Universal Culture Offer

The new Universal Offer from the Society of Chief Librarians for public libraries

SCL advocates for an innovative modern public library service. It works on behalf of its members and with Government and national partner organisations to ensure public libraries can lead and support key national priorities.

The Universal Offers celebrate and articulate the six key areas essential to a 21st Century library service: Reading, Health, Digital, Learning, Information and Culture. Two complementary offers - The Children’s Promise and Six Steps Promise (which covers services for people with sight loss and other print disabilities) - underpin the six areas.
“Public libraries are already very involved in arts and culture, and this offer will give libraries the resources to expand their partnerships with local culture organisations and provide more ways for customers to get involved. We want to attract new library customers through arts and culture, and help people who don’t engage with art to develop a love and appreciation of it.”

Neil MacInnes, SCL President
62% of people read for pleasure or bought a novel, book, story, poetry or a play within the last 12 months.

94% of library services provide or hire out space for people to experience cultural activities.

80% of library services provide monthly group reading, music activities, arts and crafts, board games and creative writing.

Source: SCL Survey on Cultural Activities in Libraries 2017
Case Study

Deptford Lounge is an award-winning community hub jointly managed by Lewisham Library Services and the Albany arts centre in South East London. Facilities include library, computer labs, study areas, cafe, room hire and a roof-top ball court. In 2016 the library/arts partnership, with support from Arts Council England and the Deptford Challenge Trust, launched an ambitious cultural programme called Hothouse.

The programme’s flagship project was a three-day, artist-led guided tour of the future of Deptford using soundscapes, live drawing, site visits and a public meeting to discuss and explore what the local area could, and should, look like in the future - Hothouse’s main theme.

During its first year, the many and varied Hothouse attractions included: a shoestring arts and community marketing course, a workshop on how to shoot videos on a smartphone, a Vietnamese language course and pop-up restaurant, a free film festival and regular free film showings, an exhibition about homelessness, live music, a theatre workshop for teenagers, a one-day festival championing ‘playfulness’ for adults, weekly tai-chi sessions, a Christmas-themed Winter Spectacular, a storytelling event to mark the 350th anniversary of the Great Fire of London, an Algerian Day - featuring art, music, traditional dress and food, photographic exhibitions, a month-long installation/exhibition about pre-Raphaelite painters - with accompanying talks and workshops, floating sculptures on the theme of weather, a community patchwork quilt project, and much more.

“Hothouse is an exciting next step in the relationship between the Albany and Lewisham Libraries. We have delivered a range of programmes together over the last three years at Deptford Lounge, and this will help us to realise the full potential of working in partnership. We will be collaborating with some brilliant artists and local people to create vibrant, unexpected and exceptional cultural experiences for Deptford. This innovative new partnership model creates brilliant opportunities, which neither Lewisham Council or the Albany alone could deliver.”

Gavin Barlow, Artistic Director and CEO at the Albany
What is the Culture Offer?

The culture offer recognises the importance of libraries as cultural hubs and gateways to wider cultural activities. In libraries people can participate, witness and express their creativity through cultural experiences and events. They will experience a wide range of art forms from drama to digital arts. Libraries provide their communities with a sense of cultural identity, empathy and an understanding of the wider world.
“Public Libraries are cultural cornerstones of communities. They make it possible for children and adults to explore and experience quality arts and culture in their own localities. They provide a sense of possibility and enable creative talents to blossom. They are active partnership builders, many are already joining forces with local and national arts and cultural organisations and I’m sure amazing things will follow. That’s why I’m delighted to be supporting SCL’s new cultural offer and I am looking forward to seeing it develop over the next few years”

Darren Henley, Chief Executive, Arts Council England
What does Culture in Libraries Look Like?

Libraries’ culture offer recognises public libraries as welcoming places where children, young people and adults can immerse themselves in every form of art, learn from local artists, create their own art, watch theatre, music and dance performances, and learn about art and culture through books and reading. Libraries are often the first place that children and young people experience art and culture, through books, free taster sessions and library events. Library staff are catalysts for activity and exploration, enabling communities to lead and work with artists to learn and create together.

Cultural spaces support learning and creativity and spaces for hire for groups and artists.

Cultural resources including free books, multimedia collections, newspapers and magazines, history and ancestry, access to computers and free Wi Fi, and, in many libraries, business support for local creative businesses.

Cultural activities including parent and toddler sessions, reading groups, music, arts and crafts, creative writing, and in some libraries performance film-making and photography.
Cultural events, book talks and workshops, visual arts exhibitions, film-screenings, dance, plays and drama, and in some libraries theatre and concerts.

Cultural programmes and key dates and events throughout the calendar year including World Book Day, Summer Reading Challenge, Get Online Week, Celebrating Shakespeare, Fun Palaces, and literature festivals.

Cultural leadership and volunteering for example through Fun Palaces, which empower people and communities to have fun and create and lead cultural and scientific activities events and experiences.

Cultural partnerships through Local Cultural Education Partnerships, Bridge Organisations and joint work with arts, local history and heritage organisations.
Case Study

Art of Libraries is a three-year pilot programme boldly aiming to reimagine cultural education in Gloucestershire.

The project is exploring the potential for county libraries to become hubs for introducing arts and culture to children and young people - especially those who do not actively engage with the sector.

Led by Create Gloucestershire in partnership with Gloucestershire Libraries and Information, Art of Libraries was launched in 2016 with support from Arts Council England, the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Ernest Cook Trust and Summerfield Trust.

Initially six Gloucestershire libraries are getting a rethink and refresh - four in the first 12 months and two the following year. A Creative Catalyst team of artists has been recruited to help change mindsets - so that libraries are not seen as ‘hush’ spaces, but places to play, experiment and be creative.

These ‘change agents’ are working with library teams to develop Art of Libraries as a potential model for the future, and testing whether it could become ‘business as usual’ when the project funding ends.

Art of Libraries’ creative summer events programme for 2017 included a new lego club, illustration and graffiti workshops, volunteering opportunities, a skate film competition, and many other activities, in pilot libraries, specifically for children and young adults. Meanwhile a mobile library took the annual Summer Reading Challenge out to children in more isolated parts of the county.

“Art of Libraries provides a fantastic new resource for children, parents, teachers and youth and community workers who want to foster creativity and develop talent in their children and young people.”

Pippa Jones, Director of Create Gloucestershire

“I tend to not think about AoL as a project but rather a journey of change for the library. A journey that seeks to alter perceptions about what a library is, what it can offer and the impact that it can have within a community.”

Hannah Brady, Creative Catalyst
The six Universal Offers, along with the Children’s Promise and Six Steps for Blind and Partially-Sighted People, cover key areas for a 21st Century library service. These Offers are an integral part of our service for customers.

**Health Offer**
Public libraries contribute to the health and well-being of local communities. This offer promotes and enables key health partnerships. *Delivered in partnership with The Reading Agency.*

**Reading Offer**
Public libraries provide a modern reading service within local communities, in all formats and for all ages. *Delivered in partnership with The Reading Agency.*

**Digital Offer**
Digital services, skills and access underpins a 21st century library service; Digital supports and enables the delivery of all the offers.

**Culture Offer**
Libraries are a place where users can experience vibrant and diverse cultural events, reaching communities who do not normally take part in the arts.

**Information Offer**
Libraries support people to access information and services in vital areas: government online information and services, careers and job seeking, health, personal financial information and benefits.

**Learning Offer**
Libraries are a space where lifelong learning takes place by providing resources, spaces and opportunities for children and adults to explore and learn together.

**Children’s Promise**
Shaping 21st century children’s library services and sets out the library journey – the way libraries engage with children and young people as they grow. The Promise underpins all other offers in relation to children.

**Six Steps**
Six crucial pledges every library service makes to provide a nurturing reading and learning environment for blind or partially sighted people.
If you would like to find out more about the Universal Culture Offer or partner with public library services to deliver this offer, please contact:

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