

# The Future of Primary School Libraries

November 2021



Supported by



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

# Acknowledgements

## Steering group members

ASCEL  
BookTrust  
CLPE  
CILIP  
The Open University  
The Reading Agency  
School Library Association  
Libraries Connected

## Author

Tessa Tyler Todd, National Literacy Trust

## Researchers

Helen Fisher  
Dr. Christina Clark, National Literacy Trust  
Anne Teravainen-Goff, National Literacy Trust

With thanks to all of those who submitted evidence for this report.

Thank you to Penguin Random House for providing funding for this research.

## About Penguin Random House UK

Penguin Random House is the UK's leading consumer publisher, made up of nine creatively and editorially independent publishing houses and over 2,000 colleagues. From bestselling writers and bold illustrators, to big thinkers and political commentators, trailblazing entrepreneurs and wellbeing experts, we are home to some of the world's most celebrated authors. Our mission is to make books for everyone, because a book can change anyone.

We've worked in partnership with the National Literacy Trust for over a decade as part of our commitment to help create the readers of the future.

## About the National Literacy Trust

Our mission is to improve the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents.

Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions. Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes children and young people's life stories. Our new site Words for Life provides simple, fun and educational activities for children and young people aged 0-24 to support learning at home and help them feel more confident.

Visit [literacytrust.org.uk](https://literacytrust.org.uk) to find out more, donate or sign up for our free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.



# Contents

Foreword .....	7
Findings at a glance .....	8
Introduction .....	10
What impact has COVID-19 had on library provision? .....	12
What are the benefits of primary school libraries? .....	14
What are the challenges facing primary school libraries? .....	21
How do we reimagine the future of primary school libraries?.....	25
What makes an effective primary school library? .....	28
Our recommendations .....	29
Conclusion.....	31
Methodology .....	32
References.....	34





## Foreword

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy, and Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Information and Knowledge, I am delighted to welcome this important report.

I know from my personal experience that a primary school library can be the heartbeat of a school, so I am deeply saddened to hear that one in eight primary schools in England does not have a library, which jumps to one in four in schools with a higher proportion of pupils on free school meals (Great School Libraries Campaign, 2019). As evidenced in this report, primary school libraries bring numerous benefits to pupils; increasing their reading for pleasure and helping their mental wellbeing. However, as primary school libraries are not a statutory requirement for schools, funding is not ring-fenced which means that libraries are competing with other priorities in the school for funding. This means that primary school libraries face significant funding challenges, often relying on PTA donations, using old books and in some cases having no library at all.

We must champion the benefits of primary school libraries, particularly the positive impact they have on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. With one in 11 children from disadvantaged backgrounds not having a book of their own at home (National Literacy Trust 2017), a school library is in some cases the only way they can access books. I commit to using my platform as a Member of Parliament, and my involvement in the APPGs on Literacy and Libraries respectively to draw attention to the benefits of primary school libraries, and call for wider support for these valuable spaces.

I am pleased to see that the private sector has responded to this challenge, and welcome the news of the Primary School Alliance that is being launched alongside this report. It's wonderful to hear the sustainable ways that businesses and charities are supporting access to books in schools. I look forward to watching more businesses join the alliance, which will help support even more children across the country.



**Christian Wakeford MP**

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy,  
Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries,  
Information and Knowledge



**40% of schools surveyed had no budget for a school library**

School Library Association submission, Sofflink Survey 2020

# Findings at a glance

There is **no government requirement** for schools to have a library

A quarter of disadvantaged primary schools in England **do not have a library**

**40% of primary schools** reported having no dedicated school library budget in recent survey

School Library Association submission, Sofflink Survey 2020

For the 1 in 11 children growing up without any books at home, **school is often the first opportunity** for children to discover the magic of reading

## An effective primary school library needs:

- A wide range of inclusive and representative books
- An engaging and creative space
- Trained staff
- To sit at the heart of the wider school community

Due to small budgets, some teachers buy books from charity shops **out of their own pocket**

**COVID-19** has affected the **most disadvantaged pupils' access to books**

Many existing school libraries lack quality **inclusive and representative books**

Reading for pleasure is proven to **positively impact young people's mental wellbeing and academic attainment**

## Summary of recommendations

- The government should acknowledge the valuable role primary school libraries and reading spaces play in supporting literacy levels, both in school and at home.
- The challenge of transforming primary school libraries needs to be addressed through a nationwide approach which brings together public, private and third sector skills and resources.
- A national primary school library development alliance needs to be developed to coordinate new investment opportunities and provide a cross-sectoral policy grouping.



“Libraries are essential for the wellbeing of children as well as in the widening of their horizons. Children can forget their troubles, escape to other worlds and relax. They can learn from others’ experiences.”

- Librarian, Thorntree Primary School

# Introduction

## Key terms

We are using the term 'primary school library' to mean a designated library area that provides access to a curated collection of resources to benefit pupils' learning and development, and is separate to a classroom or other shared space.

Primary school libraries are a vital part of the education system. A well-resourced primary school library not only supports literacy levels but has a positive effect on the mental wellbeing of pupils. **Despite their numerous benefits, there is currently no statutory requirement for primary schools to have a library** and even before the COVID-19 pandemic, primary school libraries were operating under pressure. Currently, one in eight primary schools in England do not have a library, jumping to one in four in schools with a higher proportion of pupils on free school meals (Great School Libraries Campaign, 2019). This inequality of provision needs to be addressed, particularly as primary school libraries have a greater impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These pupils will have also suffered more as a result of the pandemic, experiencing an extra month of learning loss in reading compared to their more advantaged peers. This is equivalent to undoing a third of the progress made in the last decade on closing the gap in primary schools (DfE,

2021). A well-resourced primary school library will be vital in helping address this inequality and supporting children in their educational recovery.

National and international findings over the past decade have highlighted the impact of school libraries on children and young people's literacy outcomes, as well as higher test or exam scores equating to academic attainment, successful curriculum or learning outcomes (including digital and information literacy) and positive attitudes towards learning (Williams, Wavell & Morrison, 2013).

The National Literacy Trust has found that school libraries can give particular benefits to pupils eligible for free school meals. **Pupils eligible for free school meals were more likely than their peers who are not eligible for free school meals to use the school library daily**, while pupils who receive free school meals and use their school library enjoy reading and writing more and have greater confidence in their reading and writing abilities (Wood, Clark, Teravainen-Goff, Rudkin & Vardy, 2020).

The submissions we received in our call for evidence shows the positive impact library provision has on children's literacy and love of reading, and the powerful link between children's love of reading, their educational outcomes, and their life chances. It also highlights **the damaging impact the pandemic has had on access to books, most notably affecting children from**

**disadvantaged backgrounds.** If this damage is to be remedied, many respondents argue strongly that literacy has to underpin the government's post-COVID-19 recovery agenda. Encouraging and fostering better and more inclusive access to books and libraries must be recognised as a priority.

While the government recognises the importance of libraries and book selections in the national curriculum, and make a number of references to teachers using library services to help pupils "exercise choice in selecting books and be taught how to do so", they do not currently provide any statutory funding for primary school libraries.

If the link between libraries, books and outcomes is as strong as our evidence in this report leads us to believe, then we must support primary schools so that all pupils can benefit. We are calling on the government, public, private and charitable sectors to take on board the recommendations made in this report and bring in measures to support primary school libraries across the country.

# What impact has COVID-19 had on provision?

“

**“The role of a school library has never been more needed.”**

- School Libraries Association submission

School closures as a result of COVID-19 have had a huge impact on education, with primary school pupils experiencing a learning loss equivalent to between two to three months of progress for reading (Department for Education, 2021). Although schools remained open for the children of essential workers and the most vulnerable, many children were unable to access their school library, with the service being reduced or in some cases closed completely. This particularly affected access to books for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where one in 11 say that they do not have a book of their own at home (National Literacy Trust, 2019).

School closures and additional book quarantining measures had an impact on the provision that school libraries were able to provide. We received a number of responses to the call for evidence detailing library closures and ways schools responded to this. One school commented that their library has “remained closed to pupils since March 2020”, although they noted that they had replaced this with trolleys of books outside classrooms. Another school said that during the lockdowns their library remained closed, with another saying that

they “used to visit our local library regularly but this has not been possible.” Due to the additional measures needed to quarantine books, one school hasn’t allowed children to borrow books since the COVID-19 restrictions started.

Thorn tree Primary School discussed the way that they had kept their library going during the school closures: “During the first lockdown, we ceased using the library. In subsequent lockdowns, I ran a library service, using shelved trolleys, from the lower school gate at differing times and days for the different bubbles not attending school. I had other sessions for key worker children in school. Currently, I am still running a service using the trolleys just outside the library door so that ‘bubbles’ are not crossing paths within the library room.”

A number of responses discussed the closure of schools and libraries and how this affected pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with one response commenting that “Many of our children only had access to the books we provided. Due to (the) chaotic lifestyles of many of our children, these books were not valued, (not) used, damaged or lost. COVID had a massive impact on children’s access to books and reading.” Another response said that “many children will have less access to books during COVID with reduced service/access at public libraries too.” One respondent revealed that “Children have certainly had less access to books during the pandemic.”

It wasn’t just access to books that was affected, as respondents also noticed the impact school closures have had on reading levels. Many respondents also emphasised that the promotion of reading is an essential component of their post-pandemic recovery strategy, and that the value of a library to all in the school had been shown by the pandemic.

One librarian commented that “We know that younger children who were on the verge of becoming confident readers have lost some of their skills.” Another said that after lockdown “One thing I noticed across all schools... it was immediately obvious which children had had access to books, not just in their reading ability but also their concentration levels.” Another librarian said that the impact of COVID-19 has meant a drop in reading levels for some pupils, which was supported by another school commenting that the effects had been felt “particularly for those children who may not have many books at home.” Another acknowledged the importance of reading

“

**“COVID-19 has starkly demonstrated the immense benefit of a proper library space and a dedicated librarian”**

- Call for evidence submission

within education, saying “Reading is our top priority on our catch up plan.”

One respondent said that: “Primary education is the key window to establish confident, engaged and enthusiastic readers. For children who do not have access to books at home or sufficient parental support with reading, a staffed school library is essential.” Another commented that “Children from less literate/non-reading families definitely suffered through not being in school with access to reading material.”



# What are the benefits of primary school libraries?

## Reading for pleasure

The links between reading for pleasure and academic attainment are well evidenced, suggesting a positive relationship between reading frequency, reading enjoyment and attainment (Clark, 2019). A key theme that came up in over 30% of submissions was the impact that effective primary school library provision has on students' reading for pleasure. However, this success is often dependent on the resources they have and the extent to which this approach is embedded within the ethos of the school.

## Key terms

Here, we define reading for pleasure as reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that, having begun at someone else's request, we continue because we are interested in it (Clark and Rumbold, 2006).

Research has found that children who enjoy reading do better at school. For example, children who read for enjoyment made more progress in maths, vocabulary and spelling between the ages of 10 and 16 than those who rarely read (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). Indeed, those who read books often at age 10 — and more than once a week at age 16 — gained higher results in all three tests at age 16 than those

who read less regularly. The study also found that reading for enjoyment was more important for children's cognitive development between ages 10 and 16 than their parents' level of education. This was added to by the All Party Parliamentary Group report, *The Beating Heart of the School*, which concluded that "Access to library space and School Library Services will have an impact on attainment at a pivotal point in a child's educational life. Studies have shown that children who read for pleasure from a young age are much more likely to do well throughout their academic life."

Our respondents agreed with this, saying that "Reading for pleasure helps develop the basic literacy skills needed in the classroom - the two are mutually beneficial." We also heard that "Reading is the most important skill for children to learn and they have really missed out during the pandemic." One respondent also told us that "Libraries help to develop passionate readers... reading affects all areas of learning."

Against the backdrop of post-COVID-19 educational recovery, the links between reading for pleasure and attainment are now more important than ever, not only in terms of the benefits that embedding reading for pleasure in the curriculum can bring to help children catch up, but also because the conditions of lockdown meant that some children faced greater barriers to reading. In the 2020 Annual Literacy Survey conducted by the National Literacy Trust,

some children and young people reported that during the first lockdown a lack of access to books (with schools and libraries closed), a lack of quiet space at home and a lack of school/peer support had negatively affected their ability to read and their motivation to read for enjoyment (Clark and Picton, 2020).

In the submission of evidence, many respondents also focused on the role of the school library in increasing pupils' overall enjoyment of reading, with one saying that, in a school library, "children should be encouraged to read for pleasure to help them to discover reading as a pleasurable activity and to develop their interests further." Another commented that there should be a "big push on reading for pleasure in the library without worrying



“

“We have been raising the status of reading for enjoyment and promoting a love of reading for several years. I feel this has been beneficial (mainly from the number of conversations the children have about reading and books) and the library is a conduit for this. The library supports reading at home more than reading at school.”

- Deputy Head Teacher, Kings Furlong Junior School



# “Reading allows you to travel to another place, which during lockdown was essential.”

*about 'levels'. If reading is only ever associated with attainment, some children will never enjoy it and will fall further behind, while others get turned off reading and lose a source of potential lifelong pleasure.”*

An effective primary school library not only helps to inspire and encourage pupils with their reading but also helps to embed a culture of reading for pleasure within the school. One of the respondents commented that *“Libraries are vital to the future of our reading culture and education... Children need books not only as an educational resource but to develop a love of reading for pleasure.”* Another respondent commented that the *“role of libraries is to encourage reading for pleasure and its benefits to all,”* which another respondent echoed by saying that the role of libraries is to *“promote reading for pleasure.”* Another respondent also said that primary school libraries are *“integral to the teaching and enjoyment of reading in schools.”* One response focused on how their own library is integrated with teaching and learning, saying *“We promote reading in our schools, reading for pleasure as well as developing reading skills.”*

One in three (34.4%) respondents mentioned the importance of having a professional librarian, or a trained teacher to sustain a library, to promote reading and to support teachers with pupils who found reading difficult. One respondent said that *“Libraries are integral to promoting reading for pleasure, and a librarian who knows*

*both their resources and the children they work with can make a huge difference.’* Another respondent said that *“Having a dedicated librarian who keeps themselves very well read and informed on current issues in education is essential.”*



**“Libraries are essential for the wellbeing of children as well as in the widening of their horizons. Children can forget their troubles, escape to other worlds and relax. They can learn from others’ experiences.”**

- Librarian, Thorntree Primary School

As demonstrated by our evidence, primary school libraries are key to triggering children’s enthusiasm for books and reading. However, this does require an up-to-date library of good quality books, and a librarian or trained teacher who can aid with book choices and give support.

## Mental wellbeing

Another theme from the submissions was the benefits to children’s mental wellbeing that being able to access effective primary school library provision can give. Research

has found that children with above expected reading skills are three times more likely to have high mental wellbeing than their peers with below expected reading skills (40.3% vs 13.1%) (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018). Reading also helped children and young people with their mental wellbeing during the pandemic, with three in five (59.3%) children and young people saying that, during lockdown, reading made them feel better (Clark and Picton, 2020). It has also been found that children who use their school library have higher levels of mental wellbeing than their peers who don’t (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

Primary school libraries help to foster a love of reading, which can support children’s mental wellbeing. One respondent said that they are “essential for health and wellbeing.” However, the ability of school libraries to support mental wellbeing is dependent on the level of library provision and whether there is a trained member of staff or librarian who is able to facilitate these activities.

As discussed above, primary school libraries are a conduit to increased reading and literacy levels. One of our respondents commented that *“I think reading is so important for mental health as well as education, so the library is so important.”* Within this, there is also a need for the library to have specific books focused on wellbeing, with one librarian saying that *“there is a need for mindfulness literature*

**“Libraries are key in providing that extra support for pupils who have fallen behind with reading, but also in improving wellbeing.”**

- Call for evidence submission

*across all age ranges too.”*

Schools that are fortunate enough to have a physical library space are also able to use this space for activities that support children’s mental wellbeing: *“The library in school is paramount! Our children love being in there as it is calm and offers a place for calm and reflection.”* Another respondent said that *“School libraries remain vital to school recovery, giving access to free choice of a range of books, offering a safe space and empowering students to aspire and develop their imaginations.”* Another school said that the role of a library is to provide *“emotional*



**“We are within the top 20% of the most deprived schools in the country and many pupils may not have ready access to books in the home, so the library is essential and a key driver in developing a love of reading... The library is a space of sanctuary within the school for pupils experiencing difficulties or requiring extra support.”**

- Call for evidence submission

“

“I think reading for pleasure is one of the single biggest factors we can do in helping educational recovery in schools. This, more than anything, has the biggest impact on education and also allows children to develop empathy and other skills needed to cope with the mental load of COVID and lockdown.”

- English subject lead, Garstang Community Primary School

*support and wellbeing, driving reading for pleasure with all its proven benefits, supporting the curriculum, providing book clubs/groups to recover lost ground and build confidence, and advising parents/carers.”*

Another respondent added that *“The library space itself can be key in providing an area away from the classroom for extra support.”*

The positive difference that primary school libraries make to children’s mental health and wellbeing is clear, not only from

improving access to books and increasing children’s literacy skills (which are shown to improve mental wellbeing), but because those primary schools that have a physical library space can also use this space to promote mindfulness and other mental wellbeing activities.

The role that primary school libraries play in increasing levels of reading for pleasure and the knock-on effect this has on attainment is vital in helping pupils recover from the effect COVID-19 has had on their education. Not only that, but the benefits libraries bring in terms of access to books for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who would otherwise not have access to a book of their own, will be key in helping to address the disadvantage attainment gap that has deepened as a result of the pandemic.

However, this is again dependent on provision and investment. As previously discussed, one in eight primary schools doesn’t have a school library and therefore misses out on all the benefits this brings to pupils. In order for these advantages to be felt universally, there needs to be a solution to the varying levels of primary school provision across the country.



Over a quarter of survey respondents said their current book stock is not diverse enough



## What are the challenges facing primary school libraries?

### Inequality in provision and funding

Despite pupils' use of libraries being mentioned in the National Curriculum programmes of study, there is no statutory requirement for primary school libraries and therefore they have no ring-fenced budget. Indeed, evidence provided by the School Libraries Association shows that 40% of primary schools have no budget for their library at all (Sofflink 2020 Survey report), with many reliant on donations from the parent teacher association (PTA), or parents to continue to operate. The Covid-19 pandemic brought on additional funding pressures. For example, the Education Policy Institute found that, during the pandemic, virtually all schools have had to spend more to operate in a 'COVID-safe' way, with many facing additional teaching costs alongside expenditure on PPE, cleaning supplies, digital equipment and cleaning supplies (Mills and Andrews, 2020). It was also evident from the responses that many felt that the additional funding pressures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will result in even less investment in their school libraries.

A universal theme emerging from the evidence is that schools cannot afford to fund a library and/or librarians from their normal school budgets. A supportive parent-teacher association (PTA) and/or an active Friends group, as well as philanthropic donations, could offer valuable additional support, but a solid funding base for a school library appears to be essential. The 2020 Sofflink survey

reported that nearly 50% of primary school respondents reported that their library was under-resourced, and 40% of primary school respondents reported having no budget for libraries at all. From our call for evidence, we found that 20% of our respondents were relying on old library stock.

**Primary school libraries are not a statutory requirement for schools and therefore they have no ring-fenced budget**

One in four (26.2%) respondents received practical or financial help from their PTA. In 2019, Parentkind's Annual Return data showed that 39% of their PTA members spent funds on their school library, representing over 5,000 PTAs nationally raising money for their school library. However, the pandemic has had a hugely negative impact on the overall level of funds PTAs have been able to raise. Across the Parentkind membership, this estimated loss amounts to more than £75 million. This will have a knock-on effect on the amount of money PTAs are able to give to school libraries.

While some of our respondents described a specific budget for their libraries, others are reliant on donations from families or buying books from charity shops as the "cost of constantly buying new releases for many schools is unsustainable." One school said that much "of the stock was donated from

families. Books get a very small allocation from school budget – this is used to buy up-to-date titles but only one copy of each so there are always waiting lists. Lots of stock was donated so not new.” In one example, when discussing the book areas outside classrooms that are in the place of formal library provision, the respondent said that “Most teachers spend their own money adding to these resources, owing to lack of school funding.”

One useful approach has been to ring fence some Pupil Premium funding to gain access to high quality books for Pupil Premium children (some books are then kept by the children) and/or to fund a librarian as part of an intervention role. A number of respondents have a particular focus on the library habits of Pupil Premium children. At one school, the librarian prepares a half-termly report on the borrowing habits of Pupil Premium children for the inclusion team, while at another, the

“

**One in three children and young people said that they struggle to find representation of characters that are like them, which could impact on their broader engagement with reading and its associated benefits.**

(Best, Clark and Picton, 2020)

librarian has a list of Pupil Premium children and keeps an eye on their borrowing. Analysis by the Labour Party has found that since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of children entitled to free school

meals has risen by over 400,000 (CYP Now, 2021). As noted above, children from the poorest communities are at most risk of falling further behind, yet we received reports of significant inequality in library provision.

The lack of funding has a direct link to availability of provision. Indeed, the Reading for Pleasure in 2020 report from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) identified that a quarter of teachers were worried about children’s access to books being a barrier to their reading development during the pandemic (CLPE, 2021). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be dependent on their ability to access books from their school library, and these students will have been disproportionately affected by the lack of access to books during this time. One of the schools that submitted evidence said that “The importance of sending books home is clear for disadvantaged pupils who have nothing at home to read and are not able to go to the library.”

It has been found previously that the positive impact school libraries have on student success could be undermined by cuts to library budgets (Teravainen and Clark, 2017). The additional funding pressures of COVID-19 on schools means that cuts to library budgets are only set to get worse. In order for school libraries to support the pupils they need to, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, they must be seen as a priority for funding.

### **Diversity, inclusion and representation in school libraries**

As discussed above, a lack of funding has an impact on schools’ ability to buy quality, inclusive, representative books that reflect

the realities of their children. Indeed, over a quarter (26.9%) of respondents highlighted a lack of inclusive quality literature or acknowledged the need for more diversity within their current book stock. It’s important that the children who use the library see themselves reflected in the books that are on offer.

As discussed above, many schools have minimal budgets to invest in new books, which leaves some schools reliant on donations from parents or books they can find in charity shops. Many schools cite this lack of funding as the reason for a lack of diversity within the books on offer, with one school commenting that “We are aware that the diversity in our books is very minimal, and this is an area of focus for us, but the challenge is funding.” Another said that “Our staff are well-trained in and curious about diversity and are keen to continue to improve the quality of our resources. As ever, money is the limiting factor.”

Many respondents acknowledged the lack of diversity they have in the books and resources available, with one saying that “We are lacking in books related to BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) groups and other diverse cultures,” and another commenting that “there are no books which address diversity or current issues.” Others recognised the need to improve these materials, commenting “More diverse books are required and more relevant books.”

In December 2020, the National Literacy Trust published the report ‘Diversity and children and young people’s reading in 2020’. The report found that one in three children and young people said that they struggle to find representation of characters that are like them, which could impact on

**Reading is the core to all learning, so having a library which has a broad selection of fiction and non-fiction books, classics and new books is vital in encouraging pupils to re-engage with reading.**

their broader engagement with reading and its associated benefits (Best, Clark and Picton, 2020). This means that the lack of quality inclusive and representative books available in primary school libraries could hinder children’s overall enjoyment of reading and, as discussed above, ultimately affect their attainment levels. Lit in Colour, a campaign from publisher Penguin Random House UK and race equality think tank The Runnymede Trust, aims to support schools to connect more young people with books by writers of colour in schools. Research published through Lit in Colour revealed that “It’s vital that the books we read in our formative years reflect the rich diversity of the society we live in.” In the Lit in Colour research report, they spoke to a number of primary schools who “reflected on the need for greater representation in the classroom, and better understanding of how to talk about and mediate these texts for students.” (Elliott, Nelson-Addy, Chantiluke & Courtney, Lit in Colour, 2021)

A number of charities and businesses have responded by working in partnership to try to address some of the issues around diversity of materials in schools. An example of this is Puffin World of Stories, which is a partnership between publisher Penguin Random House UK and the National Literacy Trust. The programme aims to address some of the key challenges facing reading for pleasure in schools where

budget constraints often mean investing in school libraries and librarians, yet buying new books is not an option. Schools who take part not only receive new books, but receive bespoke training, audiobook downloads and other resources. The diversity of representation in the book donation has been a key element in the programme's success. A recent evaluation of the programme showed that participants valued the diversity in the books they received. All of them (100%) rated the diversity of characters and authors as 'excellent' or 'good'.

After taking part in Puffin World of Stories, one Reading Lead said *"Just to see themselves (the pupils) in the books, I think is massively important, because I don't think some of our kids have done before. It's fantastic. It's really helped to widen our kids' experiences."* Another school who took part commented that *"the biggest benefit for me was the range of the books; I think they were chosen so carefully and - in*



**"We are aware that the diversity in our books is very minimal, and this is an area of focus for us, but the challenge is funding"**

- English subject lead, Garstang Community Primary School

*a school where we do have a very diverse range of children - that was really important."*

For schools that do have more funding to be able to invest in diverse resources, a number credit Schools Library Services with helping them to diversify the resources they have available. For one school this means they can exchange 200 books a year. However, Schools Library Services unfortunately only exist in certain areas of the country. Other schools said that they keep up to date with recommendations from reading charities such as BookTrust. One librarian said that they keep "up to date with new authors and publishers like Knights Of, who promote books about and by diverse people." For those that manage to regularly update their texts, or who engage with projects like Puffin World of Stories, or subscribe to their Schools Library Service, the benefits to pupils are vast.

It was clear from the evidence collected that schools acknowledge the need for having diverse texts and resources available within their primary school libraries. However, there is a significant cost to updating stock which many can't afford. More needs to be done to support schools to realise their ambitions to have a library well stocked with diverse texts and resources.

# How do we reimagine the future of primary school libraries?

We believe that every child should have the opportunities offered by high quality library services, be that public libraries or school libraries. There are clear benefits that come from having a well-resourced school library led by a skilled member of staff. However, as school libraries are not currently a statutory provision, many schools and pupils miss out on these opportunities. In the context of post-pandemic education recovery, we must explore mechanisms of how to deliver these opportunities to pupils without putting additional pressure on schools themselves.

Within this, we need to look at primary school provision across the entirety of the UK. In 2019, the Great School Libraries campaign found that only 67% of schools in Wales have a library, falling to 57% in Northern Ireland (Great School Libraries Campaign National Survey, 2019). There are currently no specific statistics about primary school provision in Wales. The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Wales (CCW) are trying to raise awareness of school libraries in Wales and are in the process of mapping provision in Wales. England, Wales and Northern Ireland would benefit from the focus that school libraries have been given in Scotland. In 2018, a national strategy for school libraries was announced that set out a vision where every child and young person in Scotland has access to a school library service. This was introduced due to school library provision being varied across schools and local authorities, and provides an outline for the ways appropriately-resourced school library services contribute to achieve excellence and equity in

Scottish education (Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools, 2018).

Many of the submissions to this review suggested that making primary school libraries statutory would be a mechanism to ensure change and raise standards of provision. Statutory status would have to be accompanied by additional central government funding, both for initial capital development and ongoing ring-fenced revenue funding. The Children's Laureates' recent Life Changing Libraries campaign estimated the required investment to be in the region of £100m per annum in order to enable every primary school in England to invest in the key areas of a library: books, expertise and space.

Any investment by the government in primary school libraries would be an imaginative investment, that for the reasons outlined in this report would immediately benefit children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It would also help reset the system, building capacity in primary school libraries, to benefit future generations. In order to do this, a key learning from recent campaigns to improve primary school libraries is that public policy in this area needs to be enacted in partnership with the commitment and expertise of the publishing and charity sectors.

For the past three years, the National Literacy Trust has worked in partnership with Penguin Random House UK to refresh and restock libraries and train library coordinators in 250 schools in some of the country's most disadvantaged areas,



through the Puffin World of Stories project. The model has been based on the development of local clusters of schools working together to improve their libraries, supported by both online and face to face training.

In the same way, Booktrust's Life Changing

“

“People who have (or have had) access to a school library know how much they are worth! People who haven't, don't realise. We are extremely fortunate to have not only a superb, designated library with a librarian, but also a brilliant school ethos and approach to reading. I wish every school had what we have!”

- Call for evidence submission

Libraries project, under the patronage of Cressida Cowell, the Children's Laureate, is transforming the libraries of six primary schools in disadvantaged areas, in partnership with publishers.

These examples both demonstrate how a public, private, charitable partnership between schools, publishers and literacy and reading charities can bring the expertise, passion and creativity which are needed to unlock the vision for school libraries, as has been explored by this Commission. Additional partnerships and funding will continue to support schools and develop their libraries, and we hope to see these approaches grow and develop. Ultimately, however, only a national funding partnership with Government will scale these models to the point where they become a national development programme.



# What makes an effective primary school library?

## The key components of an effective library need to be identified and promoted as the basis for a library transformation programme.

Research and the successful pilots examined by this report suggest that the primary school model needs to address four factors:

### 1. A wide range of diverse books which are regularly refreshed

- i. Book stock in the library should engage a range of pupils' own interests and support the curriculum for all phases in the school, fully representing the diversity of contemporary family life and society in a range of media.

### 2. An attractive and engaging library space to capture pupils' imaginations

- i. The space should suit the profile of pupils who will use it and make it an exciting destination.

### 3. Trained, skilled staff managing the library

- i. Access to a professional librarian through a schools library service, or network of schools, is the ideal.

### 4. The library at the heart of the wider school community

- i. To fulfil its potential, the library needs internal partnerships, integrating it with teaching and learning across the school. It needs to foster partnerships with parents to support reading at home and in families. It also needs partnerships with the local public library, the school's library service, local bookshops and important promotions like World Book Day.

# Our recommendations

## 1. The government should acknowledge the valuable role primary school libraries and reading spaces play in supporting literacy levels, both in school and at home.

- Including the additional benefits they bring to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- And, how they support mental wellbeing across the school both through access to books, and as a safe and calming space.
- This needs to be reflected in future curriculum reforms, in non-statutory teaching guidance, in professional development initiatives such as the English Hubs and in targeted investment such as the inclusion of school library services as a valued component of school improvement provision at a local authority level.

## 2. The challenge of transforming primary school libraries needs to be addressed through a nationwide approach which brings together public, private and third sector skills and resources.

There are approximately 16,780 primary schools in England. Given the scale of the challenge, the transformation of primary school libraries requires a coordinated national development programme. Many of the successful models examined in this review have combined public, private and charitable assets – schools working with publishers and with reading and literacy charities. This cross-sectoral partnership needs to sit at the heart of a national development plan for school libraries:

- Only through a partnership with publishers can a cost-effective national model for stocking and refreshing primary school libraries be developed.
- National and local literacy expertise is required to train and support members of staff managing the school library. The role of charities like the National Literacy Trust, the School Library Association and Booktrust in supporting professional development working in partnership has proved highly effective, working with local schools library services when possible. National training providers need to be commissioned. Online training offers a cost-effective and flexible model which pilots have demonstrated can work well.
- Large scale public funding is required to purchase new stock and invest in training. A national partnership between publishers and charities will unlock significant economies of scale but significant public investment is still required, elements of which need to be delegated to schools as ring-fenced funding and elements of which need to be used at a national level to commission training and stock. Further financial modelling is required The Department for Education

needs to urgently open discussion with the charities and publishers working in this space in light of the impacts of COVID-19.

### **3. A national library development alliance needs to be developed to coordinate new investment opportunities and provide a cross-sectoral policy grouping.**

Charitable foundations, publisher investment and third party corporate social responsibility investment offer significant opportunities to develop primary school libraries at scale. Whilst this does not offer the national transformation programme that is ultimately envisaged, it offers an important approach to invest in the development of primary school libraries especially in disadvantaged areas. These initiatives need to be held together at a policy level so that Government and public bodies can learn from them, they can be used as an advocacy base and they can build an evidence base to support the scoping of future development plans.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the evidence gathered for this review that primary school libraries play an important role in education. Not only do they help instil a love of reading in pupils that helps their overall attainment, but they help to improve mental wellbeing outcomes and support children from disadvantaged backgrounds to access much-needed resources. However, primary school libraries have to compete for funding, which means that even where they have been set up, they are often under-resourced with inadequate stock, and without a librarian or trained member of staff to coordinate their use within the school. We must continue to make the case for the importance of primary school libraries and reading spaces, and highlight the inequality of provision across the country.

We appreciate the huge number of competing priorities on schools' budgets post-pandemic which is why we are recommending developing an alliance of businesses, charities and public bodies to support the transformation of primary school libraries and reading spaces where they are needed most. We urge the government to look at the recommendations we have outlined above, and look to support these sustainable models that can make a much-needed difference to children's reading, wellbeing and attainment at primary school.

“

**Millions of children, particularly those from the poorest communities worst hit by the pandemic, are missing out on opportunities to discover the life-changing magic of reading - one that OECD research suggests is a key indicator in a child's future success. How can a child become a reader for pleasure if their parents or carers cannot afford books, and their primary school has no library, or that library is woefully insufficient?**

Cressida Cowell, Children's Laureate, Letter to the Prime Minister



# Methodology

The National Literacy Trust and Penguin Random House, along with an advisory group made up of stakeholders across the sector, including The Open University, BookTrust, CILIP, The Reading Agency, CLPE, ASCEL, Libraries Connected and the School Library Association, came together to launch a call for evidence, in order to help inform policy recommendations on how to best to support the provision of libraries in primary schools.

Primary schools and interested organisations were invited to submit evidence about their local primary school provision before, during and beyond the COVID-19 situation. We received 71 responses, with 61 of respondents working directly in primary school libraries. The deadline for responses was 25th June. Schools had re-opened at this point but were working on a system of class and year group bubbles.

## Call for evidence questions

### 4.1 Primary school libraries before COVID-19

In your response, you might want to consider the following areas:

4.1.1 If you're responding from a school, please describe your primary school library provision before COVID-19. If you don't have a school library, please explain why this is – lack of space, funding, resources, etc.

4.1.2 Please tell us about the diversity and quality of resources you have available.

4.1.3 Please tell us about how your library is funded – does the budget come from core school budget, voluntary income from PTA, etc.? How do you ensure the library is properly resourced across the year?

4.1.4 Please tell us about the ways that you support children from disadvantaged backgrounds to access library resources. Do feel free to include examples of what works well and what may not work as well that you have encountered through your work.

4.1.5 If you're responding from an organisation within this space, please tell us about the evidence and research you have about the need for and provision of primary school libraries before the pandemic.

### 4.2 Primary school libraries during COVID-19

In your response, you might want to consider the following areas:

4.2.1 If you're responding from a school, please tell us if you've tried to ensure pupils can still access books and resources during school closures. If so, how have you done this?

4.2.2 If you're responding from an organisation within this space, please tell us about the evidence and research you have on the ways that school closures caused by COVID-19 have affected pupils' access to books and resources within primary schools.

### 4.3 The future of primary school libraries post-COVID-19 © National Literacy Trust 2020

# References

Best, E., Clark, C. and Picton, I. (2020). Seeing yourself in what you read Diversity and children and young people's reading in 2020 (online). Available at: [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Diversity\\_and\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_peoples\\_reading\\_in\\_2020.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Diversity_and_children_and_young_peoples_reading_in_2020.pdf)

Clark, C. (2019). Children and young people's reading in 2017/18 Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey. (online) Available at: [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Reading\\_trends\\_in\\_2017-18.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Reading_trends_in_2017-18.pdf)

Clark, C. and Picton, I. (2020). "It makes me feel like I'm in a different place, not stuck inside." Children and young people's reading in 2020 before and during the COVID-19 lockdown. (online) . Available at: [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National\\_Literacy\\_Trust\\_-\\_Reading\\_practices\\_under\\_lockdown\\_report\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_-_Reading_practices_under_lockdown_report_-_FINAL.pdf)

Clark, C. and Teravainen, A. (2017). Book ownership and reading outcomes Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey 2016. (online) . Available at: [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National\\_Literacy\\_Trust\\_-\\_Book\\_ownership\\_and\\_reading\\_-\\_December\\_2017.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_-_Book_ownership_and_reading_-_December_2017.pdf)

Clark, C. and Teravainen-Goff, A. (2018). Mental wellbeing, reading and writing How children and young people's mental wellbeing is related to their reading and writing experiences. (online) . Available at: <https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/>

[documents/Mental\\_wellbeing\\_reading\\_and\\_writing\\_2017-18\\_-\\_FINAL2\\_qTxyxvg.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Mental_wellbeing_reading_and_writing_2017-18_-_FINAL2_qTxyxvg.pdf)

clpe.org.uk. (2021). CLPE Reading for Pleasure 2021 | Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. (online) Available at: <https://clpe.org.uk/research/clpe-reading-pleasure-2021> (Accessed 26 Aug. 2021)

CYP Now. (n.d.). Over 400,000 more pupils eligible for free school meals amid pandemic, says Labour. (online) Available at: <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/over-400-000-more-pupils-eligible-for-free-school-meals-amid-pandemic-says-labour> (Accessed 23 Sep. 2021)

GOV.UK. (2021). Pupils' progress in the 2020 to 2021 academic year: interim report. (online) Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupils-progress-in-the-2020-to-2021-academic-year-interim-report>

Great School Libraries Survey Findings and Update on Phase 1. (2019). (online) . Available at: [https://d824397c-0ce2-4fc6-b5c4-8d2e4de5b242.filesusr.com/ugd/8d6dfb\\_a1949ea011cd415fbd57a7a0c4471469.pdf](https://d824397c-0ce2-4fc6-b5c4-8d2e4de5b242.filesusr.com/ugd/8d6dfb_a1949ea011cd415fbd57a7a0c4471469.pdf) (Accessed 25 Aug. 2021)

Mills, B. and Andrews, J. (2020). Assessing Covid-19 cost pressures on England's schools. (online) Available at: [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EPI-School-Covid-Costs\\_2020.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EPI-School-Covid-Costs_2020.pdf) (Accessed 26 Aug. 2021)

School Library Association, Softlink 2020 Survey report - Available at: [https://www.softlinkint.com/downloads/2020\\_School\\_Library\\_Survey\\_United\\_Kingdom\\_-\\_early\\_findings.pdf](https://www.softlinkint.com/downloads/2020_School_Library_Survey_United_Kingdom_-_early_findings.pdf)

Sullivan, A., & Brown, M. (2013). Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading. CLS Working Papers, 2013(13/10)

Teravainen, A. and Clark, C. (2017). School Libraries A literature review of current provision and evidence of impact. (online) . Available at: [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/2017\\_06\\_30\\_free\\_research\\_-\\_school\\_library\\_review\\_XxR5qcv.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/2017_06_30_free_research_-_school_library_review_XxR5qcv.pdf)

THE BEATING HEART OF THE SCHOOL Improving educational attainment through school libraries and librarians 2 CONTENTS. (2014). (online) . Available at: [https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip\\_new\\_website/knowledge\\_hubs/school\\_libraries/ beatingheartoftheschool.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip_new_website/knowledge_hubs/school_libraries/ beatingheartoftheschool.pdf)

Williams, D., Wavell, C. and Morrison, K. (2013). impact of SCHOOL LIBRARIES on LEARNING Critical review of published evidence to inform the Scottish education community. (online) . Available at: <https://scottishlibraries.org/media/1211/impact-of-school-libraries-on-learning-2013.pdf>

“

**“These books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message: You are not alone.”**

*Matilda* by Roald Dahl



Supported by



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

For more information, contact:

Tessa.TylerTodd@literacytrust.org.uk  
literacytrust.org.uk/libraryalliance

Illustrations: Alicia Fernandes

The National Literacy Trust is a registered charity no. 1116260 (England and Wales) and SC042944 (Scotland).

