of the library services we surveyed provide a programme of free or low-cost training events exploring a range of business topics, from writing a business plan to exhibiting at trade shows. These could be online or in-person, providing yet another important networking opportunity. Often these are run in partnership with a local business - a marketing agency might deliver a workshop on social media strategy, for example - adding further value and networking opportunities.

## One to one advice

Almost three-quarters (73%) offer one-to-one personalised business advice, including coaching and mentoring. These sessions can focus on sector-specific issues or give more general support on registering a business, protecting intellectual property, developing a business plans, attracting funding or writing a marketing strategy.

# What entrepreneurs say

This is a small selection of testimonials from entrepreneurs who have received support from libraries as they set up and grew their small businesses. For more case studies please contact us or see @businessandipcentre on Instagram.



**Liam Carlton**  
**Founder of Pit Pro Limited**  
**Supported by Start Up Bromley**  
**(BIPC London partnership at Bromley Central Library)**

"Starting a business is awesome but it can also be lonely and terrifying. Start Up Bromley have been there with me through that journey. They've guided me through some of the more challenging minefields and helped me to improve some of the key soft-skills needed to be a successful entrepreneur. The team's passion for what they do shines through whenever you see them."



**Nicola Phillips**  
**Founder of Canvass Design**  
**Supported by Start Up Bromley**  
**(BIPC London partnership at Bromley Central Library)**

"Canvass is really enjoying being part of the Start Up Bromley programme. The community of new businesses within Bromley has been a great support to us. We have worked at the business lounges, met talented business owners at the networking events, learned new skills at the workshops and created a business growth strategy through the coaching programme. We would highly recommend this free programme to any new business setting up in Bromley."



**Bianca Sapara Grant**  
**Founder of Parent Power**  
**Supported by Start Up Greenwich**  
**(BIPC London partnership at Woolwich Library)**

"The support that the British Library BIPC and Start Up Greenwich team has provided me with has been invaluable. It's included assistance with writing successful grant funding applications, helpful introductions that have resulted in strong business partnerships, and useful workshops and one-to-ones. It's improved my marketing, confidence, and other business skills immeasurably and this has enabled my business to progress from a start-up to one that's expanding quickly. I can't recommend enough that other new business owners take up the opportunity."



**Suki Pantal**  
**Founder of Suki's Curries and Spices**  
**Supported by BIPC Worcestershire**  
**(Worcester Library)**

"The BIPC has been so supportive to me throughout my journey of launching the company. I've attended a lot of the webinars and they've advised me on getting my website done and about IP rights. The support has been tremendous to a lot of new and upcoming small businesses. I have a phone call every other week with the BIPC to see how I'm doing and where I'm headed with the business. The library is just a stone's throw away and it has just been amazing. If your heart is in the right place and you have the passion, I don't think anything can stop you."

British Library, Elliott Wilcox



**Clare Dryden**  
**Founder of Brownie Queen**  
**Supported by BIPC Humber Partnership**  
**(Goole Library)**

"I started my business in June 2020, during the first lockdown. The BIPC have helped me with a range of workshops and one-to-one sessions through the business idea clinic. The support that's available at Goole library is absolutely fantastic. When you're a small business owner you often feel like you're the only person that's in your shoes and it can be quite a lonely experience, but the fact that Goole library is five minutes from my house, it's free and everybody's so supportive and encouraging really makes it an absolutely outstanding tool."

British Library, Elliott Wilcox



# Remote working

Our survey also revealed the extent to which remote workers, which now make up around a third of the workforce<sup>1</sup> have come to rely on libraries.

Over three-fifths (61%) of library services have experienced an increase in remote workers using their libraries since the pandemic, taking advantage of the free desk space, wi-fi, charging points and quiet working environment.

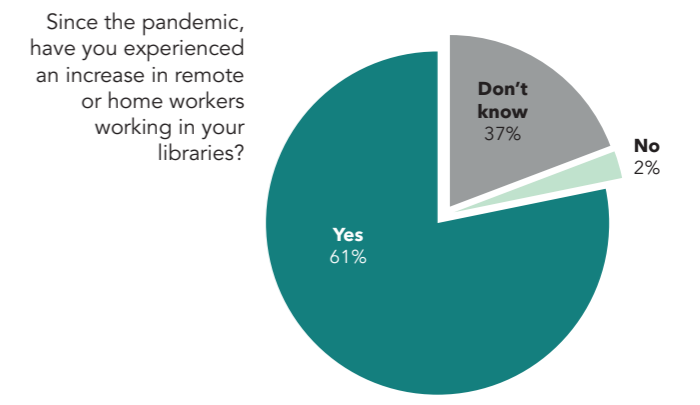
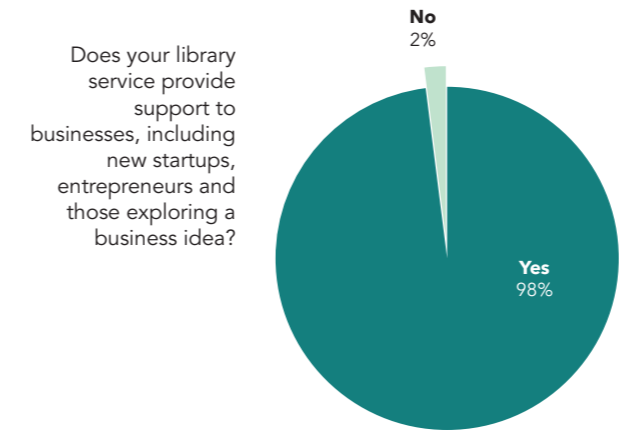
Library staff point out that many remote workers do not have an appropriate space in which to work at home or struggle with the additional costs of home working, such as energy bills. Having access to these facilities at their local library is crucial to their wellbeing and ability to do their job.

Our findings reflect another recent survey by TalkTalk<sup>2</sup>, which revealed a 147% increase in broadband use at libraries between November 2021 and October 2022, compared to the year before. The company says that hybrid working is likely to be a driving factor.

<sup>1</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritainworkingarrangements](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritainworkingarrangements)  
<sup>2</sup> [www.talktalkgroup.com/newsroom/wfh-doesnt-just-mean-home-internet-usage-at-libraries-cafes-and-local-businesses-rockets-as-remote-workers-seek-to-reduce-energy-bills](https://www.talktalkgroup.com/newsroom/wfh-doesnt-just-mean-home-internet-usage-at-libraries-cafes-and-local-businesses-rockets-as-remote-workers-seek-to-reduce-energy-bills)

# Survey data

All heads of library services (or equivalent position) in England were asked to complete an online survey from January 9 to January 16 2023. The final overall response rate achieved was 25% (44 library services operating 1,170 individual static libraries). For full data tables please contact us.



What services do you provide?

|                                                                                            |    |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|-----|
| Access to business databases (eg funding information, market intelligence or company data) | 37 | 84% |
| Printing, copying or scanning                                                              | 36 | 82% |
| Networking opportunities                                                                   | 34 | 77% |
| Workshops, seminars or training                                                            | 33 | 75% |
| Intellectual property advice and support                                                   | 33 | 75% |
| One to one business advice, including coaching and mentoring                               | 32 | 73% |
| Private office space                                                                       | 8  | 43% |
| Shared office space (hot desks / co-working)                                               | 16 | 36% |
| Meeting/interview rooms                                                                    | 29 | 18% |

## About Libraries Connected

Libraries Connected is a membership organisation representing heads of library services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We take a leading role in the development of public libraries through advocating for the power of libraries, sharing best practice and helping to shape the public library service now and in the future.

## Media enquiries

James Gray  
Advocacy & Marketing Manager  
[james.gray@librariesconnected.org.uk](mailto:james.gray@librariesconnected.org.uk)  
07849085762

Libraries Connected  
3rd Floor, Islington Central Library,  
2 Fieldway Crescent, Highbury East  
London N5 1PF

[info@librariesconnected.org.uk](mailto:info@librariesconnected.org.uk)  
[www.librariesconnected.org.uk](http://www.librariesconnected.org.uk)

Company Registration Number: 07559747  
Registered Charity Number: 1176482



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**