



Youth

Engagement

Network

**Luton Libraries**

# Introduction

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**“This was a lovely experience... I am proud to be a part of it.”**

**(I’ve been inspired to) “help others to cooperate with each other and find new friends.”**

***Young people at Luton Central Library***

**Luton Libraries** is run by Active Luton, a community wellbeing trust. There are five libraries in this service, with the recently refurbished Luton Central Library being the largest.

**ASCEL’s Youth Engagement Network** supports the voices of all children and young people including from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who identify as LGBTQIA+ and disabled and D/deaf children and young people, ensuring they are represented in libraries across England.

In this pilot phase, 7 library services tested co-creative approaches with young people aged 11-13, to engage them with the library and give them the opportunity for their thoughts and ideas to be heard.



# Aims

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## The Youth Engagement Network pilot programme:



### Ensures young people have power in libraries

By giving young people a genuine opportunity to influence their local library's services, they build confidence, self-esteem and have fun. Libraries benefit from their insight and ideas.



### Makes opportunities to co-create

Young people co-create activities and shape the services on offer at their local library. They have the opportunity to co-create the national network and influence sector policy and decision-making across the country.



### Gives chances to learn something new

Young people have the opportunity to learn new skills and gain understanding about working in a library. Library teams learn new skills in co-creation and youth engagement, and how to tailor their services to meet the needs of the young people in their community.



### Supports libraries across the country

The national network builds positive relationships between libraries and young people across the country, where open dialogue, continual cyclic feedback and a genuinely inclusive approach are embedded. The libraries taking part were also part of a pilot network, which offered support, ideas-exchange and opportunity to reflect.

# Youth Engagement at Luton Central Library



**Luton Central Library** serves a population of around 218,000 people and the town itself has a rich cultural heritage. The Community Librarian has considerable experience working with children and saw the Youth Engagement Network programme as an opportunity to meaningfully connect with 11-13 year olds; an age-range that don't typically come to the library often. She also wanted to link the programme to the refurbishment of the library building, giving the young people a chance to explore the new space and contribute creatively to its development.

- ▶▶▶ **Working with partners:** Luton Central Library approached a local secondary school librarian, who identified some students that would benefit from being involved with the Youth Engagement Network programme. Early on in the process, they also connected with a local arts practitioner to support the young peoples' creative activities.
- ▶▶▶ **Exploring as a team:** The Community Librarian encouraged the young people to explore ideas. The group quickly decided they wanted to focus on an artistic activity. To spark further ideas, the young people were given a tour of the refurbished library space.
- ▶▶▶ **Learning new skills:** The library team and creative practitioner introduced the young people to new artistic techniques, something that the young people stated they enjoyed in their feedback. A few also said they were inspired to take Art as a GCSE in the future.

- **Understanding the library:** During their time in the library, the young people were encouraged to reflect on the role of the library service within the community. One young person fed back that one new thing they'd learnt was "that so many people love books", and another said they'd learnt the "importance of the library for all age groups".
- **Building teams:** A key aspect of the youth engagement work for Luton Central Library was supporting the young people with developing communication skills and operating as a team. To create their final artwork for the library wall, they needed to ask questions and work together, something that many highlighted in their feedback as being a skill they developed during this work.



- **Considerations:** To ensure the young people got the most from their experience, the library team:
- Encouraged them to ask questions and be curious.
  - Enlisted the help of an external expert to support with delivering the co-created activities.
  - Gave the young people an exclusive tour of the library building during refurbishment, to give them ownership of the space.
  - Encouraged exploration of ideas and experimenting with approaches.
  - Opened up new experiences to the young people, such as working with art materials they'd never used before.

# Impact

**“Many (of the young people) noted how great Central Library was and were keen to return via work experience, art competitions or by becoming a regular member.”**

*Team member, Luton Central Library*

## Successes

- 7 sessions with a group of 10 young people
- Young peoples' communication and team-working skills improved
- Young people felt more ownership of their library
- All young people said they were proud of what they'd achieved
- All young people said they felt more welcome at the library than they did before
- All young people said they felt included in the co-creative process
- Library team were able to witness the young peoples' change in opinion directly, which had real impact.

## Challenges

- The library team, and some of the young people, wished they had more time to spend on the activities.
- The timing of the summer holidays made it challenging to coordinate the launch of the young peoples' artwork.

# Recommendations



## **Consider your timeline**

Young people often have other commitments, which need to be factored into the work to ensure its long-term success. Remember to incorporate school holiday dates into your plans.



## **Enlist expert support**

Let the young people explore activities that interest them, then find expert partners who can support with the delivery of these activities. Their knowledge and expertise can really enrich the experience. Make sure these partners are familiar with co-creative techniques, so they can fully support with this work.



## **Be aware that things change**

The Community Librarian left the library service before the pilot phase of this work was complete. Luton Central Library were prepared for this and ensured a smooth handover with minimal disruption to the young people.



## **Give young people ownership**

Through exploring the library space (and creating artwork for it) the young people began to take ownership of the space. This is a powerful way to encourage young people to see the library as a place that's 'for them' and which they can help to shape.

**“Many told us that they plan to visit more with their families and show off their work. Some even mentioned that they want to help the library further in the future.”**

*Library team feedback, Luton Central Library*

*Study written and published by ASCEL / Luton Libraries*