



Save our Public Libraries

Introduction

This briefing looks at the role of public libraries in our communities and the threat to that provision from spending cuts.

Our public library system has a special place in the work of the Jimmy Reid Foundation. His extensive reading nurtured Jimmy's political seeds, starting before he went to school and developing into a lifelong passion. Like so many working-class families, there weren't many books in the home as they were expensive, so Govan Library became a regular haunt. As Kenny MacAskill puts it in his [biography](#) (Jimmy Reid: A Scottish Political Journey), "*Stories abound amongst locals of a small boy who used to traipse home with a pile of books under his arm. Anything and everything could capture Jimmy's attention and he had a genuine thirst for knowledge. He loved Stevenson, Scott and Dickens and by the age of fourteen he had read Marx's A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy. George Bernard Shaw also influenced him greatly.*"

Public Libraries in Scotland

There are around 480 local 'venues', 49 mobile libraries and a 24/7 digital offer which sees 1 in 2 of the public regularly use local libraries. Under the Public Libraries Consolidation (Scotland) Act, as amended in schedule 21 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, local authorities in Scotland have a statutory duty to provide "*adequate library facilities*" for all residents in their area. The problem is that 'adequate' is not defined. UNISON Scotland considered a legal challenge some years ago, only to be told by Counsel that one public library in the local authority area could probably meet the test. There are some local acts on libraries, but they are no more substantial.

There are 32 local authorities in Scotland, and various ways to fund culture in those 32 areas. Some have Arms' Length External Organisations to run their cultural services, and how spending in these areas is presented can vary, further blurring the statutory duty.

The Scottish Government has [published](#) '*A Public Library Strategy for Scotland 2021-2025*.' It sets out plenty of ambition and makes a case for investment that sadly has not been delivered.

Vision

To enable and empower
Scotland's communities
through public libraries



People

Libraries will support people and communities to reach their full potential and celebrate the unique skill set of staff.

Embarrassingly, the leading case study is Aberdeen City Libraries, which have recently been subject to a [closure programme](#) despite a vigorous community campaign.

Financial pressures

Like other local government services, libraries are under financial pressure. 83 public libraries have closed in Scotland since 2009/10, with spending cut by 30 per cent over the same period. This is despite yearly visitor numbers increasing by over 40 per cent. Many more libraries have cut their opening hours and reduced staff. This is not unique to Scotland; [spending](#) on libraries in Britain has fallen by 17%, despite in-person visits increasing by 68% since the pandemic lockdown.

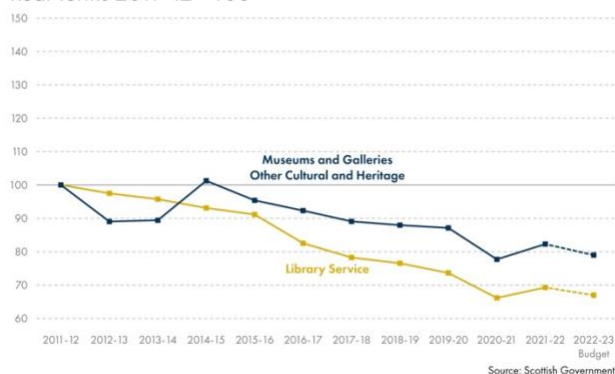


Public libraries must now apply to the Public Library Improvement [Fund](#) for limited additional funding. Around 20% (700+) of all public libraries in the UK have no professional staff. They are spun as 'volunteer led', a euphemism for blackmailing communities into running libraries under the threat of closure. However, volunteer numbers across the UK have fallen from 0.39 per 1,000 people in 2020/21 to 0.23 over the last financial year, a 41% decrease.

A recent SPICE [analysis](#) highlighted that spending on museums and galleries and other Cultural and Heritage activities had gone up and down in cash terms since 2011/12. However, there is a more evident trend of reduced spend in cash terms for libraries.

Local Government spend on Culture and Libraries

Real Terms 2011-12 = 100



Despite the financial pressures, there has been a welcome move towards abolishing library book fines, although the [data](#) is limited. Half of libraries in England and Wales are no longer charging adults late fees since the pandemic lockdown. Glasgow Life has recently done this, arguing that it reflects a growing global movement to abolish late book fines, recognised as a barrier to participation, particularly for families from low-income households. A progressive move after they controversially closed several libraries, later reopened after outstanding community campaigns.

Workforce

The number of library staff in Scotland has dropped from 1,462 full-time equivalent workers in 2017-18 to just 1,306 by 2021-22. And that data comes from 24 out of 32 Scottish local authorities that responded to the requests. COSLA warned in this year's budget discussions that councils could be forced to cut library assistants by up to 1,400 and reduce library provision by 40%.

The importance of professional staff is reflected in the wide range of services and activities in our libraries. It also provides an objective voice in selecting books and other resources. There may be no shortage of well-meaning middle-class people in some areas who would be prepared to help run the library. However, they would have little idea of the wider community's needs. This is becoming a genuine [concern](#) in the USA as books are banned because some ideologue doesn't like the content. Even Donald Trump is discovering the skills of librarians as he faces legal action for keeping files from US government librarians. We should also be in awe of the work [being done](#) by

"Crazy Ukrainian librarians" in the most difficult of circumstances.

Social infrastructure

A public library is much more than a collection of books, more than a service; it is an integral part of the community. What our Director, Dave Watson, called in his Reid Foundation [paper](#), *Building Stronger Communities*, social infrastructure. Libraries build communities. They bring generations together in a space in a way few other places can. Research shows that libraries generated £6.95 for every £1 of public funding.

The broader value of public libraries as a community resource is being recognised in the concept of 'warm banks' in response to the energy crisis. Librarians have always recognised this well before the current crisis.



The consumer champion Martin Lewis has commissioned a best practice guide on this.

Way Ahead

In England, the UK Government appointed Baroness Elizabeth Sanderson to help develop a [new strategy](#) to ensure public libraries provide the best possible service for their communities. There have been some understandably cynical responses to this initiative, but it recognises a problem. Authors and publishers [urged](#) the Prime Minister to abolish "the last remaining tax on reading", and ensure schools have funding for author visits and invest in libraries.

Jimmy Reid might not have had much in common with Andrew Carnegie, who used some of his ill-gotten gains to fund libraries in Scotland. However, he would have agreed with his words, "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never-failing spring in a desert.". Access to books is a [human right](#) for children at least; let's ensure we deliver that right for the next generation.

Jimmy Reid Foundation

The Jimmy Reid Foundation is a think tank which brings together different voices from across Scotland to make the case for economic, environmental, political and social equity and justice in Scotland and further afield.

<https://reidfoundation.scot>

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