

**The Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians (ASCEL) response to the Independent Report on Public Libraries**

ASCEL is the national network of managers of children’s public and schools library services. Our aim is to support library authorities to deliver excellence in library services for children, young people and schools. We work together to stimulate children’s library and school library service development; contribute to national debates around children’s and young people’s reading; build national partnerships; work on new initiatives; and provide support and skills sharing for members.

**Summary of ASCEL’s response**

* ASCEL generally welcomes the recommendations in the report but would like to have seen a greater emphasis on the role of libraries in supporting children and young people.
* We would particularly like to highlight libraries’ role in supporting children in the early years and those experiencing the challenges of poverty.
* We support the recommendation of a national digital resource for libraries but regret the lack of investment as yet to support this. ASCEL’s recently commissioned research into children’s digital needs and libraries supports the digital recommendations of this report.
* ASCEL supports the establishment of a Task and Finish force and would like the opportunity to contribute expertise to the group.
* ASCEL would like the Children’s Promise/Children‘s Library Journeys offer to be embedded within the strategic framework.
* ASCEL would encourage the Task and Finish Force to develop a national evidence of impact framework.
* ASCEL recognises an urgent need for workforce development and particularly the need for specialist skills in children’s reading; literacy and language development.
* ASCEL recognises opportunities for partnership models to deliver library services.
* ASCEL would welcome investment in the library “space” for children.

**1: General reflections**

In general ASCEL supports the key recommendations and welcomes the recognition in the report for libraries’ role in supporting literacy and learning; digital literacy and fluency; empowerment; community engagement and economic development. In particular we are pleased to see acknowledgement of the benefits children and young people gain from engaging with libraries and that a “re-energised library network” (which includes school library services) “would be an established and natural partner for every school”.

However ASCEL is disappointed that the impact of library services on children and young people did not have a higher profile throughout the report and strongly urge the proposed Taskforce to take a special interest in the significance of library services for children and young people. Children’s use of libraries is sustaining despite the challenges libraries and communities face in making services available - the recent CIPFA data shows that children’s fiction loans on 2013/2014 are actually 5.7 per cent greater than they were in 2004/2005 and this year’s Summer Reading Challenge reached a record 839,627 children. Children still need and want to use libraries.

Public libraries are crucial to enabling children to have the best start in life as the Effective Provision of Pre-school and Primary Education research (EPPE Project, DfES) has identified. Public libraries’ work in the early years through rhyme times, parenting support, delivering Bookstart and through extensive partnerships helps to lay the foundations for early language, literacy, emotional and social development and contributes to a wide range of school readiness indicators. School readiness is a specific aim of many local authorities and a key aspect of one of the [seven priorities](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/366852/PHE_Priorities.pdf) for the next five years of Public Health England (released in October 2014).

In the primary phase, public libraries and schools library services already work alongside schools and parents to actively support the development of literacy and reading for pleasure. The partnership with schools is inhibited only by lack of funding and capacity in both public and schools library services.

Public libraries also have a growing volunteer offer for young people, not just during the Summer Reading Challenge (which had just under 8,000 young volunteers in 2014), but also year round as IT buddies, participating in Takeover Day; World Book Night givers etc.

As children and young people become more independent, access to library services becomes more of an issue, especially in areas of deprivation. The (soon to be published) headline report from the CIPFA Children’s Public Library User survey 2013/2014 highlights that children in the more deprived areas are more likely than children in the least deprived areas to use libraries, and are also less able to travel to reach far flung libraries. With school library services closing or under threat and budget reductions also hitting school libraries, access to reading and resources can be limited for these children and young people. The [Read On Get On](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/reading?UK1011001&utm_campaign=ukreading&utm_medium=ppc&utm_source=ukreadingpetitionppc2015&sissr=1) campaign emphasises the importance of reading as a way of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. For these children and young people the importance of an accessible high quality library offer is vital.

With the right investment and national and local government vision and support, libraries could make a huge difference to the nation’s children.

**2: ASCEL’s response to specific recommendations**

A: The provision of a national digital resource for libraries

ASCEL welcomes this and believes it is urgently needed. ASCEL regrets that there is no announcement of investment to support the recommendations of the report. Wi-Fi in libraries and improved access combined with on-going skills development supporting the Society of Chief Librarian’s (SCL) current work on digital leadership are essential elements of a national digital resource.

ASCEL has recently been funded by Arts Council England to conduct research into children’s digital needs and libraries. Key recommendations in the [report](http://www.ascel.org.uk/News/Media/file/Children%27s%20Digital%20Needs%20-%20ASCEL%2017%2011%202014%20FINAL%20w%20ACE.PDF) compiled by research consultancy Shared Intelligence support the recommendations of the Independent Report. For example our research recommended recognising and developing the role libraries have in helping children achieve digital literacy and fluency; giving children the skills to stay safe online; improving access to technology for all children; supporting parents to understand how children are using technology; and expanding creative digital activity around reading for pleasure. The UK is facing a technological skills shortage (highlighted by government and through the work of the LEPs) and libraries really are well placed to offer support and courses to young people, especially those at risk of becoming NEET. Libraries should be (and, in a lot of places, are) offering specialist opportunities and activities such as coding clubs to support the STEM agenda in education.

.B: Establishing a Task and Finish Force led by local government, in partnership with other bodies involved in the library sector, to provide a strategic framework for England

ASCEL supports this idea and we request the opportunity to contribute to the Task Force. ASCEL’s expertise would ensure that children’s voices will be represented on the Task Force. ASCEL also has strong partnerships, locally as well as nationally with those working in education and children’s services

We hope that the strategic framework for England will recognise ASCEL’s [Children’s Promise](http://www.ascel.org.uk/News/Media/file/ASCEL%20Children%27s%20Promise%20%28March%202014%29.docx) alongside SCL’s five Universal Offers. ASCEL has been recently funded by Arts Council England to research and make recommendations for a national offer to children encompassing key interactions with libraries at different stages of their lives. We want to ensure that the Task Force are aware of this “Children’s Library Journeys” research and endorse it.

ASCEL is very pleased that the report recommends national marketing and branding. We believe that this will be significant in improving use and awareness of library services and SCL’s current work on the single digital presence will be key to this. For harassed parents and carers having a single point of access which gives them easy signposting to local services will make life much simpler and a single recognised brand for a library service will give a more professional, dynamic and coherent image and we hope that the Task Force will be able to influence local government and other library governance structures to support this approach.

Evidence of the impact of library services is patchy. ASCEL would urge the Task Force to look at drawing together a robust research and evidence framework across services to give a clear national picture of the impact of library services on communities especially on children and their families, particularly in terms of literacy and language, early years development, social and emotional development, lifelong learning, economic and digital skills.

C: To encourage and develop the library workforce and especially new recruits and graduates

ASCEL welcomes this recommendation, and supports the idea of librarians as “community impresarios”. ASCEL is very concerned about the lack of new graduates entering the profession, but is also realistic about the reasons for this – the negative press around the future of libraries will have to be tackled if we are to inspire young people to make public libraries their career. If the recommendations in the rest of the report can be achieved; libraries could provide amazing career opportunities for innovative young people.

ASCEL wishes to emphasise how important it is for libraries to have specialist experts in children’s reading and books, language, learning and literacy development.

D: Community Engagement

i: Volunteers and community run libraries

ASCEL is very pleased that the need for skilled staff is recognised by this report. We also support the need for greater cohesion between different types of library. This is particularly true for children and young people less able to travel to different libraries who should not have to accept a lesser quality of service from their library just because of where they live.

ii: Community hubs

ASCEL is also interested in the emphasis in the report on the library as a space and libraries as community hubs. We believe more investment is required not only in digital aspects of service but also in the physical space to ensure libraries are welcoming places for children. We also support partnerships with youth groups, clinics, schools and children’s centres to deliver shared services from one space.

Sarah Mears

Chair ASCEL

@ASCELUK

www.ascel.org.uk

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