



# The value and impact of Scotland's libraries

**Main summary of findings**  
from primary and secondary  
school librarian surveys

Report authored by  
Éadaoin Lynch

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## Top-line synopsis

'A library is an ideal place ... to make everyone feel like they belong and to allow them to see themselves reflected in books.' – School librarian

Following surveys of both primary and secondary school librarians in Scotland, circulated between October 2023 and January 2024, Scottish Book Trust found that:

- School libraries run countless activities to **encourage reading for pleasure**, including book clubs, author visits, and events as part of Book Week Scotland.
  - 81% of responding primary school librarians, and 89% of responding secondary librarians, agreed their library provides opportunities for reading for pleasure 'often' or 'a lot'.
  - Moreover, 65% of primary school librarians, and 82% of secondary librarians, agreed their library **improves literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- School libraries are **key to providing digital devices and Wi-Fi**, supporting pupils' coursework, and building their digital literacy skills.
  - This is particularly essential in areas of high deprivation where many households do not have digital devices or Wi-Fi at home.
- School libraries **reach a diversified audience** (78% of primary librarians and 88% of secondary librarians agreed) and they provide **a safe space** (85% of primary librarians and 95% of secondary librarians agreed).
- School libraries are intrinsic to providing free and equal access to information, offering access to books for pupils, and therefore families, with no other provision, maintaining a safe, quiet, inclusive, welcoming warm space, and staffing the library with a non-judgemental, friendly librarian – all of which are important factors in attempting to **close the poverty-related attainment gap**:
  - 'Some pupils have a habit of absconding if they become overwhelmed, but these pupils are taught that instead of leaving the building they can go to the library, and they will be welcomed there without judgement.'

- School librarians are crucial leaders in **supporting media / digital literacy skills**, signposting pupils to **accurate information**, providing a **safe space** in school and **inspiring pupils** to widen their reading and knowledge.



In the same surveys, however, librarians reported increasing strain on their capacity, role and overall service provision, which prevent them from delivering on the benefits of their school library:

- Nearly 3 out of 5 (59%) secondary school librarians reported **restriction on funding / resources**, with a further 23% noting restrictions on dedicated school librarian (hours / remit), and another 21% citing restriction on dedicated library space.
  - '[The school is] currently looking for ways to make financial efficiencies and that seems to be by not buying books not supporting author visits not supporting the librarian or the English department requests for more books. I believe that the plan is to scrap school libraries.'
- Nearly half (47%) of secondary school librarians, and 21% of primary school librarians, reported their **pupils face digital poverty**.
- Some librarians noted that due to the constraints in budget and stock, they have resorted to **buying library books out of their own pocket**:

- 'I buy the books from 2<sup>nd</sup> [hand] stores and sites, I cannot afford whole sets, sad when a pupil loves a book and I can't afford to buy more. I buy from my wage not a budget as there is no budget for the library.'
- **Restricted access** and time in the library space has a knock-on effect on what service the librarian can offer.
  - 'Library is only open for 13 mins at lunchtime, whilst these [library] activities are offered not many take them up.'
  - 'It should be **the heart of the school** but it's viewed as an IT suite with books.'

School librarians are direct and clear in their account of the sector: they are passionate about their work, dedicated to their pupils, innovative and resourceful in their activity, and a stalwart correction to dis- and misinformation online. They are able to adapt to competing needs of the school curriculum, digital access, media literacy, stock demands and pastoral care.

They are also trying to function to the best of their ability while facing drastic funding cuts, a lack of buy-in from management or sector leaders, restrictions and demands on their dedicated library space, and very limited time – particularly for those librarians who are taking on the responsibility in addition to their teaching role.

The school librarians who are keeping their service going are often doing so alone or with few volunteers, on a shoestring budget, while managing competing priorities and with no guarantee that their effort or its results will be recognised.

The full impact of a library service cannot be measured in the short-term, yet budgets tend to be set on a yearly basis, creating a situation where libraries are working extra hard to meet their pupils' needs, but with dwindling resource.

Where the school library is stocked, staffed and supported appropriately, it inspires and empowers pupils of all ages, offers them a safe space, provides them digital access as well as the essential media literacy that should come with it, and equips them to engage with their democracy and create pathways out of poverty. Without

appropriate understanding or buy-in from those who support and fund the sector, however, the library as a service is reduced to the library as a stockroom.

## School libraries – benefits and barriers

According to the International Literacy Association, 'nearly three decades of research shows positive correlations between high-quality library programs and student achievement'<sup>1</sup>.

This is borne out by academic research from Robert Gordon University, which demonstrated school libraries' impact on higher test scores equating to academic attainment; successful curriculum or learning outcomes; and positive attitudes towards learning<sup>2</sup>.

BookTrust, the children's reading charity, further reported in 2022 that, as a result of their Life Changing Libraries programme (in which six primary schools in England were furnished with a bespoke library space and new stock):

'Attention, engagement, confidence and motivation to learn were all reported [by the schools] to have increased, and there were reports of improved academic achievement and/or more rapid academic progress since the libraries were installed.'<sup>3</sup>

School libraries also impart more than just academic achievement: Scottish Book Trust research on the impact of school librarians in Scotland found that 'library staff play a vital role in supporting pupil wellbeing and expanding their horizons'<sup>4</sup>.

The National Literacy Trust further reported in 2018 that 'children and young people who use the school library have, on average, higher mental wellbeing scores' – not only that but, pupils who don't use their school library are 'nearly twice as likely to have low mental wellbeing than they are to have high mental wellbeing'<sup>5</sup>.

Parents and caregivers rate school libraries highly for their positive impact – in 2023, a survey conducted by the National Literacy Trust showed that 'parents value school libraries regardless of their financial situation' and that more than 9 in 10 parents (92.3%) said 'their children having access to a good school library was important'<sup>6</sup>.

There have been calls for school libraries to obtain ring-fenced funding, or to become statutory requirements, led by literary figures such as Cressida Cowell (former Waterstone's Children's Laureate)<sup>7</sup> and Michael Rosen, children's author:

‘One of the curiosities of life is that schools are not obliged to have libraries, but prisons are. Step one, then, is to make it compulsory for schools, too. This has to be backed up with step two: ringfenced money to support schools’ libraries, along with the hiring and training of librarians.’<sup>8</sup>

However, the school library sector in Scotland has faced ten years and more of service reductions, which has left some local authorities with 'no libraries' and 'many with one [librarian] between two or more schools'<sup>9</sup>.

Scotland has over a quarter fewer schools with a dedicated member of staff for the library than the UK as a whole – 32% vs. 41%<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, 'only a quarter of schools in Scotland have a designated library budget compared with schools in England (25% compared to 36% in England)'<sup>11</sup>.

Scottish Book Trust (SBT) has been aware for some time of the barriers school libraries face – in May 2024, SBT published an article, 'Beyond books: School libraries as sources of safety, inclusivity, and wellbeing', which includes an advocacy kit for librarians that contains a poster graphic outlining 'Benefits of school libraries', a summary document of the most relevant impact studies of school libraries and a letter template to advocate for the school library<sup>12</sup>. These resources will remain available on the SBT website.

The findings below demonstrate that school libraries, particularly at secondary level, are being forced to adapt with little to no resource – whether as part of a service restructure, needing to seek funding from third parties, or being 'replaced' with digital provision. As one librarian fed back in the survey, '[the school's] plan is to go fully digital and delete the school librarian post'.

Despite this 'plan', existing research from the University of Strathclyde in 2022 found that 'more than half (57%) of GB adults disagree that digital services are an adequate replacement for traditional libraries'<sup>13</sup>. This is further reinforced by findings from a series of focus groups run in 2023: 'even with those who were strong users of digital services, we found overwhelming support for physical library services and the many benefits that come from such services'<sup>14</sup>.



In short, a library is not just a repository for books, it is a safe space with non-judgemental staff who are trained to find accurate information, a place to access digital devices and Wi-Fi, and a service that aids pupils in both their academic achievement and their mental wellbeing.

This report showcases the experience and insights from primary and secondary school librarians across Scotland, and how they aspire to maintain and improve their service and ensure their users reap the rewards of a well-supported library in the face of increased restrictions and decreased funding.

## Aims

Scottish Book Trust works across every local authority in Scotland, striving to offer opportunities for all people to tell their stories; as such, we are uniquely positioned to bear witness.

This research intends to showcase how public and school libraries address inequality across many intersections of Scotland's communities, through the following thematic approaches:

- Reading for pleasure
- Learning opportunities / closing the poverty-related attainment gap
- Digital inclusion
- Active citizenship

## Methods

This interim report details preliminary findings from the surveys completed by school librarians between October 2023 and January 2024. (Further findings from public librarian interviews, library user feedback, and quantitative data gathering will be available with the final report in early 2025.)

There was one survey each for public librarians, primary school librarians and secondary school librarians. The response rate was positive:

1. Public librarian survey – 315 responses total
2. Primary school librarian survey – 41 responses total
3. Secondary school librarian survey – 140 responses total

In-depth reports arising from these surveys are available on the Scottish Book Trust website.

A note on the term 'librarian': in this report, this term includes both qualified librarians and any other library staff seeking to support their service. School libraries are

staffed variably by pupil volunteers, teachers, school management, and/or career librarians, all of whom have fed into these findings. The breakdown of qualified and unqualified librarians in the quantitative research serves to indicate those who have had specialised training in information management – it is not a value judgement on the quality of any one service. As such, 'librarian' in this report indicates any school library worker.

Great School Libraries – a joint research project between CILIP, School Libraries Group and the School Library Association – published a report in 2023 that showed, across both Scottish primary and secondary schools, 'two thirds of school libraries ... have no library budget at all, and there are significant regional inequalities'<sup>15</sup>.

In 2023, there were 1,988 primary schools and 361 secondary schools in Scotland<sup>16</sup> – the collated school librarian findings represent approximately 2% of primary schools (41 responses total), and 39% of secondary schools (140 responses total).

The low proportions in this response rate for these findings (particularly at primary level) may account for what the Great School Libraries statistic anticipated: where two-thirds of schools do not have a library budget, there will more than likely be no library, and therefore no librarian, to participate in research surveys.

This summary document contains high-level findings and comparisons between the primary and secondary school librarian surveys.

## Main findings

### Provision for Scotland's school library services

'Aside from promoting a culture of reading for pleasure, it is vital to have an information professional at hand to offer advice on research and finding information. This is particularly important in an age where information (and misinformation) is in abundance.' – School librarian

Looking at primary and secondary school libraries in tandem, with the caveat that the responses represent 2% and 39% of their respective national total, a clear picture emerges of the differences between their provision and maintenance:

- 71% of secondary school respondents reported themselves as **qualified librarians**, compared to just 15% at primary level.
- 91% of secondary school respondents noted their library provision is managed by a **librarian**, compared to 24% at primary level.

Primary school respondents further cited **school staff** (49%), **volunteers** (27%), and **pupil assistants** (17%).

- Half of secondary school librarians (49%) have been working in their role for **10+ years**, compared to just 10% of primary school librarians.
- 87% of responding secondary schools receive **provision from their local authority**, compared to 71% of responding primary schools.

Both the primary and secondary school surveys sought to understand the role the respondents played in their school library service. Results were much more split compared to the [public librarian survey](#):

- 'I'm split between two schools so each school no longer has a fulltime librarian.'
- 'Restructure within the service meant school library assistant hours were removed. [...] Some secondary schools have only part-time staff.'

Looking at the roles occupied by school librarians in this way, there is an evident inconsistency across the sector, whether in terms of pay, time or quality of service. Many non-qualified library workers are going above and beyond to support and run their school library, often amid challenging circumstances. There is an acute lack of understanding of the true value and benefit of school libraries, which is leading to an undervaluing of the librarian post, combined with many schools choosing to limit or cut the library service altogether.

Nearly 3 out of 5 (59%) secondary school librarians reported **restriction on funding / resources**, with a further 23% noting restrictions on dedicated school librarian (hours / remit), and another 21% citing restriction on dedicated library space:

'[The school is] currently looking for ways to make financial efficiencies and that seems to be by not buying books not supporting author visits not supporting the librarian or the English department requests for more books. I believe that the plan is to scrap school libraries.'

Comparatively, 1 in 3 (29%) responding primary school librarians reported **restriction on funding / resources**, with a further 15% noting restrictions on dedicated school librarian (hours / remit), and another 12% citing the **loss of their dedicated school librarian**:

'At the moment our school doesn't have an in-school library. One of the reasons why the school library would be challenging to set up is the lack of adequate space and resources. Also, recently, the local library was shut down, which might have impacted young people and their ability to access books outside school.'

In addition to ongoing cuts faced by schools and their libraries, school librarians reported a widespread lack of understanding from colleagues and management about the value and impact of their service:

'I try my best as a librarian to provide students with transferrable skills – digital makers club / student library assistants, etc. – but I am mostly invisible to SMT [Senior Management Team]. I don't think they're aware what goes on.'

In an environment where space, time and budgets are being squeezed, many workers are facing their service being diminished:

'[The school library] should be the heart of the school but it's viewed as an IT suite with books.'

To best evidence the overall impact that school libraries provide, which is not captured in quantitative cost-based approaches, Scottish Book Trust's research focused on four primary themes: reading for pleasure; learning opportunities; digital inclusion; and active citizenship.



## Reading for pleasure

'We are all READERS but not every person is a reader of books and there are many different reasons behind that. I think we should encourage and celebrate reading across all formats, e.g. online articles, magazines, blogs, podcasts, videos [...]

I think there is also a place for reading for life skills to ensure that young people have the basic literacy skills to manage their home and working lives successfully. If they gain confidence in that, and libraries continue to offer a wide and accessible range of resources and services, they may discover a love of reading for enjoyment later in their lives.' – School librarian

The most popular **reading activity** in school libraries across Scotland reported by librarians were Book Week Scotland (47% of responding primary librarians; 74% of secondary), book clubs / cafés (24% primary; 66% secondary), storytelling sessions (35% primary; 22% secondary), and author visits (26% primary; 50% secondary).

Primary school librarians reported promoting children and young people's reading for pleasure with reading challenges / competitions (25% of responses), inspiring and diverse displays and stock (25%) and recommendations from pupils and staff (18%):

'Staff book club, where staff read and promote recent children's books. Posters of what staff are currently reading. Library helper scheme for older pupils, with first access to new books. A Battle of the Books-style house group quiz. A travelling book fair that gives commission to the school. Second-hand book sales. Regular book reviews between peers. Events for parents and infant children, like Books for Breakfast, where they share picture books before school. Storytelling for our associated pre-school. Book buddies between upper and lower school.'

Secondary school librarians reported their efforts to promote reading for pleasure through one-to-one engagement and bespoke support to pupils (55% of responses), book displays in the library or from staff (49%), timetabled reading time or library time (46%), book talks or author visits (26%) and bespoke book recommendations (24%):

'We are currently working towards our [Scottish Book Trust] Reading Schools Core Award and are hoping to get pupils to be Reading Ambassadors. We hold all school quizzes to tie in with national events, e.g. BWS [Book Week Scotland]. We have a small Book Group who meet weekly in the library. We have relevant displays to encourage pupils to borrow books. We tweet/'X' relevant book-related information. We have a library website that recommends books under different genres. We occasionally hold 'DEAR' [Drop Everything and Read] sessions and 'Keep the Heid and Read'. We host author visits.'

However, responses to this question also highlighted where school libraries were not promoting reading for pleasure, and why:

'Before funding was cut our librarian had an open access policy, brought in authors, planned workshops.'

When asked how often they **recommend reading to pupils**, primary librarians' responses ranged widely (9% 'never'; 29% 'occasionally / weekly'; 35% 'often / multiple times a week'; 27% 'daily / multiple times a day'), where well over half (63%) of secondary librarians noted 'daily / multiple times a day'.

Respondents were upfront about the barriers they face to further supporting pupil reading – in an open comment box of unlimited length for each survey, six key themes emerged:

- Time constraints (71% of responding primary librarians; e.g. library hours / staff time 66% of responding secondary)
- Capacity constraints (32% primary; 35% secondary)
- Insufficient resources or stock (18% primary; 24% secondary)
- Issues with pupil behaviour (23% secondary)
- Restricted access (17% secondary)
- Insufficient staff training (11% secondary)



These combined pressures have led to extremely concerning situations for some librarians:

'I buy the books from 2nd [hand] stores and sites, I cannot afford whole sets, sad when a pupil loves a book and I can't afford to buy more. I buy from my wage not a budget as there is no budget for the library.'

A further concerning issue was reported by some school librarians who are attempting to promote reading for pleasure and library time in a school where colleagues, including management, do not appreciate the value of libraries. When reflecting on the barriers faced in supporting pupil reading, one librarian noted:

'Lack of interest in books / reading from teaching staff; classes don't visit as much, preferring students to google everything on Chromebooks. SMT do not value the library service other than on paper (aspirations in SIP); they take little practical interest. I no longer have a library assistant. My library has just been reduced by 50% in size, and my budget looks to be vastly reduced – not sustainable.'

Reductions in library provision, both stock and budget, are overshadowed here by the librarian's cornered position in a school where they feel both their role and the services they offer are undervalued, and where the reality of reduced staffing, stock and funding is not reflected in the SIP (School Improvement Plan). It is not possible to build a reading culture while simultaneously dismantling its resource.



## Learning opportunities / closing the poverty-related attainment gap

'I have seen friendships develop and flourish after solitary pupils have made friends during lunchtime activities such as playing board games, or book club. These friend groups meet in the library most days at break time and lunchtime now and I see their individual confidence grow.' – School librarian

### **Curriculum-based learning**

In the primary school librarian surveys, the most popular additional opportunity offered for pupils was board games or games clubs (43% of responses). The same number of librarians indicated their service offered no such opportunities.

At secondary level, the most popular was also board games or games clubs (74%), followed by pupil librarian opportunities (65%), digital skills / computing and IT (55%), and the Curriculum Resources and Information Service (53%).

However, librarians also noted barriers to offering additional opportunities to their pupils:

'Library is only open for 13 mins at lunchtime, whilst these activities are offered not many take them up.'

'Library / information handling skills are no longer embedded in school culture. I took 15 students through [a nationally recognised award that records pupil achievement] but, one year on, nothing has been progressed by school. Comm Ed took on validation for me but still no awards for kids. Demoralising.'

3 in 5 primary school librarians – and 4 in 5 secondary school librarians – feel the library is **'quite' or 'very' important in providing additional opportunities** to pupils in their school.

When asked for comment on their choice, one librarian noted the library should be the 'heart' of the school:

'We are involved with the peer reading groups in school and a regular dyslexia group. It is important that the library is a welcoming and safe space and pupils

regard it as the 'heart' of the school. The space is well used before and after school and at break and lunch. The book group and Dungeons and Dragons are very well attended, and we would love to run more clubs but am conscious that we want to be available to all pupils too.'

### **Closing the poverty-related attainment gap**

No library can raise a child out of poverty or compensate for the barriers to learning they might face within and outwith their school – but all school libraries are crucial to offering a pupil the best chance of achieving those ends.

When asked how school libraries help (if at all) to close the poverty-related attainment gap, school librarians indicated four main metrics as to how the library service can help:

- Free and equal access to books
- Access to books for families with no other provision
- The library as a safe, quiet, welcoming, inclusive warm space
- Access to an unbiased, friendly librarian

Additional reflections included the benefits of reading for writing and language skills, encouraging reading for pleasure, and provision for the whole local authority.

The nature of poverty results in an absence of freely available support or resources to help people become informed and empowered. It's clear that many librarians feel their school library is intrinsic to providing equity of access, a safe space for pupils, and opportunities to develop greater skills, and they see these functions as a crucial part of addressing the poverty-related attainment gap.

When asked what barriers (if any) their service faces to helping close the poverty-related attainment gap, librarians were frank in pointing out that poverty is a structural issue the library cannot solve alone:

'The sheer scale of deprivation in our community means a lot of pupils don't see the point of trying to improve their education and opportunities.'

They also noted that changes or updates to their service to help combat poverty are impeded by inadequate funding and insufficient staffing:

'Up until January 2023 I worked there five days, and then the library funding was cut and I now only work two days within the school.'

If libraries are to help close the attainment gap, they need top-down support and a nuanced understanding of what they are designed to do. As one librarian put it:

'This is a massive question! In my opinion schools only play a very small part in this. Society needs help ... As a school we actively promote 'zero cost to the school day'... with all of what we have in place to support families we are still finding there is a poverty-related attainment gap.'



### Digital inclusion

'Many of our pupils don't have access to a PC / internet connection at home. Just today, I was talking to an S1 pupil who hadn't realised she could use the library PCs to do her homework. She doesn't have a computer at home and

had been worried about not getting her work done – the relief on her face was clear to see.' – School librarian

## **Digital poverty, access and support**

Nearly half (47%) of secondary school librarians, and 21% of primary school librarians, reported their **pupils face digital poverty**.

- 'Most pupils now have iPads supplied by the school. However there is still digital poverty at home such as not having internet access, not being able to afford electricity to run and charge devices. Also there is poor digital literacy in the earlier generations which is a knock-on effect of digital poverty. In [the local authority], the Librarians are not being given iPads to help the pupils despite asking at a higher level.'

Almost half of those who reflected further on this question reported that Wi-Fi or digital device access at home may be, or certainly is, an issue (45%).

2 in 5 (42%) secondary school librarians reported that their school provides pupils with digital devices:

'There are many pupils who can't effectively interact with the online environment to find information. Pupils lack the skills to discern bias and the reliability of information sources.'

All pupils in [the local authority] are issued with a Chromebook. Many pupils come to school with devices uncharged or devices left / lost at home which becomes a barrier to learning.'

Nearly all secondary school librarians (98%) felt it was 'very' or 'quite' important that the library service supports digital access / inclusion for pupils (78% of primary school librarians).

When asked for individual examples of how their library supports digital access, one librarian shared the clarifying story of their service's managed decline:

'I think it very important that the Library supports digital access. Unfortunately when the Library was moved to a much smaller space the opportunities to provide anything other than Wi-Fi access was removed. Thus making the library seem less important as somewhere to find information in the eyes of the students.'

Many secondary school pupils, particularly those in areas of deprivation (SIMD 1 and 2), rely on their school libraries to provide them with digital access and devices. Without that access, they face significant barriers to engaging with the curriculum, completing homework, upskilling their information literacy, or preparing for future education or employment. In other words, if school libraries are stripped of digital resources, access and support, there will be a long-term and significant negative impact on their pupils' attainment and progress.

### **Digital and media literacy**

43% of primary school librarians, and 55% of secondary school librarians, reported that their library currently supports pupils with media / digital literacy skills:

'Digital literacy lessons including website evaluation. Provision of reliable websites for research projects. Demonstration of online digital resources available on NLS website. Use of online library catalogue.'

'We actually talk about this in library lessons. I do a series of lessons about information literacy in P6 and P7, and I also talk about it if I see students doing their own research (e.g. we have a boy who is extremely into trains and was making his own PowerPoint). I recently bought a book called 'Killer Underwear Invasion' by Elise Gravel, which is an amazing graphic novel-style non-fiction book about fake news and misinformation on the internet.'

A number of librarians responding to the survey also reported their concern for the lack of media / information literacy support in their school:

'When Chromebooks came in (seven years ago) using the library for research went out. All 'research' is now googling on Chromebooks. I no longer deliver

information handling skills classes. I cannot afford subscriptions to online platforms that provide quality, age-specific resources.'

'We used to do comprehensive digital skills classes but due to staffing constraints I no longer have the time to plan and carry out these lessons. Now I just do little bits here and there if the opportunity arises and it is done very inconsistently. I was asked weeks ago to do a presentation on digital skills to senior pupils but was unable to due to time. As a second-best option, I agreed to make up a pack for pupils to use in their own time and I still haven't had time to do this because I have too much other work because staff numbers have been cut and workloads have increased on those of us who remain.'

The school library and the school librarian, due to lack of resource, are reportedly playing a diminishing role in helping young people to learn the skills to access and assess information, or identify disinformation – this is a worrying trend in a society and culture that is increasingly online.



## Active citizenship

'The library has a collection of books for all – with a real focus on diverse voices. I create displays promoting them throughout the year and talk about them with classes. Pupils feel seen and are then comfortable being their authentic selves in the library. I wear my LGBT+ ally and autism spectrum badges on my lanyard. The fact that the library regulars are such a diverse group shows that they feel valued and welcome.' – School librarian

Research clearly shows that public libraries operate as anchor institutions<sup>17</sup> for communities – in other words, public libraries reach diverse audiences, empower individuals with trusted, accurate information, offer safe spaces, and promote democratically engaged and informed communities<sup>18,19</sup>.

In the school librarian surveys, Scottish Book Trust asked questions to gather further evidence on each of these points: (1) reaching a diverse audience; (2) safe spaces; and (3) democratically engaged and informed communities.

This report reinforces the fact that school libraries **reach a diversified audience** (78% of primary librarians and 88% of secondary librarians agreed) and that they provide **a safe space** (85% of primary librarians and 95% of secondary librarians agreed).

When it came to the final metric, however, responses were inconsistent. The survey asked librarians to reflect on how often their library is a hub for student debate or discussion, and to agree/disagree with the statement 'libraries will open access to and build trust in public data to increase participation in the democratic process'.

In response, librarians were frank about the barriers they faced to this long-term goal:

- 'I'm a librarian – a solo worker – there's only so much I can do without burning out. Senior school is focussed on the exam diet and there is no room in the junior years either. I can do lots of jobs really badly or focus on the things that really count. Nearly half of our pupils have reading ages below their actual age. Many have reading ages of eight or under. Without helping raise their literacy levels they will be unable to make head or tail of information sources.'





## Final snapshot

To conclude the surveys, there were two matrix questions on a scale of 1 (no, not at all) to 5 (yes, a lot).

### **Primary school level**

- 92% of responding librarians agreed their library supports **access to books** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 42% agreed their library supports **digital devices / Wi-Fi** 'often' or 'a lot' – but 31% selected 'no, not at all'.
- 54% agreed their libraries are essential **warm spaces** 'often' or 'a lot'.

- Over 1 in 3 agreed their library supports **access to learning resources and training** 'often' or 'a lot' (35%) – but 27% selected 'no, not at all'.
- 58% agreed their library supports access to **trusted sources of information** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 73% agreed their library provides a **quiet space** at school 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 81% agreed their library provides opportunities for **reading for pleasure** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 35% agreed their library addresses **social isolation** 'often' or 'a lot' – but 23% selected 'no, not at all'.
- 38% agreed their library helps close the **poverty-related attainment gap** 'often' or 'a lot' – but 19% selected 'no, not at all'.
- 65% agreed their library **improves literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 42% agreed their library develops **media / information literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 54% agreed their library addresses **mental health and wellbeing** support 'often' or 'a lot'.
- Just 35% agreed their library helps **tackle poverty and the cost-of-living crisis** 'often' or 'a lot'. 31% selected 'no, not at all'.

What emerges here is a picture where primary school libraries appear to be treated and evaluated on the basis of reading skills and comprehension, and the library's function as a service that offers holistic, person-centred provision, or media or information literacy, is not consistently represented or felt.

### **Secondary school level**

- 91% of responding librarians agreed their library supports **access to books** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 78% agreed their library supports **digital devices / Wi-Fi** 'often' or 'a lot'.

- 84% agreed their libraries are essential **warm spaces** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 74% agreed their library supports **access to learning resources** and **training** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 79% agreed their library supports access to **trusted sources of information** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 83% agreed their library provides a **quiet space** at school 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 89% agreed that their library provides opportunities for **reading for pleasure** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 74% agreed their library addresses **social isolation** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 64% agreed their library helps close the **poverty-related attainment gap** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 82% agreed their library **improves literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 50% agreed their library develops **media / information literacy** 'often' or 'a lot'.
- 81% agreed their library addresses **mental health and wellbeing** support 'often' or 'a lot'.
- Just 42% agreed their library helps **tackle poverty and the cost-of-living crisis** 'often' or 'a lot' – 28% noted it helped 'moderately'.

These findings illustrate that many secondary school libraries are primarily directing their increasingly limited resources towards literacy and mental health and wellbeing. Societal issues, such as tackling poverty, or closing the poverty-related attainment gap, are too big for a school library to address in isolation, however, libraries can and do make a huge contribution to the whole-school strategy to address these issues. School libraries are in many cases pupils' only point of access for holistic support.

## Conclusion

School librarians are direct and clear in their account of the sector: they are passionate about their work, dedicated to their pupils, innovative and resourceful in their activity, and a stalwart correction to dis- and misinformation online. They are able to adapt to competing needs of the school curriculum, digital access, media literacy, stock demands and pastoral care.

They are also trying to function to the best of their ability while facing drastic funding cuts, a lack of buy-in from management or sector leaders, restrictions and demands on their dedicated library space, and very limited time – particularly for those librarians who are taking on the responsibility in addition to their teaching role.

The school librarians who are keeping their service going are often doing so alone or with few volunteers, on a shoestring budget, while managing competing priorities and with no guarantee that their effort or its results will be recognised.

The full impact of a library service cannot be measured in the short-term, yet budgets tend to be set on a yearly basis, creating a situation where libraries are working extra hard to meet their pupils' needs, but with dwindling resource.

Where the school library is stocked, staffed and supported appropriately, it inspires and empowers pupils of all ages, offers them a safe space, provides them digital access as well as the essential media literacy that should come with it, and equips them to engage with their democracy and create pathways out of poverty. Without appropriate understanding or buy-in from those who support and fund the sector, however, the library as a service is reduced to the library as a stockroom.

*Scottish Book Trust recommendations will be published with the final reporting arising from this research project in 2025.*

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