



Our Universal Library Offers

Our Universal Library Offers demonstrate the power of libraries to enrich the lives of individuals and their communities.



Children's Promise



Culture and Creativity



Health and Wellbeing



Information and Digital



Reading



Vision and Print Impaired
People's Promise

Biblioteki jako (wciąż?) miejsca spotkań i miejsca budowania kapitału społecznego

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The Universal Library Offers

Over the last twenty years, the relationship between the UK and Poland has grown and strengthened. There are now nearly 750,000 people living in England and Wales who were born in Poland, and Polish is the third most commonly spoken language after English and Welsh^[1].

In June 2022, Libraries Connected welcomed Jan Brodowski to our annual conference where he spoke about the work of public libraries in Kraków and Poland. Jan's presentation caused me to reflect on the similarities in library work in our two countries – how it is based on the same core library values or inclusion and wants to make people's lives better. But it also helped me appreciate the differences in our work, and how UK libraries now have a broad social role, and how we had to develop the Universal Library Offers as a framework to help shape what we do.

Libraries Connected^[2] is the membership body for public libraries in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. We provide training, access to funding, support for innovation and – most importantly – networks to interconnect our members and to connect them with government, funders and partners. Our members are 177 library services, with over 3,000 library buildings and 15,000 staff.

[1] *International migration, England and Wales: census 2021*, Office of National Statistics, 2nd November 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/internationalmigrationenglandandwales/census2021>.

[2] Homepage for Libraries Connected website, <http://www.librariesconnected.org.uk>.

In the UK, libraries are the legal responsibility of local government^[3], which also provides most of the funding. The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 states that, “It shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof”, and its clauses focus largely on the lending of books and materials. However, over the last two decades libraries have expanded their role around a whole range of social and community outcomes in line with their local authorities’ priorities.

So, it got to the point where it was hard to explain the role of the modern public library and how it all fitted together. It was a bit like a visit to TK Maxx where you know there is lots of great stuff in there but there is so much and it is so disorganised that it isn’t easy to find what you want.

Therefore, we developed the Universal Offers^[4] to provide a framework to articulate what libraries deliver, and to support staff development and innovation.

The Universal Offers firstly provide a clear and incredibly positive mission statement for the important role libraries play in modern society: “to connect communities, improve wellbeing and promote equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity.

Secondly, they provide a clear framework under which all library work can be arranged with four “Offers” or areas of activity:

- Books & Reading,
- Health & Wellbeing,
- Information & Digital,
- Culture & Creativity.

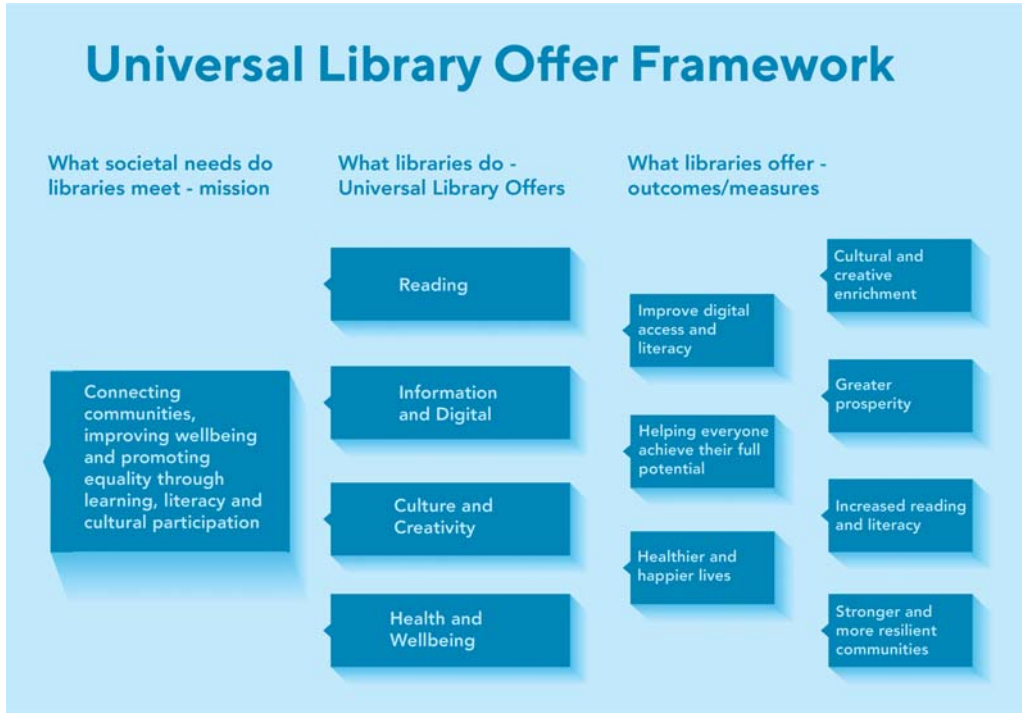
The Universal Offers framework recognises that each library service is unique in the services it delivers to its communities. So the Offers were designed to be deliberately broad, to allow for variation and experimentation. The framework provides consistency of quality and ambition but does not expect every service to be exactly the same.

The framework also provides a logic model showing how the Offers deliver impacts on individuals and communities so that libraries can align their work with national and local government priorities. We have had a lot of governmental churn in recent years, so what the logic model has done is to identify societal outcomes of interest to all political parties – including greater prosperity and stronger communities.

There are a number of ways the Universal Library Offers framework is used by library services. It helps them identify priorities, develop annual plans and ensure they are delivering a range of services their communities need. It also helps them plan staff development and training, to ensure existing staff are aware of new ap-

[3] *Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964*, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75>.

[4] Libraries Connected webpage about the Universal Library Offers, <http://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/universal-library-offers>.



proaches and skills – and to help identify what new skills and experience they need to recruit for. The framework can also underpin partnerships and funding bids, and most importantly, it is a powerful tool to help communicate the value and impact of the service.

On a national level, it has made it much easier to talk to government, the media and funders about what libraries do and the societal impacts they make, and to identify the need for innovation and investment, and to secure key national partners and funders for the sector. It is incredibly powerful to talk about the potential of the whole library network of more than 3,000 branches – and the millions of people libraries can reach locally through everyday interactions as well as through targeted campaigns. There are very few networks in the UK with such reach – apart from the

Universal Library Offers logic model

National Health Service. Each year, Libraries Connected works with library services to develop new programmes and approaches under each of the Offers, which generates toolkits, training materials and impact reports which we then roll out across all public libraries. This approach ensures that the Universal Library Offers remain relevant to the changing needs of society.

Now, I want to look at each of the Universal Offers in more detail to give you a flavour of what they mean for library practice.

Books & Reading – which remain absolutely at the heart of every library

The UK is a high skill economy, but 7 million adults are functionally illiterate^[5]. That's a shocking statistic.

The role of libraries is not so much about basic literacy – although many do work with specialist partners to host literacy classes. But the focus of libraries is more on fostering a love of reading – by promoting enjoyable and creative activities to feed the imagination and encourage discovery.

Another key value for libraries is about connectivity. Reading can be a solitary activity, but a lot of library programmes are about connecting readers with each other in book groups, connecting readers and authors in festivals, and bringing families together around a shared reading experience.

Activities under the Reading Offer include:

- Reading groups. These may be for general audiences – open to anyone who wants to join, but sometimes libraries run more targeted groups – for example for people learning English, or for those interested in a specific genre. Crime is always popular! In the pandemic, reading groups were forced to go online and although many have now restored the face-to-face experience, online groups remain popular and provide a new route for those who may not have time to travel to the library in the evening.
- We have a strong tradition in the UK of reading and literature festivals. These include City Reads, where a single title is promoted across a whole city for a short period, and the library works with the publisher, bookshops and the author on a range of promotional and interactive events. We also have regional festivals – such as a well-established children's book festival in the North East^[6]. Libraries in this region are a very long way from the centre of the book trade in London, so can struggle to arrange visits by authors and illustrators. However, the Festival has a high profile, so it encourages them to come to visit and inspire young readers.

[5] *Adult literacy*, National Literacy Trust, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>.

[6] Webpage for the Northern Children's Book Festival, <https://northernchildrensbookfestival.org.uk/libraries/>.

- Libraries also get involved in national campaigns. In the summer 2022, we celebrated Queen Elizabeth's 70th year on the throne. Libraries delivered the Big Jubilee Read in partnership with the BBC and The Reading Agency^[7] – focusing on seven decades of writing from across the Commonwealth, encouraging people to read well known classics, and also introducing lesser-known writers from Africa, Asia and across the globe. The programme also led to really interesting debate about the cultural histories of empire and the Commonwealth and how this is shaping modern English literature.
- One of our innovation projects this year is called Ask for a Book^[8] and is trying to tackle the problem of providing librarian quality recommendations to digital readers. It is developing an online platform that will work like a virtual librarian, to suggest titles and authors based on your preferences and reading habits.

The very biggest thing in the reading offer is the Summer Reading Challenge^[9] led by The Reading Agency. Many libraries describe it as “library Christmas”, as it is such a major event in the calendar and usually involves about 700,000 children. It is designed to keep children reading over the long summer holiday by inviting them to read six books, and to get involved in fun activities and win rewards and a medal. The theme this year was “gadgeteers”, so libraries put on great events about technology such as Lego modelling, building robots and coding. The Challenge is free for children to join, so a great benefit to families to provide activities in the long summer holidays.

The next Universal Library Offer is Health & Wellbeing

As you may know, in the UK we have a very treasured National Health Service – but its funding has been increasingly challenging with an ageing population and increased health problems across the whole community including obesity. Furthermore, local government is responsible for social care for older people which is a massive strain on their budgets leaving less and less for other services including libraries.

Therefore, there is now a much bigger focus on preventative health programmes and a much better understanding of how arts, culture and sport can be used as therapies, and to support people to live more healthy lives.

Libraries are really well placed to deliver preventative health programmes – including things that participants may not realise are for their health! For example, joining a reading group or Knit and Natter conversation group can have a meas-

[7] *Big Jubilee booklist announced!*, The Reading Agency, 2022, <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/the-big-jubilee-read-booklist-announced.html>.

[8] Website for the new Ask For A Book system, <https://www.askforabook.com>.

[9] Summer Reading Challenge website, <https://summerreadingchallenge.org.uk>.

urable impact on people's mental health – but for participants it's just a nice thing they do on a Thursday.

There is emerging evidence about how libraries can reach those who may not seek medical help until they reach a crisis point or may be reluctant to take action to improve their own health. So many health partners are keen to work with libraries to reach people in their audiences.

Examples include:

- Baby rhyme times accompanied by baby weigh sessions and advice from midwives and health visitors.
- Smoking cessation clinics and blood pressure testing – reaching people reluctant to go to the doctor.
- Some libraries deliver exercise sessions – story walks to get people outside into the local parks and landscape, and chair exercises for older people. These sessions also help people benefit from social contact, so are good for the soul as well as the body.

Under the Universal Offers, we also deliver national programmes such as Reading Well on Prescription^[10], where book lists are developed with experts in the medical field and also people living with specific health conditions. If, for example, you are diagnosed with dementia, your doctor can “prescribe” books from the list which will be free to borrow from your library and cover texts to give you information about your condition and treatment as well as more personal accounts from patients to give you an insight into living with the condition.

Another national programme is Reading Friends^[11], using books and reading together to forge friendships for people suffering from isolation. During the pandemic, the programme received significant government funding in recognition that loneliness rates had increased during lockdown, even as the subsequent impacts on health services. In just four months at the start of 2021, the programme had about 70,000 engagements to bring people together over reading and 83% said it made them feel more connected to others^[12].

Next in the Universal Library Offers is Digital & Information

Although we live in the digital age, the pandemic laid bare the size of the digital divide. In the UK, it is estimated that 10 million people are digitally excluded – they

[10] Reading Well webpages, <https://reading-well.org.uk>

[11] *Reading Friends*, The Reading Agency website, https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/quick-guides/reading-friends/?gclid=CjoKCQiA-JacBhCoARIsAlxybyOpB_26X4KylgR_Hx-buCgi8ROO2DuNoFH5BSazfTYLTJEjlxXAsaAkp9EALw_wcB

[12] *Read, Talk Share Campaign, evaluation and impact*, The Reading Agency website <https://readingfriends.org.uk/en/blog/read-talk-share-campaign-evaluation-and-impact>

can't afford data and devices, or they lack the skills and confidence^[13]. Libraries' ancient role of providing access to information has taken on a new urgency in the 21st century.

About 20 years ago, government provided funding for the People's Network – a network of free computers and internet connectivity in all libraries which in 2019 provided 26 million hours of access – often for essential things like applying for a job or benefits. This is supplemented by free Wi-Fi in all libraries for the growing number of people who bring their own devices.^[14]

In the pandemic, the importance of this access was recognised by government, and libraries were allowed to open their doors in lockdown to those who needed to use a computer or access the internet.

Libraries are not just passive providers of the internet. Even more important is their provision of digital assistance to help people get online safely and confidently. A recent national survey showed that library staff were the second most trusted professional group, with a massive 93% trust rating^[15]. Trust really comes into play with digital inclusion work, and the patient and personalised approach of libraries to help people step by step. Someone may come to the library wanting to print off a form, but a skilled library worker can help them open an email account, navigate web pages, download a document, use Wi-Fi printing, and of course help them identify which sources of information and websites to trust, and which to use with more caution.

Increasingly, libraries are exploring ways to deliver digital inclusion out in their communities – working with partners and charities to give people devices and data. These are often targeted schemes. For example, in Somerset job seekers receive a laptop with free data and also loaded with videos and helpful links – such as how to write a c.v. – and linked to reading materials and activity sessions in the library^[16]. The library approach is very much a wrap-round service taking people every step of a journey – from starting out to full digital confidence. Many libraries have Maker Spaces with high-tech kit such as laser cutters and 3d printers, used for introductory sessions and available to local businesses and artists to use professionally.

Finally, an increasingly important area of work is online safety and media literacy. How can libraries help people stay safe online and navigate the jungle of

[13] *The Digital Divide*, Good Things Campaign website, <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/the-digital-divide>

[14] *People's Network 20 years on*, Lorensbergs, <https://www.lorensbergs.co.uk/casestudiesandresearch/the-peoples-network-20-years-on/>

[15] *Ipsos MORI veracity index. Trust in professions survey 2021*, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-12/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2021-ipsos-mori_o.pdf

[16] *Libraries offer digital help for jobseekers*, Somerset County Council, 28th September 2020, <https://somersetnewsroom.com/2020/09/28/libraries-offer-digital-help-for-job-seekers/>.

misinformation? We were really pleased that libraries were mentioned in the recent government strategy on online media literacy^[17] – and that government provided some funding so we could develop a training module for library staff so they are better equipped to help their users^[18].

What libraries want to do is embed this approach in their day-to-day work, as they know they can reach more people this way. For example, they may help an elderly lady use Zoom so she can join her regular reading group – and they can ensure she knows how to use it safely. They can help the lady find information about her health condition and how she can identify reliable sources of information and what to watch out for from scammers or those spreading misinformation, and they can help her set up online access to her bank account and how to operate it securely.

The final Universal Library Offer is Culture & Creativity

For many people, the library is their gateway to culture – they can't afford theatre tickets or may feel intimidated to go to a museum or gallery – but the library is somewhere they can encounter cultural experiences in a familiar, comfortable and free environment.

This is a role that is finally being recognised by national arts funding organisations, who are now encouraging cultural organisations to work with libraries and are providing funding for libraries to run their own cultural programmes and to refurbish their spaces so that they can be used in flexible ways – such as shelving that can be rolled to one side to create a clear floor space for performances.

Libraries have long been cultural venues in their own right – with a strong tradition of literature events. But over the past few years the range of arts and culture they offer has blossomed.

For example, you can attend a library film show with special screenings designed for different groups – autism or dementia friendly, or welcoming to families and babies.

Libraries have exhibition spaces – not just for community arts projects but also for touring exhibitions, bringing well known artists into the hearts of communities.

There is also a lot of music in libraries and one of the most successful programmes is run by an organisation called Get it Loud in Libraries^[19] which puts on gigs with young musicians, who love performing in such a quirky venue as a library and attracting a really mixed audience – including young mums and dads who bring babies and grandparents along with them. Some of these musicians go on to very

[17] *Online media literacy strategy*, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 14th July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-media-literacy-strategy>.

[18] <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/media-and-information-literacy-module-resources-and-links>

[19] <https://getitloudinlibraries.com>

successful careers – one of the early gigs by Get it Loud in Libraries was with Adele, and the librarians had to run to the pub next door to borrow a bar stool for her to sit on while she sang!

So that is a quick gallop across the four Universal Library Offers, to give a sense of the type of library work they inspire and help innovate.

I want to end by looking at a very pressing current issue, to see how the Universal Library Offers help libraries mobilise quickly to provide their communities with the support they need.

Like many countries, the UK is experiencing a cost-of-living crisis and there is a lot of anxiety about people not being able to heat their homes or afford the basics of food, clothing and rent. In response, libraries have been thinking about what support they can offer and how this can be done in the open and non-judgemental way that all the library support is offered. They have been using the Universal Library Offer framework to help shape their work to create a multi-stranded programme:

- Books & Reading: libraries have stocked up on books about saving money and frugal cooking and growing your own food.
- Health & Wellbeing: they are creating a “warm welcome” to invite people in to feel physically warm and also comfortable and welcome, and are looking at schemes like providing recycled school uniforms, winter coats and toiletry packs.
- Information & Digital: the free Wi-Fi and internet access is more vital than ever, and libraries are also providing information sessions with expert advisers on useful topics like how to reduce home energy bills or manage debt.
- Culture & Creativity: using cultural activities to animate the library space so people feel welcome and comfortable to stay for a whole afternoon and enjoy themselves.

At a time of national crisis, the Universal Library Offers are helping libraries deliver valuable services.

SUMMARY

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The Universal Library Offers

The Universal Library Offers were launched in 2013 by Society of Chief Librarians (now called Libraries Connected). They provide a framework for public libraries to help deliver a comprehensive set of services for their communities. The four Offers are:

- Books & Reading,
- Health & Wellbeing,
- Information & Digital,
- Culture & Creativity.

The framework helps libraries plan their programmes, support staff training and development, and demonstrate the impacts of their services. At the national level they are a powerful tool to advocate for libraries, secure funding and partnerships, and help drive innovation.

KEYWORDS

libraries, reading, digital inclusion, health, wellbeing, creativity

STRESZCZENIE

ISOBEL HUNTER

Program Universal Library Offers^[20]

Program Universal Library Offers (Uniwersalna Oferta Bibliotek) został zainicjowany w 2013 r. przez Society of Chief Librarians (Stowarzyszenia Głównych Bibliotekarzy, obecnie Libraries Connected).

Pomaga on bibliotekom publicznym świadczyć kompleksowe usługi dla społeczności i obejmuje cztery obszary:

- książki i czytanie,
- zdrowie i dobrostan,
- informacje i zasoby cyfrowe,
- kultura i kreatywność.

[20] <http://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/universal-library-offers>

Oferta stanowi bazę dla planowania programów bibliotek, wspiera szkolenie i rozwój pracowników oraz pomaga unaocznić znaczenie usług bibliotecznych. Na poziomie krajowym program stanowi skuteczne narzędzie wspierania działań na rzecz bibliotek, zdobywania funduszy i partnerstw oraz napędza innowacje.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

biblioteki, czytanie, cyfrowa integracja, zdrowie, dobrostan, kreatywność

BIOGRAPHY

Isobel Hunter is the Chief Executive of Libraries Connected, the membership body for all public libraries in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies. Isobel's focus is on building expert communities of practice across the library sector, and empowering library leaders to develop their services to the benefit of their communities through providing training, toolkits, advocacy and evidence. She believes in the power of libraries to change people's lives and to build thriving communities.

Isobel initially trained as an archivist and worked with collections in London for 15 years including at the Wellcome Library, Marks & Spencer and The National Gallery. She then moved to development roles in the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, Arts Council England and The National Archives.

BIOGRAM

Isobel Hunter jest dyrektorką generalną Libraries Connected, stowarzyszenia zrzeszającego wszystkie biblioteki publiczne w Anglii, Walii, Irlandii Północnej i terytoriach zależnych Korony Brytyjskiej. Isobel zajmuje się przede wszystkim tworzeniem w ramach sieci bibliotek społeczności eksperckich zorientowanych na wymianę dobrych praktyk oraz wspieraniem osób zarządzających bibliotekami w kierunku rozwijania usług bibliotecznych świadczonych na rzecz społeczności. Jej pomoc polega na dostarczaniu szkoleń, narzędzi, wsparcia i sprawdzonych danych. Wierzy, że biblioteki mają moc zmiany ludzkiego życia i budowania prężnych społeczności.

Isobel początkowo kształciła się na archiwistkę i przez 15 lat pracowała przy zbiorach bibliotecznych w Londynie, między innymi w Wellcome Library, Marks & Spencer i National Gallery. Następnie zajęła się pracami rozwojowymi w takich organizacjach jak Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, Arts Council England i National Archives.