



School Library Services Research Report

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SLS Research Report: Executive Summary

School Library Services (SLS) in England provide a range of exceptional services. Book loans underpin all areas of the curriculum across all phases. Advisory services support and enhance teacher knowledge and skills. The services provided by SLS cannot be found elsewhere and without them classrooms are impoverished. SLS offer value for money and should be supported at local and national level.

Forty three staff representing thirty-nine SLS responded to our survey.

24 SLS are part of the Library Service in their area, 6 part of the Education Service, 5 part of a different council service and 4 are independent.

36 SLS receive funds through **school subscription**. 11 SLS receive some **Local Authority** funding. Most SLS have multiple sources of income.

39 SLS provide a loan service for **primary schools**. 26 SLS provide a loan service for **secondary schools**.

The number of schools served by SLS ranges between **12 and 480**. The majority of SLS serve between 20 and 120 schools. The full time equivalent of staff employed by each SLS ranges from **1-19.6**.

Book loans are the most common service, followed by **advice and consultation, book awards and artefact loans**.

The **ratio of SLS staff** to number of schools served ranges from 1:7 to 1:43

SLS strengths:

- *meeting school needs*
- *communication and relationships*
- *range and quality of resources*
- *range and quality of services*
- *high calibre staff*

100% of respondents agreed that their SLS contributed positively to teaching and learning.

100% agreed that users valued their SLS.

Opportunities to develop:

- *profile and reach*
- *service and stock*

75% said that their SLS was valued in the local area.

74% said that their SLS was well resourced.

Risks to SLS:

- *threats to financial security*
- *threats to service quality*
- *changing school contexts*

26% of respondents said that their SLS was adequately staffed.

60% said that their SLS was financially secure in the short term.

9% said that their SLS was financially secure in the long term.

Key ingredients for a successful SLS



Recommendations

For SLS: A number of different models are running successfully; we cannot recommend a ‘one-size’ SLS to fit all contexts as local opportunities and needs vary. Sharing best practice among an SLS network will likely be highly beneficial; a priority is to identify ways to raise the profiles of SLS in their local areas.

For organisations representing SLS: SLS offer support, advice and resources to schools that cannot be replicated elsewhere. SLS need support in building local networks and marketing their services; advocacy at national and local level is essential.

For policy makers: SLS offer excellent value for money and significantly support teaching, learning and curriculum delivery. Only a small proportion of SLS are confident that they are financially secure and therefore sustainable in the long term. If SLS are lost it will not be possible to replace them. They are a public service that should be maintained, promoted and valued for the expertise and resources they provide.



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Background context

In the 1980s and early 1990s School Library Services (SLS) were typically part of the offer to schools in every English Local Authority and provided a range of book loan services to enhance school library stock and to add resource to different curriculum areas. Qualified librarians provided advice and expertise for schools and both primary (age 5-11) and secondary (11-18) schools were entitled to the service. In most cases these services were run and managed as part of the public library service, although in some cases they were part of the Education service (Heeks and Kinnell, 1992). In either case, they were part of an entitlement to books and resources for teaching and learning provided centrally in each area, thus offering equal access to all schools within the local authority.

In 2024 this is no longer the case. A series of policy changes have affected School Library Services both directly and indirectly over the last 40 years. The organisational structures of state schooling in the United Kingdom have changed considerably; Local Authority control has declined, and Academy Trusts now manage 43.5% of all schools and educate 56.2% of pupils (gov.uk). Locally funded support services to schools began to be at risk as the budget awarded to Local Authorities declined in the 1990s due to the policy of Local Management of Schools. The Academies Act of 2010 compounded this decline by incentivising schools to 'opt-out' of Local Authority control and manage more of their own budgets. Public library services have also been at risk in recent years due to austerity measures designed to reduce public sector funding. Funding for public libraries has fallen by 47.9% since 2010 (Kelly, 2023) and these twin issues have affected School Library Services leading to closures and reductions in service.

Until 2005, data about library services to schools was regularly collected by the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) at Loughborough University, (Creaser and Maynard, 2005) but in the last twenty years no information has been collected. This meant that there was no reliable information to indicate how many SLS were running, how they were funded, how they were staffed, what their offer to schools was or how many schools they served. The current research on behalf of the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) was designed to address this lack of information, to explore the perspectives and experiences of staff working in SLS and to support the future development and resilience of SLS.

Research aims

- To create a database of key information about existing SLS
- To identify how SLS are funded, managed and staffed, the services they offer and the number of schools they serve
- To identify opportunities and risks experienced by SLS
- To identify essential factors that contribute to a successful SLS

Method

Online survey design

Two online surveys were designed to meet the aims of the study. Both were created and administered using JISC online surveys.

The first survey was for SLS staff, named *ASCEL School Library Services* and questions were asked about the size, reach, organisation and the services offered by each SLS. Drawing on a pilot survey which had 24 responses which had been circulated to SLSs in autumn 2023, we developed questions about the nature of the services offered. The survey comprised 30 questions which were mainly multiple choice, with one Likert scale set of choices and four free text questions.

The second survey was for librarians and children's librarians working in the Public Library Service, named *Library Services for Children and Young People* in areas where there was no SLS. The purpose of this survey was to identify any services to schools that may be being provided by public libraries, and to find out when and why former SLS had closed. The survey consisted of 20 multiple choice questions.

Online survey distribution

The survey *ASCEL School Library Services* was sent to 73 e mail addresses where we believed, from information provided by ASCEL that there might be an SLS operating. The survey was also shared by ASCEL. The survey *Library Services for Children and Young People* was sent to public librarians in local authority areas for which there was no evidence of an SLS. Local Authority websites were used to find contact details and information about SLS. The survey was also shared by ASCEL and by Libraries Connected.

Case study identification

Case studies of six SLS were carried out. SLS which had responded to the survey were categorised by geographical area (North, South, East and West), by size (small, medium and large) by location (urban and rural) and by management (Library Service, Education Service or Independent). Eight SLS representing different categories were invited to participate in an interview, of which six agreed. Participants chose whether they would prefer to be interviewed in-person or online; we held four interviews online and two in-person.

Case study interviews

Once an interview date had been arranged, participants were sent a topic guide in advance of the interview. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Interviews were designed to further explore questions which had been raised in the survey and to enable a more nuanced understanding of the unique contexts in which each SLS is working. Participants were asked about a typical year for the service, the physical spaces available to them, the communities they serve, the challenges they face and what they considered to be the heart of their service.

Analytical approach

The quantitative survey data has been analysed descriptively using MS Excel. The free-text questions from the survey were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). For each question, individual responses were coded, then grouped within parent codes. Parent codes were used to generate themes in answer to each question.

Findings

Where are SLS running currently?

We received 43 responses to the survey *ASCEL School Library Services* representing 39 School Library Services. In four cases two members of staff responded to the survey. In response to the survey *Library Services for Children and Young People* we received 74 responses, of whom 64 stated there was no SLS in their area and 2 stated that they did not know. Six respondents gave the name of a SLS in their area, of which five had responded to survey 1. An additional SLS was mentioned by a respondent in a later question.

We therefore have confirmation that 41 SLS are operating, with specific details about 39 of them. There are likely to be services in other areas who did not complete either survey. Our search of council and library services websites suggests that there are at least a further 16 SLS running currently. All SLS that we have identified (n=57) are listed with website URLs in Appendix 1 and their locations are depicted in the Figures 1 to 6.



Figure 1 The locations of all SLS identified (n=57).

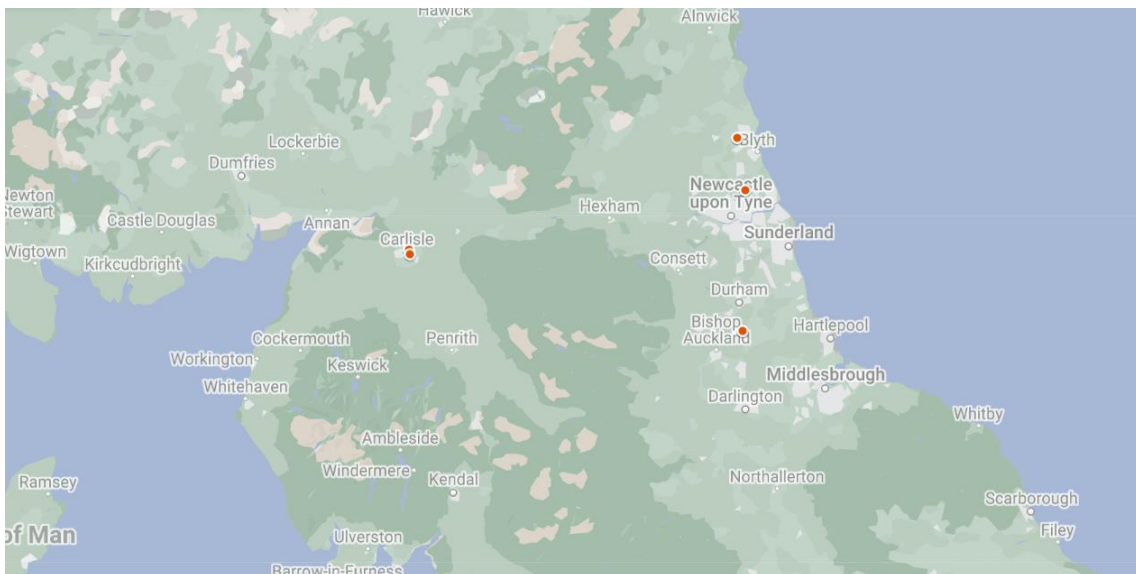


Figure 2 The locations of SLS in the far North of England.

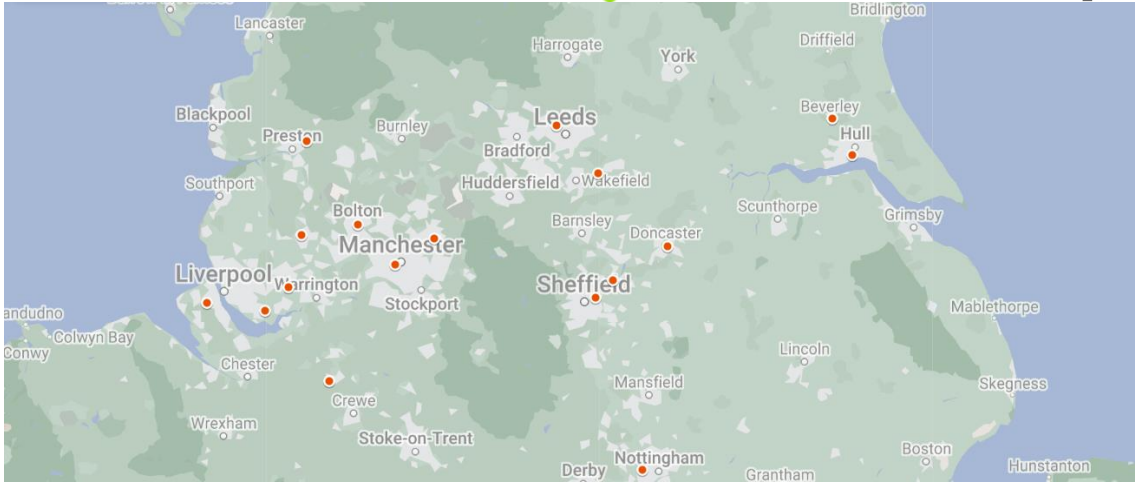


Figure 3 The locations of SLS in the North of England.

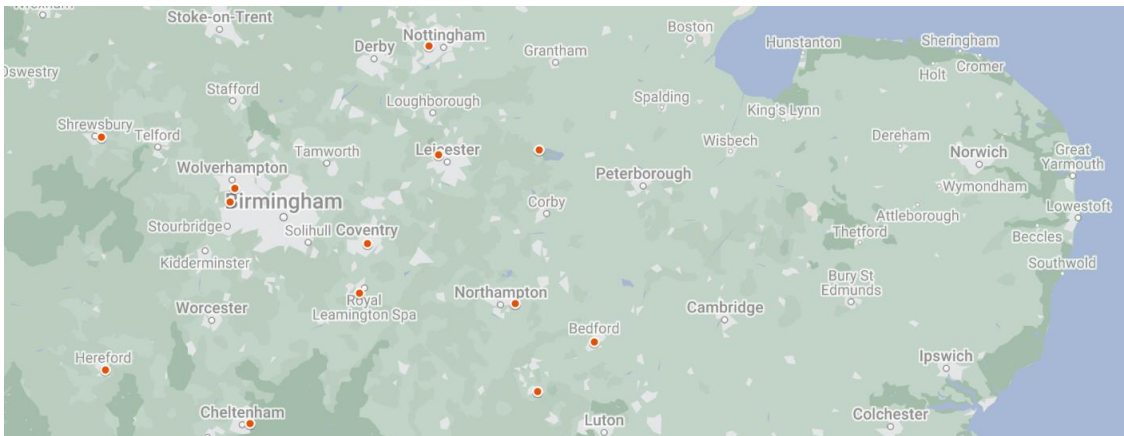


Figure 4 The locations of SLS in the Midlands and the East of England.

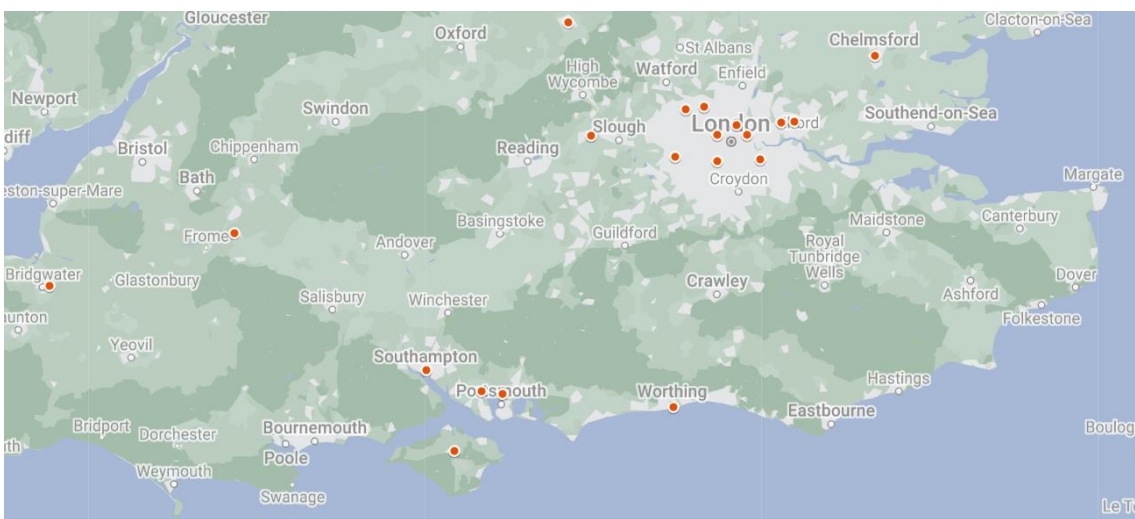


Figure 5 The locations of SLS in London and the South of England.



Figure 6 The locations of SLS in the South West of England.

An interactive map containing this information is available at <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1vIdD5-oD4vetlpWqDJ-rCcI5LE1tSQ4&usp=sharing>

Of the 64 respondents who stated that there was no SLS in their area 57% said that the SLS had closed more than 5 years ago and 35% said they did not know. 9% of SLS had closed in the last five years.

Of the 39 SLS for which we have specific data there was a roughly equal division between the number of SLS whose service covers 30 miles or below, and those covering more than 30 miles. 6 services covered an area of 0-10 miles, 12 covered 10-30 miles, 7 covered 30-50 miles and 14 over 50 miles. These data are displayed as percentages in Figure 7.

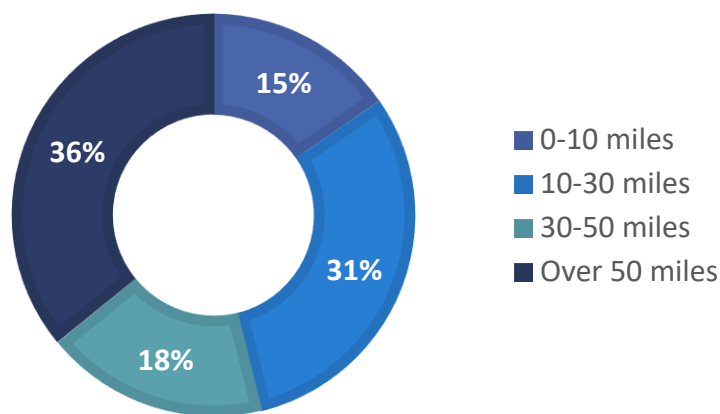


Figure 7 The percentage of SLS whose service covers each mileage range.

The number of schools served by each SLS ranges from 12 to 480. The average number of schools served per SLS is 117, however there is considerable variability as can be seen in Figure 8.

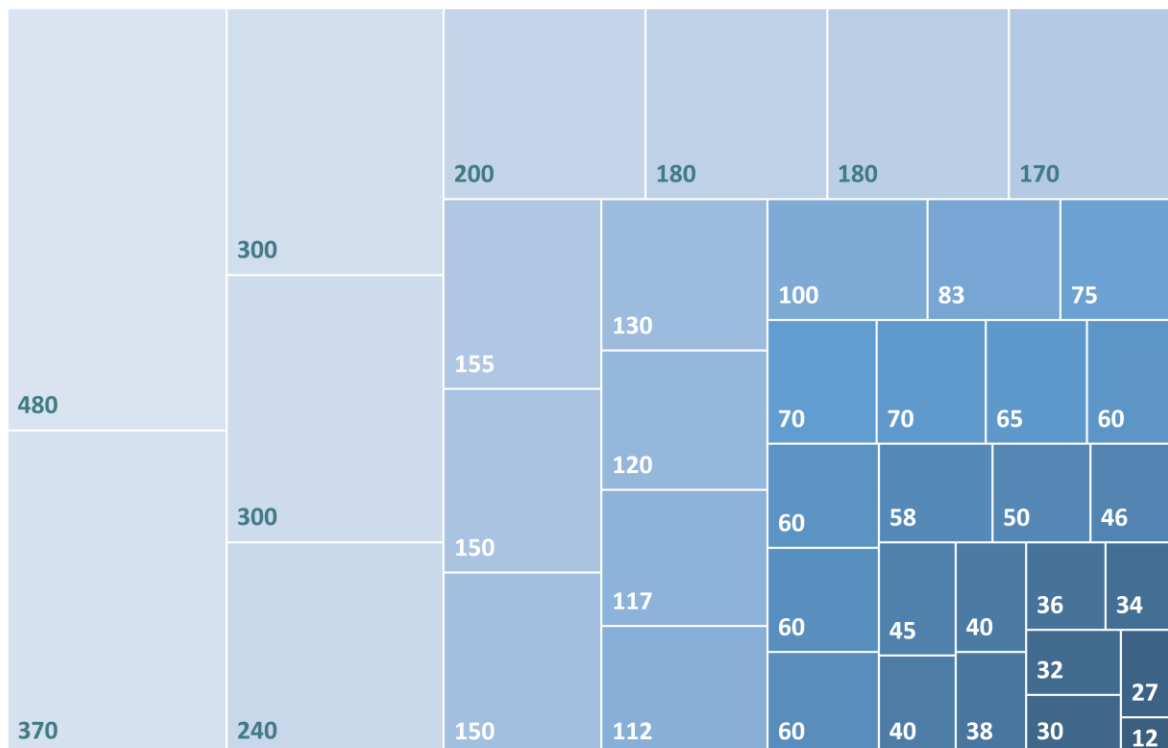


Figure 8 The number of schools served by each SLS.

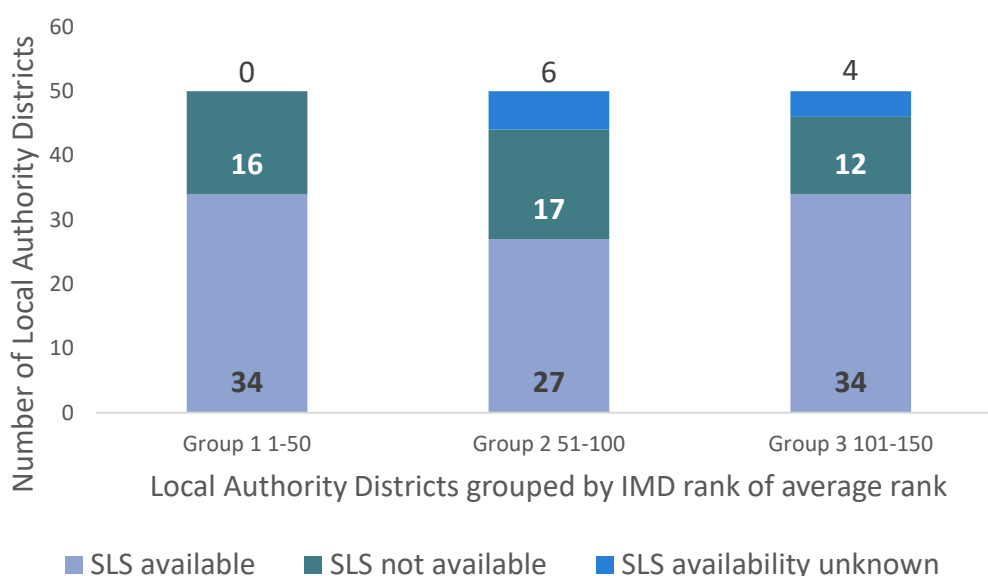


Figure 9 The availability of SLS and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (2019) Rank of Average Rank (Grouped; 1 to 50 = lowest).

Figure 9 shows the availability of SLS in relation to IMD Rank of Average Rank (RAR) score, for ease of analysis we have grouped the 150 Local Authority Districts (LADs) into three groups according to their ranking. Group one, includes LADs with RAR scores between 1 and 50, indicating greater deprivation. Group two, includes LADs with RAR scores between 51 and 100. Group three, includes LADs with RAR scores between 101 and 150, indicating lower levels of deprivation. The groups show a similar pattern with an SLS being available in approximately two thirds of the LADs. It is notable that 16 LADs in group 1 and 17 LADs in group 2 do not currently have an SLS available to them. In group 1 there is availability data for all LADs, however in groups 2 and 3 there are approximately one fifth of LADs for which it is not known whether or not there is an SLS available.

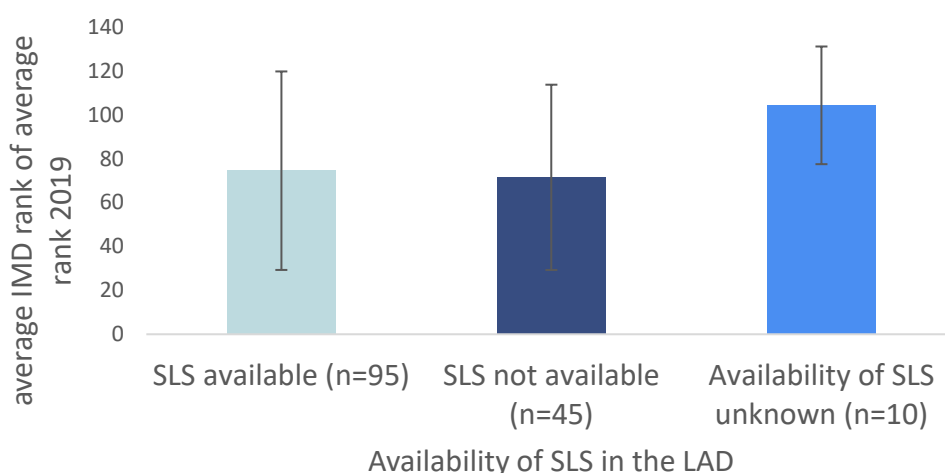


Figure 10 The average Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) average rank in 2019 and the availability of a School Library Service (SLS) in the Local Authority District (LAD). Error bars are Standard Deviations. N=number of local authority districts.

Figure 10 also shows the IMD data but in a different way. Here the LADs are grouped according to whether or not there is an SLS available, then average IMD RAR scores have been calculated and plotted. The error bars represent the standard deviations and therefore indicate the amount of variability in the data within each grouping. It can be seen that the average IMD RAR scores are very similar for the LADs which do have an SLS (average score 74.5) and for those which do not have an SLS available to them (average score 71.5). The average IMD RAR score is higher (indicating lower deprivation) in those LADs for which availability of SLS is not known (average score 104.3).

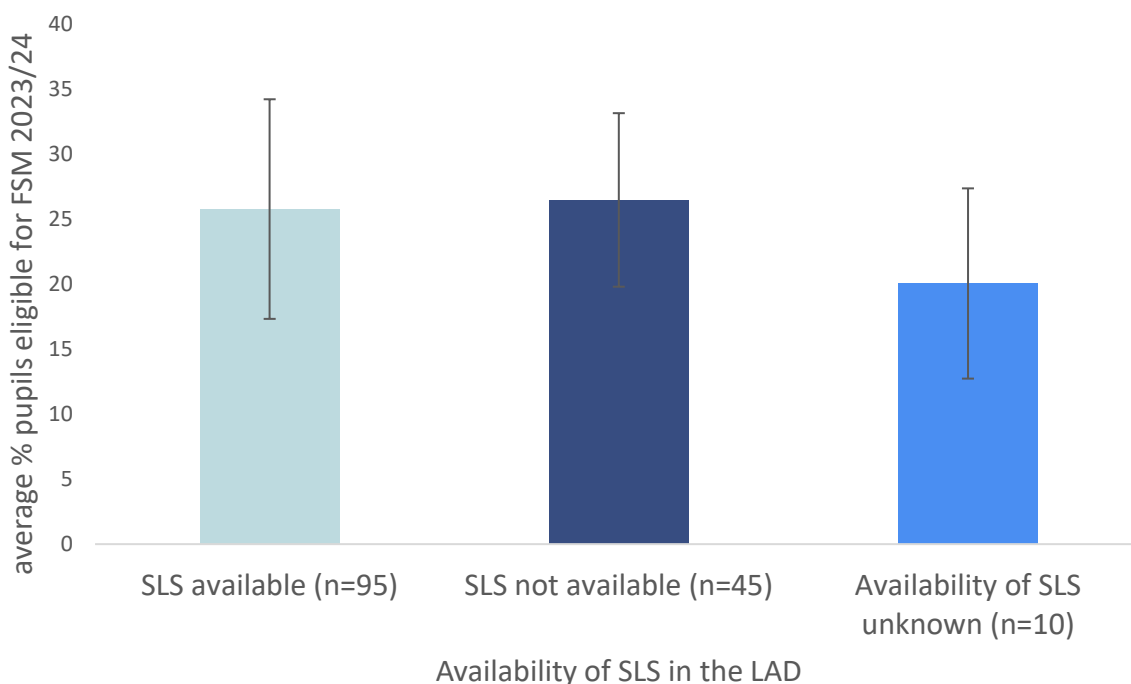


Figure 11 The average percentage of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in 2023/24 and the availability of a School Library Service (SLS) in the Local Authority District (LAD). Error bars are Standard Deviations. N=number of local authority districts.

Figure 11 shows Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility data. The LADs are grouped according to whether or not there is an SLS available, then the average % of pupils eligible for FSM in each group has been generated. It can be seen that the average % of pupils eligible for FSM is approximately 26% for both LADs which do have an SLS (25.8%) and those which do not (26.5%). There appears to be slightly more variation in the average % of pupils eligible for FSM within the LADs with an SLS when compared with LADs without an SLS. The average % of pupils eligible for FSM is slightly lower at 20.1%, in those LADs for which availability of SLS is not known, which aligns with the IMD data.

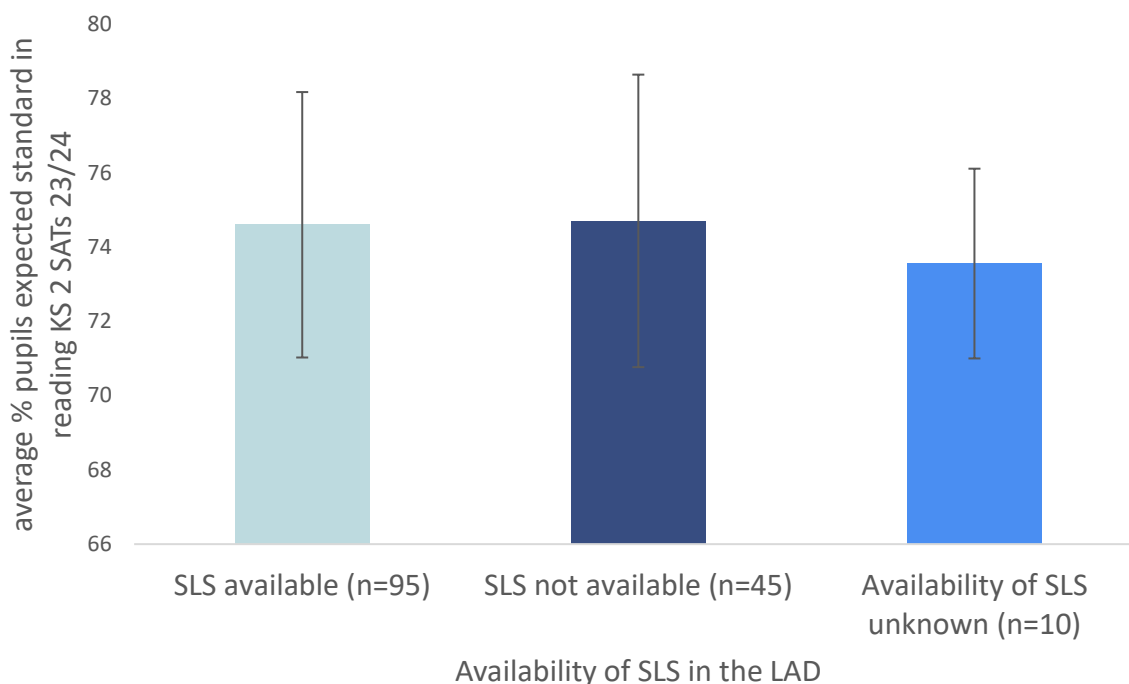


Figure 12 The average percentage of pupils achieving expected standard in reading in Key Stage 2 Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) in 2023/24 and the availability of a School Library Service (SLS) in the Local Authority District (LAD). Error bars are Standard Deviations. N=number of local authority districts.

Figure 12 presents SATs data, specifically the average % of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading. The LADs are grouped according to whether or not there is an SLS available, then the average % of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading in each group has been calculated. It can be seen that average % of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading is almost exactly the same for the LADs which do have an SLS (74.6%) and those which do not (74.7%). The average % of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading is slightly lower at 73.6%, in those LADs for which availability of SLS is not known.

The data presented in Figures 9-12 should be interpreted with caution. Inferential statistics have not been used so therefore any apparent differences should be considered as potential patterns and trends rather than of statistical significance. It is not possible at this stage to infer any associations between the availability of SLS and the variables associated with deprivation and attainment. To do this would require consideration of a much wider range of factors and more sophisticated statistical techniques.

How are SLS currently funded, structured, and staffed?

Figure 13 shows that school subscription is the predominant form of funding for all SLS, with only 3 respondents not selecting this as a form of funding. It is notable that only 11 SLS are in receipt of Local Authority funding of any kind.

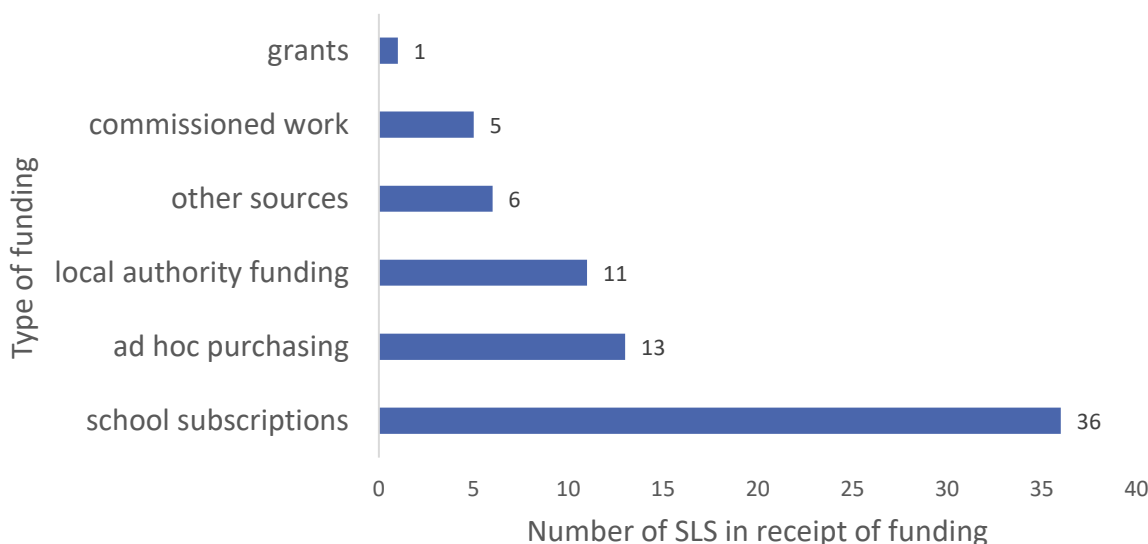


Figure 13 The number of SLS in receipt of funding of different types.

Figure 14 indicates that the majority of SLS are structured within a public library service (24) followed by an education service (6), another local authority department (5), and as an independent service (4).

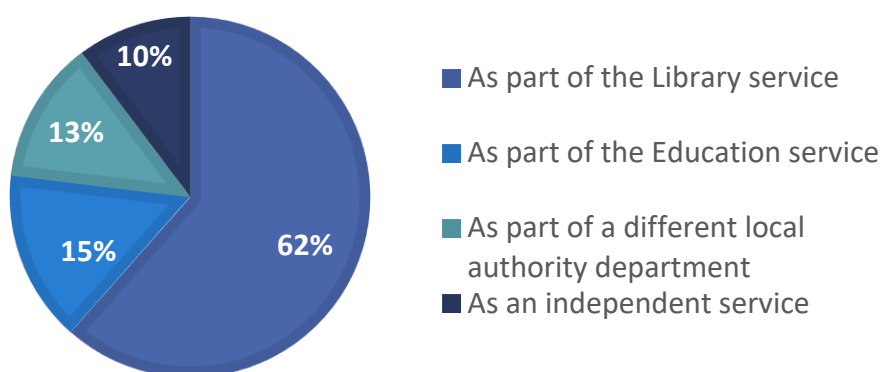


Figure 14 The percentage of SLS who are structured within different types of services.

The number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff employed in each SLS ranged from 0.75 to 19.6, relating to the size and reach of the service. The number of qualified librarians in the service ranged from 0 to 6. Rounded to the nearest whole number, of these 8 had no qualified librarians, 19 had 1, 6 had 2, 2 had 3, 1 had 4, 2 had 5 and 1 had 6.

Which schools are currently served by SLS?

As can be seen from Figure 15 every SLS reported providing a service for primary schools, 77% for early years, 67% for secondary schools and 19% for FE or sixth-form providers. In some cases respondents indicated that although a service was offered, it was not used.

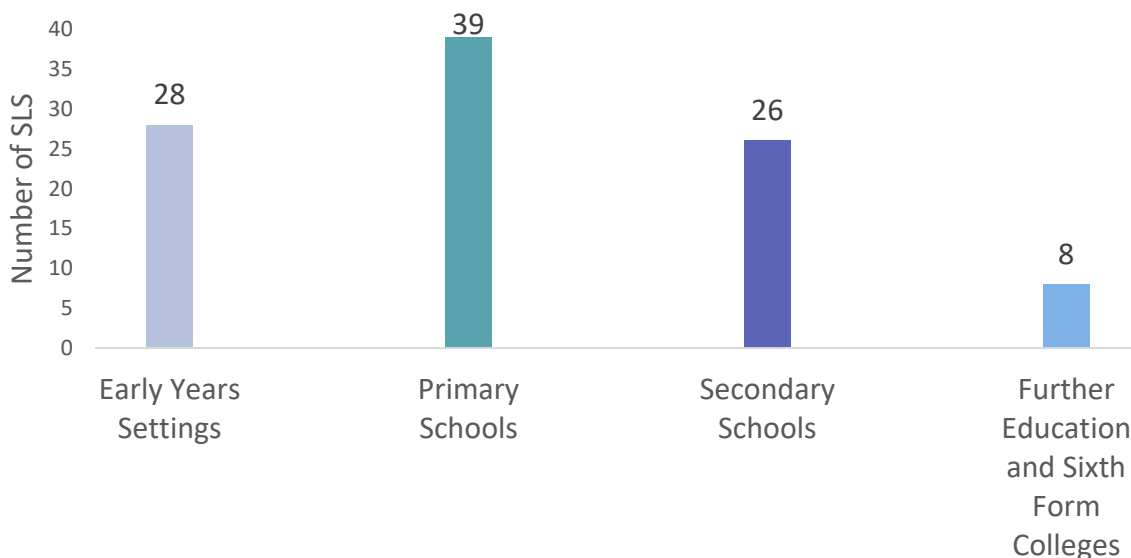


Figure 15 The number of SLS offering services to each type of education provision.

Respondents were asked to select from five statements which best captured the types of schools that used their SLS. Figure 16 shows that 40% of SLS work with mostly local authority schools, in contrast with 12% who mainly serve academy schools. 49% of SLS provide services to a mixture of school types; either an equal mix of local authority and academy schools (23%) or a mixture of all school types (26%). The types of schools served by each SLS vary and are likely to reflect the organisation of schools within their local areas.

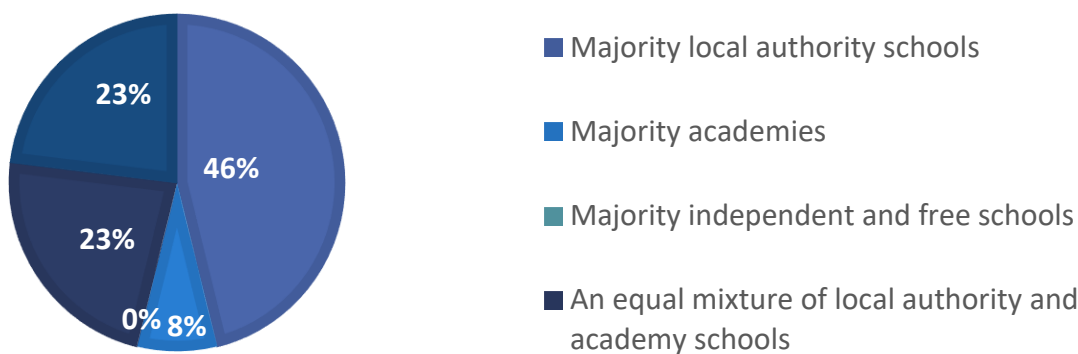


Figure 16 The percentage of SLS who responded to each statement regarding the types of schools who use their services.

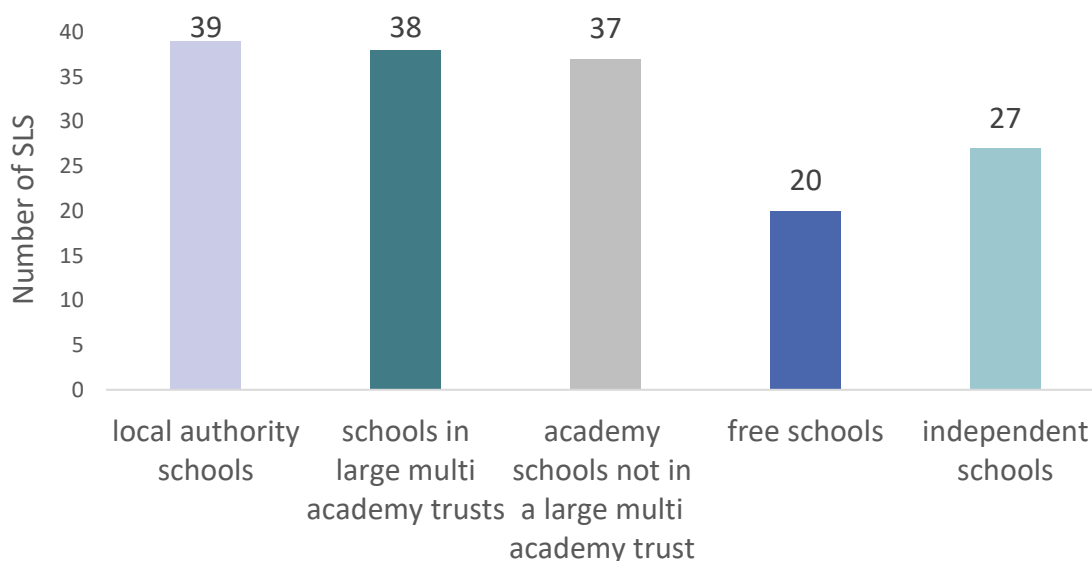


Figure 17 The number of SLS providing services to each type of school.

Figure 17 shows that all SLS serve local authority schools and the majority serve academy schools (both those who are part of large multi academy trusts and those who are not). Approximately half SLS provide services to free schools and 27/39 SLS serve independent schools.

What services do SLS currently offer?

Resources offered for loan by SLS differ but as Figure 18 shows, project sets, fiction sets, bespoke sets and class reader sets are the most commonly offered by the majority of services. One service did not offer any resources for loan but was functioning as an advisory service.

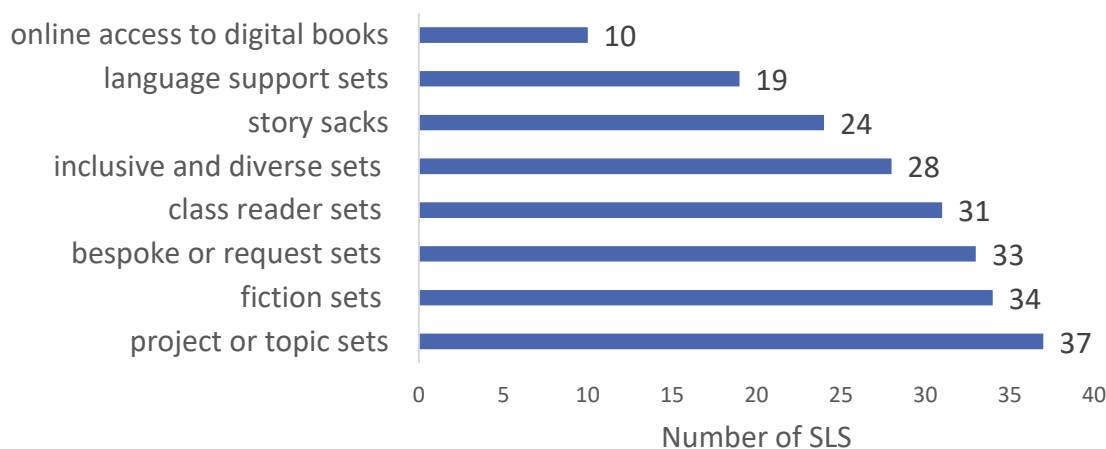


Figure 18 The number of SLS offering each type of book loan service.

In addition to books, 26 services loaned artefacts and other equipment to schools. The number of SLS providing each type of curriculum resource loan can be seen in Figure 19.

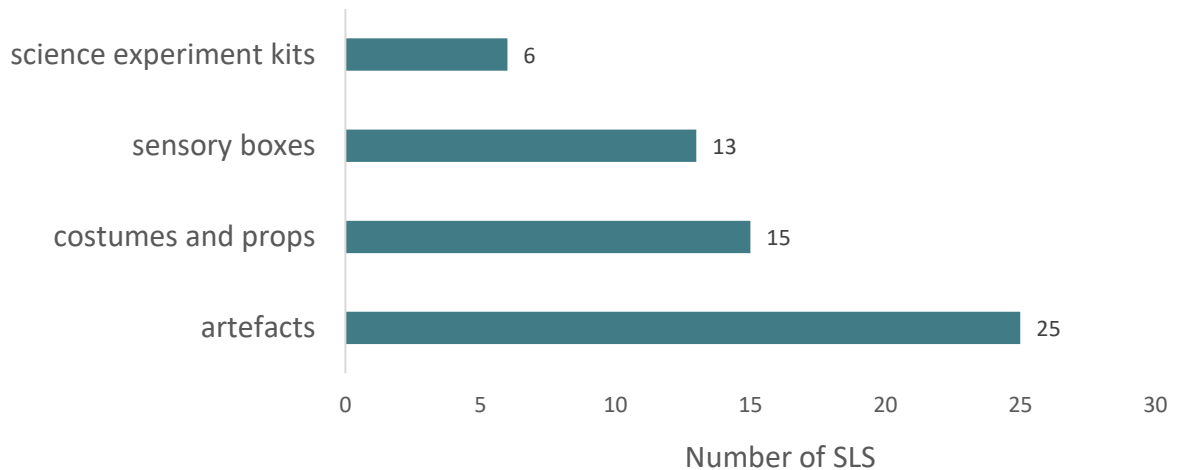


Figure 19 The number of SLS offering each type of curriculum resource loan service.

In some areas artefacts are available to schools through the public library service, even where there is no SLS. 28% of respondents to survey 2 (n=20) indicated that artefacts were available for loan in their area.

We asked which services for children were offered by SLS in addition to resource loans. The types of services and the number of SLS offering them can be seen in Figure 20. Reading for pleasure events, author visits and book awards are the most commonly offered activities.

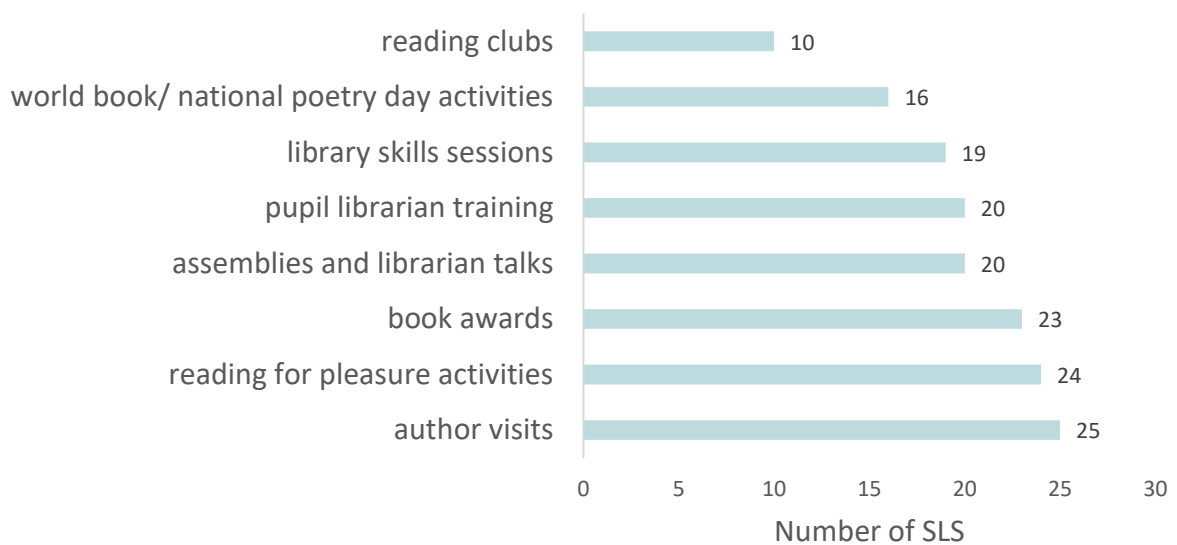


Figure 20 The number of SLS offering other services for children.

The SLS also offer a variety of services for staff. Figure 21 shows that the most common of these are weeding old library stock, advisory visits and supporting the development of reading.

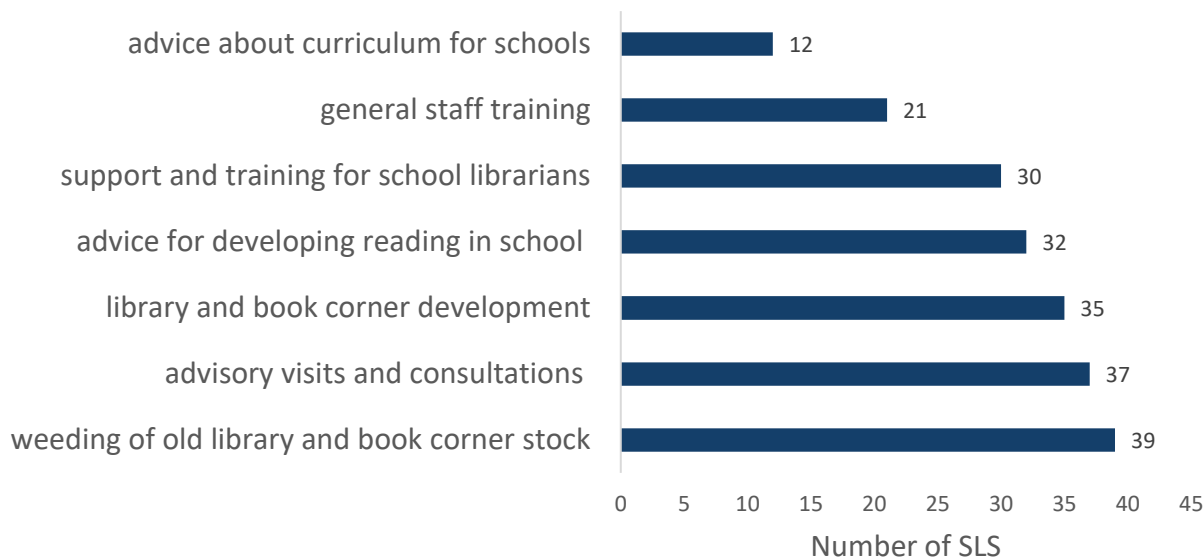


Figure 21 The number of SLS offering services for staff.

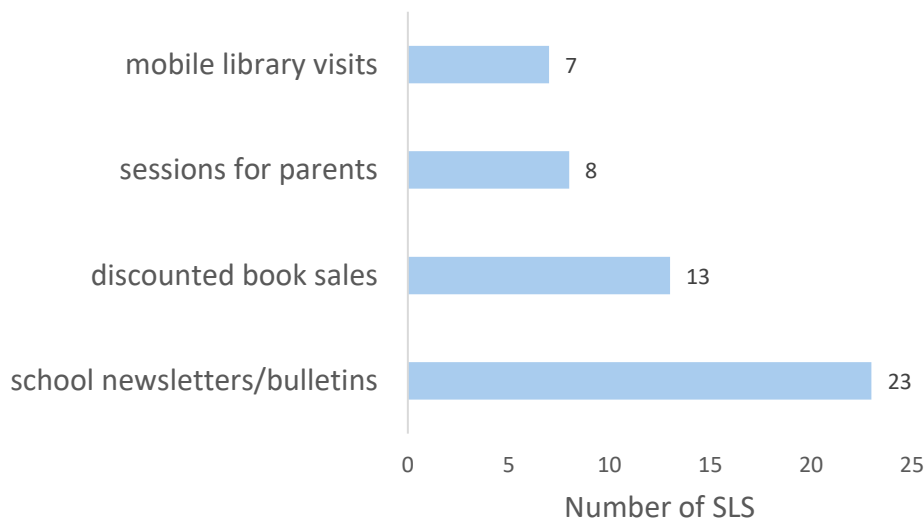


Figure 22 The number of services offering additional services.

It can be seen from Figure 22 that many SLS also provide additional services, most commonly school newsletters or bulletins and discounted book sales.

What are perceived to be the strengths, risks and opportunities for SLS?

We sought to capture the perceptions and experiences of participants to determine the current opportunities available to SLS and the risks that are faced. A Likert scale question was included in the survey *ASCEL School Library Services*. Respondents were asked to state to what extent they agreed with eight statements in reference to their own SLS.

The responses are shown in Figure 23 indicating that whilst respondents perceive their SLS as providing a valuable service which meets the needs of users and contributes positively to teaching and learning in the local area, there are also serious concerns about financial security. Whilst 25 respondents (60%) agreed that their service was financially secure in the short term, only four respondents (9%) agreed that their service had long term financial security.

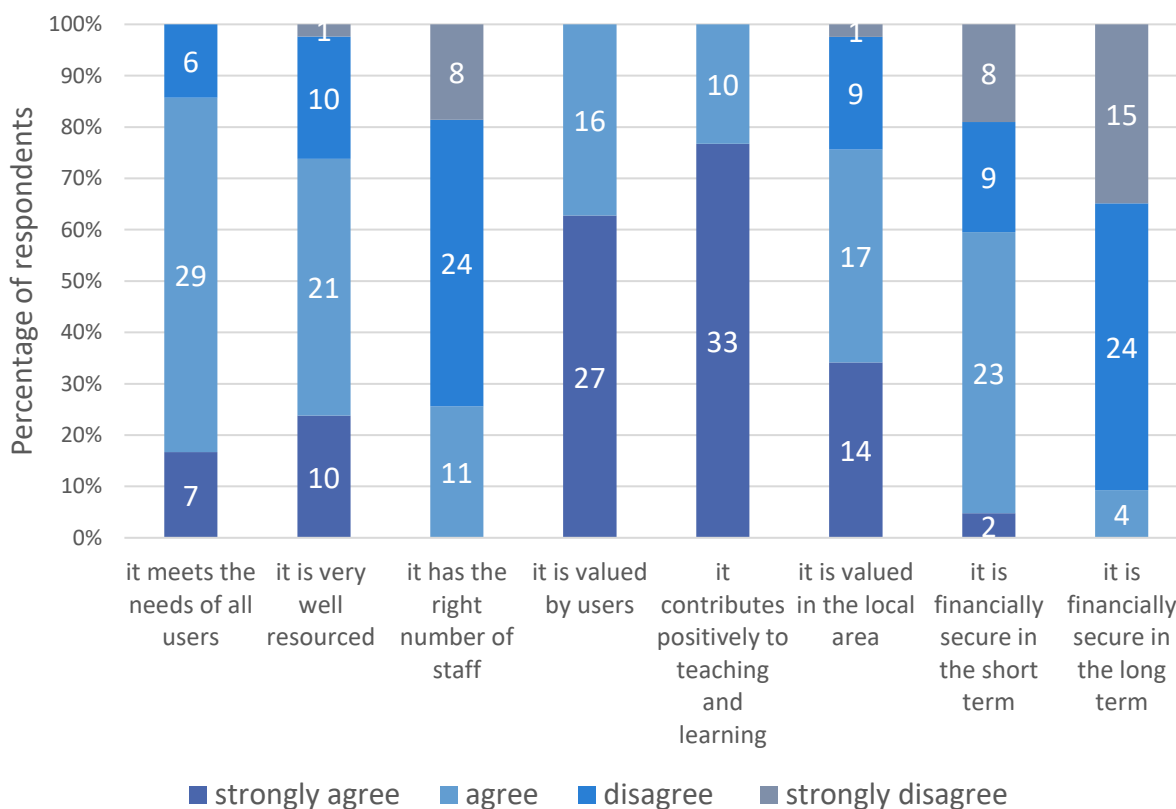


Figure 23 The number of respondents who agreed or disagreed with each of the eight statements about their SLS, as measured using a four point Likert scale.

Free-text survey questions

Two free-text questions were also included in the survey to gain an in-depth understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by SLS. The findings of these two questions are presented in the following section.

Opportunities

In response to the free-text question '*How would you like to develop your service in the future?*' forty-three responses were received. Thematic coding was used to analyse the responses and two themes were identified.

Profile and Reach

The theme *profile and reach* includes comments relating to recognition and value of the SLS, communicating that value, and expanding the reach of the service into wider geographical areas. It also includes comments about opportunities to increase the number of service users, and collaborating with other SLS, museums and education services. Examples of comments coded for this theme include '*a service that stands tall not in the shadows*'; '*more opportunities to showcase what we do*'; '*widen our reach across the city and into surrounding areas*'; '*build more school subscriptions*' and '*increased partnerships*'.

Comments coded for this theme reflect a belief in the strength and quality of the services currently offered by the SLS and demonstrate the sense of potential opportunities in making these services more widely known.

Service and Stock

The theme *service and stock* include responses which refer to specific areas of development within the current offer provided by the SLS. It covers development of the service, such as creating book awards, an artefact collection, or a digital offer as well as increasing workshops, events and advisory services. Supporting reading and literacy was a part of these proposed developments. Improvements to the premises to make them more accessible for service users are included in this theme. It also includes references to increasing and diversifying book stock and building workforce capacity through recruitment and training. Examples of comments coded for this theme are '*additional services such as book awards*'; '*extend the range of our artefact boxes*'; '*improve our digital offer*'; '*develop our dual language collection*' and '*succession planning*'.

It was notable that some responses coded for this theme included conditional statements indicating that these developments were dependent on financial security (see Q38).

Profile and reach	Service and stock
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise the profile of the SLS • Improve communication • Collaborate • Widen reach of SLS • Increase the number of users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase range of services offered • Diversify stock • Increase amount of stock • Improve premises • Build workforce

Figure 24 Opportunities to develop the SLS.

Risks

In response to the free-text question ‘What threats or challenges does your service face?’ forty-three responses were received. Thematic coding was used to analyse the responses and three themes were identified.

Threats to financial security

The theme *threats to financial security* was a significant one in the data set. This theme includes concerns about loss of council funding, reduced school budgets affecting use of the services, schools cancelling subscriptions to the SLS, and costs increasing. Examples of the responses coded for this theme include ‘*loss of funding*’; ‘*school budgets are getting smaller*’; ‘*other costs keep going up*’; ‘*schools may choose not to renew subscription*’.

There was no difference in responses from SLS that were funded in different ways; all perceived a potential threat to ongoing funding, whether they were funded solely by subscriptions, or received a form of council funding. Concerns about the financial stability of the SLS underpin the other themes identified in the data set, because other concerns can be seen to be a consequence of lack of funding.

Threats to service quality

The theme *threats to service quality* included references to resources or services that may not be able to be maintained without ongoing financial security. Responses about stock quality declining if it cannot be regularly updated, being unable to adequately staff the SLS to provide the current level of service, loss of experienced staff and loss of adequate space for the SLS were coded for this theme. The loss of experienced staff was linked to lowering morale due to workload pressures, staff retiring and not being replaced, and staff being unable to afford to live in expensive areas. The impact of this was perceived to be a potential loss of expertise which would affect the quality of the service. Examples of the responses coded for this theme include ‘*stock becomes old and tired*’; ‘*reduction in staffing*’; ‘*loss of staffing expertise*’. This theme also covers threats to



the wider service ‘*diluted and decreasing of SLS*’; and the space available for the service ‘*premises are under threat*’.

The theme *threats to service quality* is linked to *threats to financial security* because lack of funding can result in the threats to the service, but in a reciprocal way, a lower quality service could cause fewer schools to subscribe, thus reducing the income to the SLS.

Changing school contexts

The theme *changing school contexts* includes threats perceived by the respondents relating to the ways that schools are organised and managed, changing priorities in school spending decisions, a devaluing of libraries and their role in schools, and falling pupil numbers. References to Multi-Academy Trusts were included in this theme, where decisions about purchasing services were made for the trust as a whole ‘*you can lose several schools at a time*’ and by an ‘*increasing number of MATs, Academies and Trusts who are unwilling to respond/engage*’. This theme also includes comments about schools needing to choose between the SLS and other services, and the lowering status of libraries leading to the SLS being ‘*now seen as an easy service to dispense with*’. Some respondents also noted falling pupil numbers in schools, which could have an impact on the funding of the SLS if subscriptions were per pupil.

Marketing and competition were mentioned by a small number of respondents but should be noted because they have an impact on decision makers in schools who may lack awareness of the SLS or not understand the role and value of SLS.

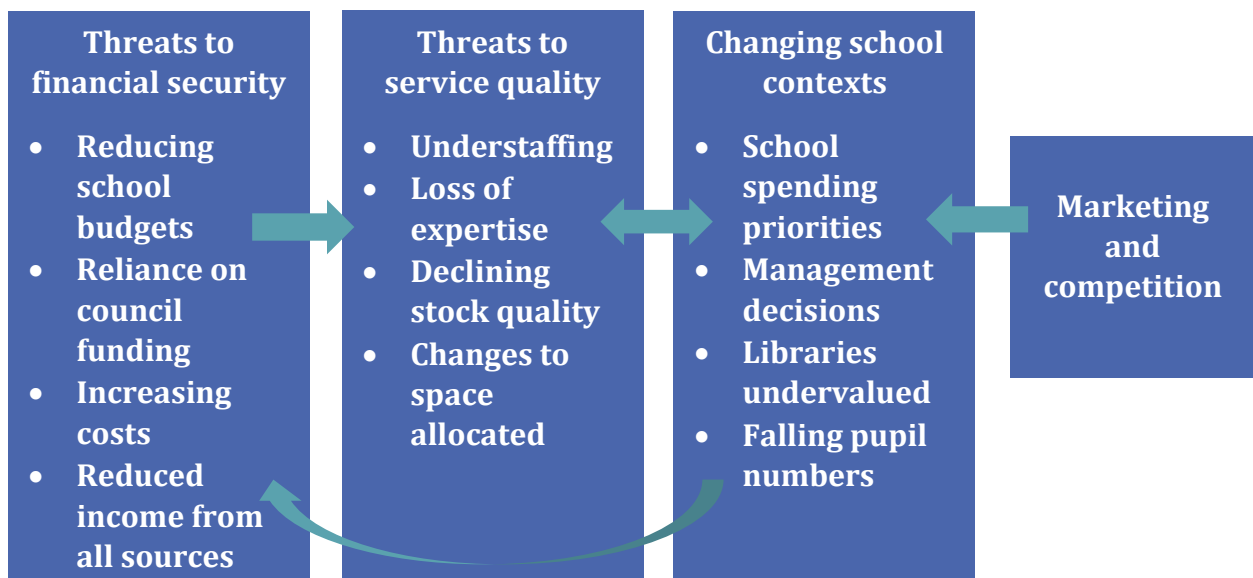


Figure 25 Risks faced by SLS.

Essential factors in ensuring a successful SLS

We sought to capture the perceptions and experiences of participants to determine the factors which contribute to the success of SLS; two free-text questions were included in the survey for this purpose. One question asked about the strengths of current services and the second asked about what was essential to maintain a good SLS. The findings of these two questions are presented in the following section.

Strengths

In response to the free-text question 'What are the strengths of your service?' forty-three responses were received. Thematic coding was used to analyse the responses and five themes were developed.

Meeting school needs

The theme *meeting school needs* was a core idea in the responses to this question. Participants felt that a key strength of their service was that they were able to provide what schools needed. The responses indicated that needs were met through responding to requests, being flexible about loans and services and offering bespoke resources. Other responses coded for this theme included being customer led, and offering practical support to schools. Examples of the comments which contribute to this theme include '*delivering exactly what the teachers request*'; '*flexible and adapt to school needs*'; '*a very bespoke service*' and '*we are a customer led service*'. This theme also includes responses about providing a service which offers schools value for money, so that it would be '*cost effective*' and '*allow for pressure on school budgets*'. Schools need to be able to afford and see the value of the resources and services the SLS provide; meeting school needs in a cost-effective way is seen as a strength.

Whilst bespoke loans were not offered by all the SLS responding, those that did offer them considered that they were a strength. This theme indicates that SLS know what the schools using them need and are responsive in providing the resources and services required.

Communication and relationships

The theme *communication and relationships* is linked to the theme *meeting school needs*, because relationships with schools using the SLS were cited as means by which school needs could be identified. These relationships, such as '*working closely with schools*'; '*personal relationships*' and '*excellent customer relations*' describe the ways that SLS understand school needs. Included in this theme are relationships with partners other than schools including the public library service, school improvements teams, local councils and local business. Respondents stated that '*being part of the public library services*'; being '*able to reach a wider audience through our partnerships*' and being able to '*network well*' were strengths of the SLS.

Although the relationships developed by SLSs differ according to local contexts, being able to communicate about the SLS with schools and other partners was an important theme.

Range and quality of resources

The theme *range and quality of resources* includes any responses which make reference to the type of resources (such as artefacts or reading sets), the range and quantity of the resources, the quality of the resources and their role and purpose. Resources are defined as any items which are available for loan. Examples of comments that were coded for this theme include '*we provide artefacts and costumes*'; '*wide range of resources and collections*'; '*diverse and up to date book stock*' and that the resources '*support the school curriculum*'. The resources described include specialist collections which '*encourage reading for pleasure*'.

Different SLS have different resources available for loan, but the range and quality of these resources is presented as a strength in the data set. Schools can access resources which they could not provide for themselves.

Range and flexibility of services

The theme *range and flexibility of services* includes any responses which refer to services other than resource loans as strengths. Examples were given such as providing librarians to work in schools, advisory work, events, training sessions and book awards. This theme also includes references to the nature of the service provided, such as the offer of flexible membership options. Comments from the data set that were coded for this theme include '*experienced advisory support*'; '*annual book award*'; '*range of membership options*' and '*flexible in our offer*'. The quality of the service provided is included in this theme, including comments such as '*high quality service*' and '*excellent, efficient service*'.

Engagement with schools with services other than book loans was a strength in the data set and is contributory to the theme of '*communication and relationships*', because such activities raise the profile of the SLS and strengthen relationships.

High calibre staff

The theme *high calibre staff* was notable in the data set and was coded to include the knowledge, experience and expertise of staff along with personal characteristics such as enthusiasm and dedication. Staff '*expert and in-depth knowledge of school libraries*'; '*highly experienced staff*' and '*professional expertise and knowledge*' were examples of comments coded for this theme. Comments such as '*motivated staff*'; '*passionate staff*'; '*professional team*' were coded for this theme and identified as strengths in the response to this question.

This theme links to the *range and quality of resources* theme because staff knowledge and experience is required to provide and maintain good quality resources. It also links to *range and flexibility of services* as it is staff who deliver these services, and to *communication and relationships* because such relationships depend on the staff of the SLS.



Figure 26 Strengths of SLS.

In response to the free-text question ‘What is essential to maintain a good SLS?’ forty-three responses were received. Thematic coding was used to analyse the responses and five themes were identified.

Essential features

Meeting school needs and expectations

The theme *meeting school needs and expectations* was central to the responses of participants and forms an over-arching theme into which the other themes feed. This theme is important because it represents the attitudes of the respondents towards maintaining a good service, in that it should be responsive to requests, customer focused and that an SLS should listen to the needs of schools. This theme covers specific aspects of meeting school needs such as fulfilling delivery and collection expectations, providing support for specific requests and having a flexible approach. Examples of responses which contribute to this theme include ‘listen to their needs’; ‘deliver a service

that reflects their needs'; 'act upon their requests'; 'customer led approach' and 'support with the challenges that schools face'.

This theme reflects an emphasis in the data set that the focus of a successful SLS should be outwards, towards the users, and therefore that the SLS should respond locally to fulfil local needs.

High-quality wide-ranging offer

The theme *high-quality wide-ranging offer* covers the specific features of the offer to schools that were referred to in the data set. The theme includes participant comments about keeping stock updated, and ensuring that book stock is high quality, diverse and wide-ranging. Other services, in addition to book loans, are also included in this theme, with references to a range of services schools can access, such as advisory support. Also included are references to having suitable space for stock. Examples of responses which contribute to this theme include *'quality, up to date resources'; 'excellent stock'; 'diverse range of reading materials'* and *'deliver more than books'*.

This theme reflects the emphasis in the data set that a successful SLS must be well stocked with high quality resources and be able to provide high quality additional services in order to meet school needs.

High calibre staff

The theme *high calibre staff* was notable in the data set. This theme covers responses relating to staff knowledge and expertise, including specific knowledge about school curricula and other specialist areas. Staff were described as needing to be experienced and knowledgeable, in particular to have *'good stock knowledge and the ability to articulate and demonstrate that knowledge'*. In addition to knowledge, experience and expertise, the personal characteristics of staff were frequently referred to. Participants stated that staff needed to be enthusiastic, committed and flexible, passionate about the subject as well as friendly and approachable. Examples of responses coded for this theme include *'enthusiastic, knowledgeable staff'* and *'a passion for books and reading'*. Alongside these personal characteristics, willingness to change was also referred to; staff need to be able to *'evolve and change'* and be adaptable, supported by good, flexible leadership.

This theme reflects the emphasis in the data set on the significance of high calibre staff in maintaining a successful service. Good quality resources alone will not be enough; staff need to know these resources well and to be able to use them to respond to the requirements of schools.

Strong local profile

The theme *strong local profile* includes responses about how knowledge about the SLS is communicated to users and potential users, such as *'good communication between library service and customers'* and *'opportunities to network'* and marketing. It also covers the relationships the SLS builds locally and the support that is needed to maintain a successful service. Relationships with schools should be *'strong'* and

'effective', but the need for support from external bodies is also identified. Support from the local council and from senior managers within the service, along with advocacy for the service and an understanding of the value the SLS provides. Examples of responses coded for this theme include '*decision makers who understand the importance of SLS*' and '*elected members who value the work undertaken*'.

This theme reflects the emphasis in the data set on the need for the SLS to be well connected locally, both to schools and to local decision makers. To succeed in meeting school needs SLS need to be able to communicate the value of their offer and to have external advocacy.

Financial security

The theme *financial security* was important in the data set and referred to the need for a consistent level of ongoing funding, sufficient budget to continue to update stock and to staff the SLS appropriately. This theme includes considerations about where the funds might come from and how they might be allocated. Examples of responses coded for this theme include '*subscriptions from schools*', '*consistent level of funding*' and '*enough budget to have a wide breadth of stock*'. It also includes the need to use the funds effectively to provide value for money for users, examples of which are '*offering value for money*' and '*events that incur minimum costs for schools*'. These comments reflect responses in the data set indicating that the offer to schools should be value for money in order that schools continue to subscribe, thus ensuring the financial security of the SLS.

This theme underpins all the other themes because without it SLS are unable to meet school needs, provide a high-quality wide-ranging offer or recruit and retain high calibre staff. Financial security depends on support from decision makers and on the ability of SLS to communicate their value to users and potential users. However, there is also a dependent relationship between this theme and the others. Whilst providing a high-quality service with high calibre staff relies on adequate funding, the quality of the offer to schools also generates income and helps to ensure that the SLS can maintain its services.

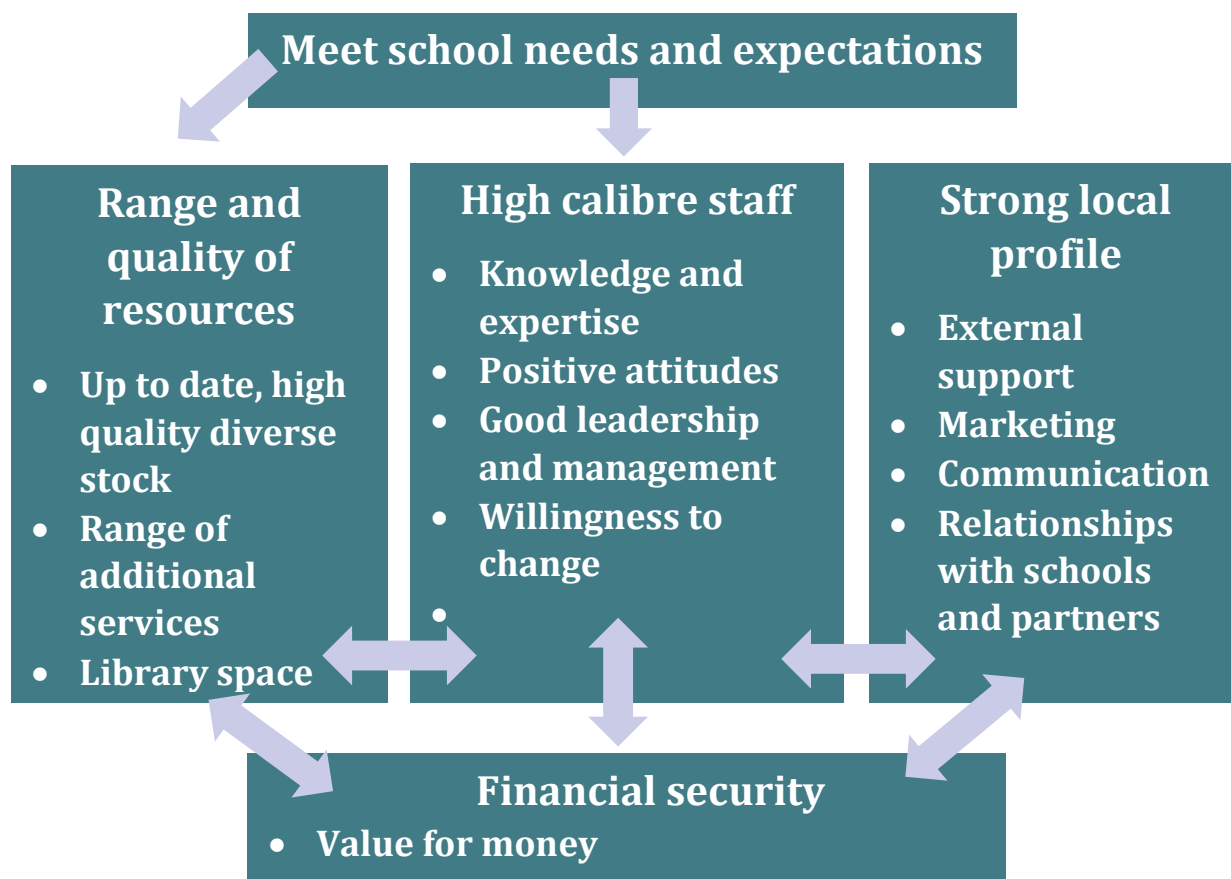


Figure 27 Essential features of a successful SLS.

When comparing the participant responses about the strengths of their current service and the essential features needed to maintain a good SLS there are overlapping features which link to each other.



Figure 28 Common features indicated by participants regarding strengths of SLS and what is essential for maintaining an SLS.

The ability to meet school needs, provide a range of high-quality resources and services with high calibre staff are common features of both data sets. Having a strong local profile includes having good relationships and communicating well, but importantly also requires advocacy and support from outside the SLS. This is a key difference between the responses in the two data sets. Financial security was not listed as a strength by any of the respondents but featured heavily in the data set for essential features to maintain a good service.

Case study interviews

After the interviews had been transcribed, we created narrative summaries of the conversation and sent the summaries to participants for feedback. Any comments, clarifications and corrections were acted on. The final version of these summaries can be found in appendix 2. Extracts from the narrative summaries are presented here, grouped thematically according to the aims of the research and related to the themes that arose from the analysis of the free-text questions. The extracts are not direct quotations from the participants.

Strengths and opportunities

Meeting school needs:

Participants commented on the different ways in which their service was designed to meet the needs of subscribing schools.

This service offers a full range of book loans and artefacts. All the boxes are bespoke- there won't be a generic 'Romans' box, for example. A teacher will receive a box to support all the different topics they are covering. CS1

To be as flexible as possible for the schools and give them a bespoke package that best suits their needs. CS1

The SLS is focused on being responsive to school needs- for example, the stock of dual language books has been increased following requests from schools. Resources are selected in collaboration with other advisory services such as the LA Ethnic minorities and travellers' service. Schools are seeing higher numbers of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and the SLS is thinking about ways they can support these needs in the future. CS3

Some of the topic requests coming in are very niche, and there are not always books published to meet the requirements- but the public library can sometimes help. The contents of the boxes are matched to the schools for appropriateness, rather than keeping a generic set for common topics. CS6

The SLS make bespoke resources requested by schools. For example, local schools have asked for projects on the Shang Dynasty, Islamic Empires, Windrush and the fall of the British Empire. Local history projects are in high demand and can be very specific to the locality. CS4

Communication, relationships and local profile:

Participants described the different ways that they were making use of local connections to develop and support their service. They also talked about ways that they would like to develop these connections in future and to further advocate for their service.

There are good links with other SLSs in the region- although not every area has one, but being part of the public library service means the SLS is very connected and well networked. Problems, suggestions, contacts and information are shared across the different SLSs in the region- there is no sense of isolation. Different SLSs have different strengths and insights, and this collective intelligence is shared in regular meetings. CS6

Some of the services and events provided cut across both the SLS and public library- a good example of this is the Northern Children's Book Festival. All the library services in the region are involved, and the librarian from this SLS organises the events that are most local to this service. So, she might organise the visits of authors and illustrators to schools, but on the day of the event the whole team gets involved. This means the SLS can deliver and be part of much bigger events despite its small staff. CS6

A key element is being part of the local education support network with the council. This shows that an SLS is professional education support. You can't operate in a silo and need to be part of a wider network. Being part of a wider local network is important as is being flexible in terms of the offer to schools and having the freedom to adapt. CS4

Working closely with the local advisory service means that the SLS can respond to the identified needs of schools. For example, if a school is struggling with literacy levels the inspectorate might recommend that the SLS goes in to support school improvement. CS5

The reading road map has enabled collaborations with other SLSs in the region. If a neighbouring SLS promotes the scheme to their schools, and those schools buy in, the neighbouring SLS will receive some commission. This is a good opportunity for SLSs who may be running their own book awards, but finding that they lose money. CS1

Raising the profile of the service remains important- ideas such as holding a local mini-conference for schools with suppliers and speakers is being considered. There is an early years offer which includes books, displays and author visits. It would be good to be more collaborative with other services, to support each other, and exchange/recommend services to help each other out when necessary. The manager is wary of saying no to any school that asks something of their service. There used to be 166 SLSs but there are far fewer now. The hope is that such connections and collaborations among SLSs can help the remaining ones survive current challenges. CS1

There is potential to be more proactive than reactive. There is room for the SLS to develop more links with local networks by approaching groups like literacy coordinators and newly qualified teachers in order to promote their services. Another avenue for collaboration and development is working with local SEND officers in order to adapt/expand the books they offer schools. The SLS also has the advantage of its proximity to a major city without an SLS of its own; they can approach city schools to offer their services. CS3

Range and quality of resources:

Participants discussed the resources they were able to offer schools, and how these resources were particularly appropriate to local contexts and needs.

The local area is very diverse and there is a lot of call for dual language books, and there is a lot of focus on underrepresented groups, particularly on their part in history. CS4

There are always booklists being created - such as transition booklists - and lists of recommended reads for different year groups are created throughout the year. Also going on throughout the year is book selection, the arrival of new stock and weeding stock. CS5

The heart of the service is the books and the exploitation of the books. The books fund is healthy and new books are bought every week; the SLS adds keywords and levels the book, then classifies it. These keywords are constantly updated and teachers/school librarians can use them to look for specific themes, genres and books they'd like for their classroom. CS5

The 300,000 items of stock mean that schools can access far more than they could house themselves. Inviting schools to the SLS office either via regular visits or through pre-booked staff inset days provides an opportunity to showcase their extensive range of resources. CS2

Range and quality of services:

The wide range of advisory, support and enrichment services was highlighted by the participants. Each SLS had developed innovative schemes and services to meet local needs.

A unique feature of this SLS is sending out professional librarians to work in schools. Many of the primary schools do not have professional librarians and therefore can lack the expertise needed to run a library properly. Librarians from this SLS go into schools for anything from half a day to three days a week to run their libraries. CS4

So now, there is a poetry slam, a creative writing competition, a book award and a World Book Day event provided in addition to the resource lending and advisory services CS4

Targeted activities like 'SLS at Home' in which schools nominate pupils to receive books to take home over the holidays. This last summer 1000 pupils were supported in this way. Teachers and SLTs can see that these initiatives really benefit the schools, but also meet some county literacy targets and show that the service is part of a bigger picture. CS5

The service has 340,000 books, 200,000 artefacts, and 9000 costumes. The 13 staff have a range of roles including book librarians, one with a remit to manage class reading sets; artefact librarians, managers, drivers, assistants and librarians who work in schools. CS1

One of the services offered is a support package that secondary schools can buy in to to support their school librarian. This offers an inset day and four further meetings to help with ideas and planning for the library. General advice is free for all subscribing schools. CS2

High calibre staff:

All the participants recognised the value of staff knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm.

Knowledgeable staff are at the heart of the service because this allows for bespoke provision. CS6

The SLS team's expertise can help expand the books the teachers use in their classes to include more contemporary, local and diverse literature. CS6

The enthusiasm, commitment and knowledge of the staff are paramount- they are the heart of the service. CS1

The team know the schools they work with well and are familiar with the way the schools like to work. CS3

The team are very enthusiastic, interested in learning about children's books, and committed to doing whatever it takes to make the service a success. They are also keen to continue building a diverse and inclusive stock based on current conversations as well as the communities they serve. CS3

It's about the information and expertise the SLS provides about the books that can then help teachers/school librarians get the right book to the right child. CS5

The knowledge of the staff is astounding. The team are constantly reading and reviewing books, which despite being time-consuming, is very much worth it. This develops their own expertise of children's books and themes, something they can readily offer the schools and teachers they work with. CS2

Risks and challenges

Risks and challenges identified by the participants typically related to financial concerns, the lack of stability in income and the difficulties schools face in prioritising their own spending. Concerns about loss of expertise if staff cannot be retained and lowering quality of service if budgets reduced were also raised.

The SLS needs to be able to communicate the value provided, especially to some of the bigger academy chains. School libraries themselves have been underfunded for so long that people don't always understand the value they can provide. There's a whole generation of teachers and even SLT who haven't experienced a good quality, working school library. There's a memory gap to fill and SLSs need to be good at demonstrating what they can offer. CS4

If schools pull out and stop subscribing, it could mean the SLS isn't having enough impact for them to see it as value for money, but feedback always gives them very high value for money ratings. Maybe they take this service for granted! Financial instability is a challenge and is the real reason schools pull out. CS5

Customer evaluations are always very positive, but school budgets have led to some schools not renewing, despite them hugely valuing the books and support the SLS offers CS2

The space isn't really big enough given recent expansions- especially the books for the reading road maps. Ideally a big warehouse would be needed to make storage and deliveries easier. The current space is difficult to access because it is on the second floor. CS1

The extent of the stock means schools can't always be guaranteed the resources they want- you can't always just buy everything the school asks for, because it is being done on a shoestring. CS3

There needs to be advocacy, both from the SLS promoting its own service within the local community but also from the advice offered by national SLS networks. This advocacy can't be generic; different SLSs need to be able to tailor it to best represent them. CS6

Conclusions and recommendations

The range of information we collected for this study has provided insights into the current situation for School Library Services in England, the benefits they provide, strengths they demonstrate and challenges they face. A wide variety of resources and services that support curricula and reading across all school age groups forms the backbone of all the services that participated in the study. Given the quality of the services provided, it is very concerning that fewer than half the Local Authority Areas in England have access to a SLS. We heard from very different SLS from all parts of England, with a variety of similarities and differences. Our findings suggest that a number of different models are running successfully; we cannot recommend a 'one-size' SLS to fit all contexts as local opportunities and needs vary. Sharing the strengths and successes of different models will help SLS to build and maintain services and make them more resilient to future threats.

A new representative body for School Library Services

Sharing best practice among an SLS network will likely be highly beneficial; a priority is to identify ways to raise the profiles of SLS in local areas. Some networks already exist and are successful.

We therefore recommend the creation of a new body that will represent School Library Services. This body will enable connections to be made between services, and facilitate sharing of practice and professional development. The body should have an Executive Board of stakeholders, and all SLS should automatically become members. We recommend the formation of Local Chapters that are geographically organised, and Special Interest Groups reflecting the needs and interests of members. Each SLS will be assigned to a Local Chapter but individual staff can choose which groups they prefer to belong to. Local Chapters will be able to work together to respond to the needs of the local area and find potential areas for cooperation. Special Interest Groups might include Book Awards, developing an artefact service, or marketing, for example. Groups may decide to meet in person or online but we recommend a regular programme of contact to strengthen and revitalise the national SLS as a whole.

SLS offer support, advice and resources to schools that cannot be replicated elsewhere. The creation of a national representative body will give SLS a platform from which to advocate as well as confidence in the excellence of the services that are offered across the country.

Maintain and develop the workforce

It was particularly notable that the staff of the service featured highly in responses about the strengths of SLS. The expertise of staff was frequently mentioned, from knowledge of school curricula, children's literature and information texts to the demographics of the schools served and the ways that books can be targeted to support

individual schools and children. As well as expertise, the enthusiasm, commitment and resourcefulness of staff is essential in maintaining the success of the services. The drive towards innovation, problem solving and creative thinking amongst the staff hold together SLS that face challenging financial circumstances. It is therefore imperative that recruitment, training and succession planning form part of the work of people managing SLS; if an SLS is carried by the efforts of key individuals then it could be at risk when those individuals move on or retire. A national programme to raise the profile of SLS and the role they have in schools could help to encourage new staff.

Advocacy and raising the profile of the SLS

Our findings show that where SLS are running they are very highly regarded by users and have become an essential and irreplaceable part of the way schools deliver the curriculum. However, there are still schools who do not use their local SLS, and there are schools who might choose to buy in to services outside their local area if they were aware of them. SLS need support to be able to raise their profile locally and make connections with decision makers to demonstrate the value of the service. Further research should be undertaken to evidence the impact of School Library Services, and data about SLS should regularly be collected to monitor future developments. The new representative body could be involved in commissioning such research.

The findings from this study clearly show that there are a number of intersecting challenges facing SLS; financial insecurity underpins all of them. It is therefore vital that organisations working with School Library Services are committed to raising the profile and emphasising the value of the services offered. With a clear message about the ways schools benefit from SLS, and the value for money they provide, school subscriptions will secure the future of SLS. Local and national policy makers should be lobbied to support this essential educational service.

Thank you

The research team would like to thank all the participants in this study, in particular those who were interviewed in the case studies. They were without exception generous with their time and expertise, and gave us a detailed and nuanced picture of the ways that SLS are working.

We would also like to thank Steering Group at ASCEL who provided advice and support throughout the project.

Appendix 1

List of School Library Services in England.

Service name	URL
Barking and Dagenham SLS	https://www.lbbdtradedservices.co.uk/Article/95325
Barnet School Libraries Resources Service	https://www.barnet.gov.uk/libraries/school-libraries-resources-service
Bedfordshire SLS	https://www.bedford.gov.uk/schools-education-and-childcare/schools-and-colleges/schools-library-service
Bolton Schools Libraries and Museums Service	https://www.boltonlams.co.uk/schools
Buckinghamshire SLS	https://tradedservices.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/our-services/our-education-service/school-library-service/
Cheshire Education Library Service	https://www.elscheshire.org.uk/homepage.aspx
Cornwall Education Library Service	https://schools.cornwall.gov.uk/Services/6261
Coventry Schools Library and Resource Service	https://www.coventry.gov.uk/schools-library-resource-service
Cumberland Library Services for Schools	https://www.cumberland.gov.uk/libraries-and-archives/library-services-schools
Devon SLS	https://devoneducationservices.co.uk/themes/teaching-and-learning/school-library-service/
Dudley SLS	https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/learning-and-school/school-information/schools-library-service/
Durham Learning Resources	https://durhamcommercialservices.co.uk/schools-and-education/teaching-and-learning/support-and-development/durham-learning-resources/
East Riding SLS	https://www.eastridinglibraries.co.uk/memberships/schools-library-service/
Gloucestershire Library Services for Education	https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/lse/



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Leading Excellence in library Services for Children, Young People and Schools



Hampshire SLS	https://sls.hias.hants.gov.uk/
Harrow SLS	https://www.harrow.gov.uk/libraries/school-library-service
Herefordshire SLS	https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/libraries-1/schools-library-service/1
Heritage Doncaster SLS	https://www.heritagedoncaster.org.uk/education/school-library-services/
Hounslow SLS	https://www.hounslow.gov.uk/info/20050/libraries/1685/school_library_service
Hull SLS	https://www.hulllibraries.co.uk/borrowing/schools-library-service
Inspire Education Library Service	https://www.inspireculture.org.uk/services-schools/els/
Isle of Wight SLS	https://www.iow.gov.uk/libraries-leisure-and-heritage/libraries/specialist-library-services/school-library-service/
Islington Education Library Services	https://www.iels.org/
Juniper Education Resource Service	https://junipereducation.org/ers
Knowsley SLS	https://knowsleysls.co.uk/
Lancashire SLS	https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/school-library-service/
Learning Resources for Education	https://www.northnorthants.gov.uk/schools-library-service/learning-resources-education-service
Leeds SLS	https://libraries.leeds.gov.uk/what-you-can-do/school-library-service
Leicestershire Creative Learning Services	https://www.creativelearningservices.org.uk/
Lewisham Libraries Services for Schools	https://schoolsservices.lewisham.gov.uk/Service/s/6857
Milton Keynes SLS	https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/schools-and-lifelong-learning/mk-sls
North Tyneside SLS	https://educationservices.org.uk/Services/2958



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Northumberland SLS	https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Education/Professionals/Schools-Library-Service.aspx
Oldham Library Services for Schools	https://hla.oldham.gov.uk/schools/
Plymouth SLS	https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/schools-library-service
Portsmouth SLS	https://tradedservices.portsmouth.gov.uk/Page/6094#
Redbridge SLS	https://www.redbridge.gov.uk/libraries/schools-library-service/
Rotherham SLS	https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/libraries/schools-library-service/1
Rutland Library Service	https://rutlandlibraries.org.uk/school-services/
Salford SLS	https://salfordcommunityleisure.co.uk/schools/schools-libraries/sls/
Sheffield SLS	https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries-archives/schools-library-service
Shropshire SLS	https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/schools-and-education/schools-library-service/
Somerset SLS	https://www.supportservicesforeducation.co.uk/Page/9229
Southampton SLS	https://www.southampton.gov.uk/schools-learning/southampton-services-for-schools/education-and-pupil-support/school-library-service/
St Helens SLS	https://www.sthelens.gov.uk/article/1936/Schools-Library-Service
Wandsworth Learning Resources Service	https://s4s.wandsworth.gov.uk/Services/5008
Tower Hamlets SLS	https://towerhamlets-sls.org.uk/
Wakefield SLS	https://www.wakefield.gov.uk/SLS
Warwickshire SLS	https://sls.warwickshire.gov.uk/202425
West Sussex SLS	https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/6820



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Westminster SLS	https://www.services2schools.org.uk/Page/11404
Westmorland and Furness Library Services for Schools	https://www.westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk/libraries-and-archives/library-services-schools
Wigan Public Libraries Schools Cultural Service	https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Resident/Libraries/Schools-Cultural-Service/Our-services.aspx
Wiltshire Learning Resources Hub	https://www.wslr.co.uk/
Windsor and Maidenhead Reading Development Services for Schools	https://www.rbwm.gov.uk/home/leisure-and-culture/libraries/reading-development-services-schools
Wirral SLS	https://www.wirral.gov.uk/libraries-and-archives/schools-library-service
Wolverhampton Education Library Service	https://www.wves.wolverhampton.gov.uk/Page/9447

Appendix 2

Narrative summaries of case study interviews.

Case study 1

Books and beyond

This is a large urban service in the south of England, covering over 700 schools with 13 staff, and it functions as an independent service. It receives a grant from the local council and does not pay rent for the building. It was already in a strong position when the current manager took it over 12 years ago, and there was a community of local SLSs at that time. The managers of those services were all extremely committed and knowledgeable, who would often work long hours to ensure their service worked well. However, based on the participant's observation, in general they tended to lack experience of running a business and were often risk averse in that regard, which held the services back in the face of change. There is not enough expertise across the SLSs in marketing and people have tended to stick with familiar models because they believe that is what schools want. This particular service is run as a business with a fairly hard-nosed approach to ensure enough income is generated to provide a great service. While this emphasis on income-generation isn't something schools encounter, it allows the SLS to offer schools a flexible range of services and subscriptions that meet their diverse requirements.

This service offers a full range of book loans and artefacts. All the boxes are bespoke- there won't be a generic 'Romans' box, for example. A teacher will receive a box to support all the different topics they are covering. Reading for pleasure boxes are provided, as well as class reading sets for guided reading- of which there are over 1000. The SLS provides 3 peripatetic librarians who work in local schools to work in and manage their libraries. This can be anything from half a day to three days a week. Other advice about managing and stocking libraries or book corners is part of the service. Teachers are encouraged to come in to select resources, with specific sessions being run for newly qualified and early career teachers. The service has 340,000 books, 200,000 artefacts, and 9000 costumes. The 13 staff have a range of roles including book librarians, one with a remit to manage class reading sets; artefact librarians, managers, drivers, assistants and librarians who work in schools.

There are a range of different subscription types. The full subscription is six deliveries a year including half-termly books and artefacts for each teacher in the school, the reading road map and a half-day advisory visit. There is a termly offer, which is cheaper than a full subscription, in which books and artefacts are delivered termly but without the reading road map. Artefact only subscriptions can be taken out termly or half-termly. A further option is a mixed box of books and artefacts based on a topic, which is half-termly. In addition, schools can order boxes on an ad hoc basis and pay for them individually. This is to be as flexible as possible for the schools and give them a bespoke

package that best suits their needs. All the subscriptions are priced per pupil, so a reduction in school roll numbers can significantly affect the income generated by the service.

A key offer is the reading road map that draws on the SLS staff's interests and expertise around children's books, reading and local contexts. The reading road map is a scheme with book lists for different school year groups. Each pair of year groups has a list of around 40 books, and the different genres are visually represented on a map of different neighbourhoods/cities/towns/counties in Britain. It started off as a London-based scheme with borough-specific maps, but has since grown to other parts of the country due to its success, with even some international schools using it. All the books are provided for subscribing schools, with the aim of developing reading for pleasure through different titles and genres. Children can collect stickers and awards by reading the books on the list. All the books on each year's map are published within the last year and the list includes some new authors; this helps reflect the diversity of the local schools. The scheme is very popular with schools and has the flexibility to be used within school as part of the reading curriculum, or for children to take home to read. The scheme was evaluated by The Open University, with very good results.

The reading road map has enabled collaborations with other SLSs in the region. If a neighbouring SLS promotes the scheme to their schools, and those schools buy in, the neighbouring SLS will receive some commission. This is a good opportunity for SLSs who may be running their own book awards, but finding that they lose money. The Reading Road map could be used instead and be managed by this service. An annual event is used to celebrate the scheme and 250 children come along to hear from authors whose books feature on the map. The only downside is that the staff of the SLS are very busy managing the reading road map books- 30,000 were delivered this summer to be categorised into various genres and reading levels - and there is a risk that it takes people away from the core services. However, getting new books into schools is really important to this service and the reading road map enables that.

The year revolves around making up boxes, sending them out, then shelving and cataloguing returned books. There is never a quiet time! Managing and mending artefacts can be very time-consuming because they need to be checked in case they are dirty, broken or no longer working. 4000 boxes a term could be delivered. New artefacts are purchased regularly. The whole process can be quite physically demanding. A new innovation for the spring term is a writing competition in which children submit a short story and the winning entries are bound into a book. This book is then added to the reading road map for the following year.

Local knowledge of the area is very important- there are areas of poverty and wealth, and considerable diversity. Knowing the schools well means extra support can be provided at challenging times, and the relationships with individual teachers are key. The reduction in the local advisory service has made this more difficult, it is only through personal connections that the SLS knows if a school is struggling or would

value extra support. The stock of dual language books has been increased and developed to meet the needs of the different languages spoken across the local schools.

Raising the profile of the service remains important- ideas such as holding a local mini-conference for schools with suppliers and speakers is being considered. There is an early years offer which includes books, displays and author visits. It would be good to be more collaborative with other services, to support each other, and exchange/recommend services to help each other out when necessary. The manager is wary of saying no to any school that asks something of their service. There used to be 166 SLSs but there are far fewer now. The hope is that such connections and collaborations among SLSs can help the remaining ones survive current challenges.

The space isn't really big enough given recent expansions- especially the books for the reading road maps. Ideally a big warehouse would be needed to make storage and deliveries easier. The current space is difficult to access because it is on the second floor. The rooms sometimes need to be cleared for other purposes; space is a real issue. Other issues faced are the falling roll numbers and the resulting falling income- but there are also lots of opportunities if you look at it in a positive way. The staff team are constantly working to find ways to improve processes. Future developments must be driven by what the schools need, so communication with them-maybe attendance at meetings among school staff/leaders-will be important. The SLS team can also provide inspiration for teachers who have less time to innovate. Sharing what the service can offer more widely among local residents, raising the profile of the SLS in wider circles, such as through the council will help reach more people.

The enthusiasm, commitment and knowledge of the staff are paramount- they are the heart of the service. The quality and range of the resource are vital because they enable schools to do things in ways they couldn't otherwise. Local schools say they couldn't deliver the curriculum without the resources provided by the SLS. The feedback is incredible- schools know they couldn't afford to teach this way without the resources the SLS provides. When teachers move to new schools that don't subscribe to the SLS, they recommend the service because of the tremendous value they offer. Collaboration with other SLSs is an essential ingredient to support everyone.

Case study 2

Extensive stock

This is a very large SLS in the Midlands, serving over 370 schools in both urban and rural areas, which functions as an independent service. There has been an education library service in this area for 95 years. It is part of a community benefit society with a lot of different branches including public libraries, youth art and music.

The service does not offer any packages or pre-packed boxes. Schools either buy in to an unlimited exchanges option or a standard service. The majority of users opt for unlimited exchanges which means that a school would buy an allowance for a specified number of books, and would be entitled to have that many books on loan at any one

time but can swap them as often as they like. For example, if a school bought an allowance for 100 books and swapped them every half term, they would have accessed 600 books over the course of the year. The standard service runs differently and is a legacy of an older model. 95% of the income comes from school subscriptions, though the total amount of income has been going down in recent years. Customer evaluations are always very positive, but school budgets have led to some schools not renewing, despite them hugely valuing the books and support the SLS offers. There has recently been some additional funding from the County Council for post-covid recovery, which in turn helped when applying for grants from other sources.

Schools operate different systems in terms of their financial year depending on whether they are Academy schools or local authority controlled, so this affects the way the year is organised. The Brilliant book award aimed at Year 7 pupils runs from September to March and is for any schools buying in to the service. Author visits to schools are part of the book award events, which are provided to schools at no extra cost. While publishers sometimes offset costs or offer support, the SLS largely pays for author visits. They have a small budget for this since it is something they value and believe it will help children engage with reading. The award is aimed at combatting the dip in reading for pleasure that typically happens which children move to secondary school. There is a website through which schools can vote for their favourites and post reviews of the shortlisted titles and all the books are chosen to inspire children to get reading.

SLS librarians read and review books throughout the year which go onto the longlist of approximately 20 books, then school librarians come to a meeting to finalise the shortlist of 6 titles. They deliberately want the list to represent a range of genres and diverse representations to broaden children's reading experiences. Feedback indicates that participation in the book award *has* successfully pushed teachers and children out of their reading comfort zones. The covid-19 pandemic provided the time and opportunity to develop a second book award, this time for primary age children and their community. They found recordings of authors reading chapters of their books online during the pandemic lockdown and shared links with their schools. Originally, it started as a virtual award. Now it takes place between May and July and is currently supported by an Arts Council England grant. This is a good time of year for primary schools, being after SATS, and leads into the summer reading challenge.

The SLS not only works with schools but also contributes to develop reading communities around children's books, no matter the age. A key feature of this is the links with public libraries because it is about reading in communities and showcasing the amazing children's books that are great for everyone. The grant enabled authors to visit four public libraries in the hope that this would inspire more people to visit public libraries and to read more. There's an online voting form so anyone can vote across the categories- picture books, shorter books and longer books. The website itself acts as both a source of information as well as a resource for teachers, parents and children. It contains reading-related activities, newsletters, book lists, and recordings that anyone can use. The Best book lists – which are totally separate to the Book Awards and produced termly - aim to keep teachers' knowledge about children's books up to date. Producing this is hugely time-consuming as they read and review all the fiction books they buy, but the team continues to do it since they find it worthwhile.

There used to be qualified librarians in all the secondary schools in the county, but as this is no longer the case, one of the services offered is a support package that secondary schools can buy in to to support their school librarian. This offers an inset day and four further meetings to help with ideas and planning for the library. General advice is free for all subscribing schools. A fortnightly bulletin goes out as part of the School Librarians Support Package with news and information. The team produces this resource by collating relevant information from diverse print and digital media sources.

The spread of schools served is very wide and they are very different in terms of demographics. Some of the city schools can be in quite socio-economically deprived areas, whereas others are more advantaged. The 300,000 items of stock mean that schools can access far more than they could house themselves. Inviting schools to the SLS office either via regular visits or through pre-booked staff inset days provides an opportunity to showcase their extensive range of resources. However, some local requirements can't be met simply because books aren't published in that topic area. Being responsive to the needs of communities is important, but you can only do as much as you can with the types of books being published and the book fund isn't limitless. Similarly, although you want to be responsive to schools it isn't always possible to provide what they need- such as expensive A level textbooks for example. The service is currently housed in an industrial unit. In the past there was an additional base in the north of the county, but this was closed years ago, to reduce overheads.

The service has half the downstairs area and upstairs of HQ as a library and then another room on the first floor. There are meeting rooms in the building that can be used to run inset training for schools. There is also a mobile library though that is focused around reading for pleasure rather than projects due to the size of the vehicle. Visitor numbers to the centre have dropped since the pandemic, so the mobile library is even more important, but it is expensive to run and should have been replaced several years ago. Although the service offers visits to schools to run book lessons with children, there is limited take up by schools. It is something the SLS continues to promote and would love to keep doing; however, due to school's budget constraints, they prioritise the books and swapping the books.

When buying stock, books are currently sent on approval first so the librarians can look at them, because there is only so much you can find out from looking at something online. The knowledge of the staff is astounding. In the online catalogue on the website you can see books linked to different themes; the catalogue can be searched using keywords. Teachers can use this to build their own stock. The team are constantly reading and reviewing books, which despite being time-consuming, is very much worth it. This develops their own expertise of children's books and themes, something they can readily offer the schools and teachers they work with. Every term a list is published of the best books read that term and this also helps teachers keep their book knowledge up to date. It does rely on the commitment of individuals, often working in their own time, but knowing the books is so important. A new library management system is due to be introduced, and the book supplier has recently changed, so there are a few changes coming up.

There have been changes around reading for pleasure. The SLS has developed connections and collaborations within the local community to highlight their services. The team was involved with the Open University Reading Teachers as Readers pedagogy and research and now supports teachers' reading groups that developed from the project. There have often been connections with local universities and trainee teachers have used the shortlisted books from the SLS book awards to conduct discussions and activities with students in schools. In future, they would like to work with local schools and children to help shortlist books for the Book Award. The SLS also offers its services to a neighbouring city and county without an SLS of its own, though it is not the only external organisation doing so.

The heart of the service is the book collection and staff expertise. The stock kept by SLSs means they are goldmines, and it is important to make sure the quality is maintained. The staff expertise is fantastic, but it needs more younger librarians to come through to avoid the knowledge being lost when individuals retire. This seems to be a worry across the nation, rather than specific to this SLS. Key ingredients for a successful service are customer care, staff knowledge, having a website and being able to market services. It has been helpful to be able to develop a fairly flexible website without council constraints and with a marketing team's skills to draw on. This allows them to offer multimodal resources to the schools and wider communities to increase knowledge of and engagement with children's books. They offer bespoke boxes for schools rather than pre-packaged ones. They are also flexible to schools' needs and develop solutions when an option does not immediately exist.

An opportunity to explore would be to promote their services within school premises. Before the service was delegated 31 years ago, regular visits were made to schools to talk about it. Then visits were made to each school to explain the new service and model. At the moment, lack of time for both SLS staff and school staff acts as a barrier. However, it would be absolutely brilliant to do that again! It would help the team develop relationships with different schools, have conversations, understand their needs, learn about things they had not previously considered, and provide solutions that would benefit both the school and the SLS.

Case study 3

A flexible model

The service is situated in an urban area in the northwest of England, which functions as part of the public library service. The majority of the around 60 schools served are within the LA area and are primaries. Eight secondary schools have a service level agreement. A few schools from out of the area use the services offered, taking in areas where there is no SLS. There are four staff in three FTE posts. Throughout the year boxes of resources are prepared and are collected in person by schools. The public library van is available to the service once a week but generally schools collect their own resources, which makes it more flexible for them. Schools can call in throughout the term to get the resources they need. However, the start and end of school terms tend to be the busiest times because most schools prefer to change their resources at these times. Because the team know the schools well, they know which schools are

likely to want to change resources termly, half-termly or on a more ad hoc basis. Schools from out of the area tend to pay a bit extra to have the resources delivered, and also like to take more things at once. The SLS has recently moved premises which has made them a little less accessible for some schools.

The local children's book awards run throughout the academic year, starting with a long list in autumn culminating with an awards ceremony in June. Schools join from around January when the short-list has been decided. The book award is for key stage 3 and forms part of the service level agreement for the secondary schools so they usually all participate. Long list books are chosen based on recommendations from the specialist children's book supplier Peters, who review new titles. The service, in-house expertise, resources and opinions provided by Peters is very valuable to the SLS as a whole.

The SLS has recently moved because the former premises were sold by the council for other purposes. The service is now housed in the same building as one of the public libraries, along with other services- the books at home service and other reader services. In the shared space the SLS has a project loan room and a fiction room that teachers can visit where books are shelved. Teachers often come and select their own books from here. A corridor is used to store boxes of books coming in or going out, and a separate space for boxes of class readers. Class readers are very popular with schools and are sometimes reserved a year in advance. The sets are of around 30 books so that each child in a class could have one. Mini-sets of 15 books are also popular, and the smaller sets that would once have been used for guided reading are useful if teachers want multiple copies.

Other than the move there haven't been major changes recently. The services offered have tended to remain the same- such as the annual fiction loan. This is the core of the service- book loans. Advisory services are offered but are usually in response to what a school needs or has asked for support with. Some potential changes might be computerising the service. This will have repercussions around the storage of books- where they are kept on the shelves and how they are categorised, so some thought is needed before doing this.

The team know the schools they work with well and are familiar with the way the schools like to work. The types of schools using the service are from different parts of the local area and have different characteristics. The SLS is focused on being responsive to school needs- for example, the stock of dual language books has been increased following requests from schools. Resources are selected in collaboration with other advisory services such as the LA Ethnic minorities and travelers service. Schools are seeing higher numbers of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and the SLS is thinking about ways they can support these needs in the future.

The service is funded by school subscription but benefits from the use of shared resources such as the public library van, which reduces costs. Overall, the SLS is not part of a council department but part of Salford Community Leisure which is a separate trust

Users have said they couldn't do what they do without the SLS, especially around reading for pleasure and celebrating reading. It can be difficult to be proactive and promote the service with all the day-to-day work, and it feels like a different role than running the service. It would be good to be able to attend more local meetings with teachers, for example, to talk about what can be offered. The 'Libraries in Primaries' project has been operating in the area, but although it is marvellous for schools to have

new books for the library, it has meant one school dropping out of the SLS because they had a whole lot of new books. At the same time, working with the NLT has had some positive effects for the SLS too. All participating schools attended a training day, which the participant was invited to attend along with a colleague from public libraries. They were given a slot to speak about their service, and the participant had several useful informal conversations with teachers during the day. When it comes to schools serving specific demographics, there are potential gaps in the kinds of books the service is able to offer that meet their requirements. Work needs to be done with schools to think about sustainability.

Schools would find ways to manage without the service, but it wouldn't be as good. There is a bit of a downward drift from schools, with one or two schools dropping out each year. They usually still value the service but say they can no longer afford it. The extent of the stock means schools can't always be guaranteed the resources they want- you can't always just buy everything the school asks for, because it is being done on a shoestring. The aim is to spend £30,000 a year on stock, but the accountant has the final say on what can be spent. A potential way to counter this loss of schools is to continually reach out to schools and draw attention to the various services the SLS offers, especially since the people involved change fairly frequently and may not be aware of its benefits. The reading framework, with an emphasis on reading for pleasure, is an opportunity and has been helpful for the SLS. Advisory services are also an area that can be developed- helping schools with their libraries. There are no qualified librarians currently working in the schools in the area, so this impacts the sort of advice needed. School libraries might be being run by people with little experience, or by no-one at all. It is a very mixed picture across the area. Another area to explore is finding more time to work with schools and to develop relationships with individual schools to understand and respond to their needs. There is potential to be more proactive than reactive. There is room for the SLS to develop more links with local networks by approaching groups like literacy coordinators and newly qualified teachers in order to promote their services. Another avenue for collaboration and development is working with local SEND officers in order to adapt/expand the books they offer schools. The SLS also has the advantage of its proximity to a major city without an SLS of its own; they can approach city schools to offer their services.

The heart of the service is the books and the staff. The team are very enthusiastic, interested in learning about children's books, and committed to doing whatever it takes to make the service a success. They are also keen to continue building a diverse and inclusive stock based on current conversations as well as the communities they serve. Flexibility and responsiveness are also key ingredients to a successful service. Another crucial factor for success is support from the wider library service and the local council. An SLS cannot stand alone.

Case study 4

Understanding local communities

This is a small urban SLS in the south of England, which is part of the Education Service of the local council. There are around 50 schools using this SLS, mostly primary schools,

many of which have a significant number of pupils who are eligible for pupil premium funding.

A unique feature of this SLS is sending out professional librarians to work in schools. Many of the primary schools do not have professional librarians and therefore can lack the expertise needed to run a library properly. Librarians from this SLS go into schools for anything from half a day to three days a week to run their libraries. When introduced, the schools had more budget available for this service than they do now; however, despite budget constraints the schools continue to prioritise these librarians in residence as they have seen how valuable their contributions are. Fourteen schools currently access this service, which addresses professional skills gaps in schools. It can be hard to manage the team's capacity to deliver this service; one librarian for example currently works in six schools. Some of the librarians are training for qualifications such as the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals accreditation (CILIP) or an MA. These are part-time roles so can attract people moving towards retirement. They need to be happy to work alone with remote support, so it can suit librarians or former teachers.

Book awards are a common feature of SLS provision, but in this SLS, there is also a writing competition offered as part of a Creative Literature package. Secondary schools in the area were drawn to this because they have become more interested in events than in borrowing books. There was a poetry slam previously run by education support teams in the area, which the SLS took on when budgets were cut to educational support services after 2010. So now, there is a poetry slam, a creative writing competition, a book award and a World Book Day event provided in addition to the resource lending and advisory services. In the past, when more schools subscribed, there was enough money to run the events in-house, but now extra funding needs to be sought through local and national grants. The poetry slams and writing competitions are popular because they tackle the underrepresentation of different groups. For example, putting Muslim and Bengali poets into schools helps children from those populations see themselves represented in arts. Diversity, inclusion, equality and anti-racist resources are in demand in the area.

The SLS currently has an Arts Council Grant, and awards from local organisations which fund heritage and history projects. As well as supporting the events, which add value for subscribing schools, the grants help the SLS make bespoke resources requested by schools. For example, local schools have asked for projects on the Shang Dynasty, Islamic Empires, Windrush and the fall of the British Empire. Local history projects are in high demand and can be very specific to the locality.

The grants allow SLS staff to research and develop customised heritage resources that explore different local histories and also fill gaps in existing resources. Teachers use an online form to request services and order resources. A list of things that are difficult for schools to source and purchase independently, such as specific local history items is provided and compiling this has led the SLS to consider bidding for money to further build up this collection.

It is important for this SLS to keep an eye on when grants might be coming to an end, and to try to spread all the work out over the year so that it is manageable for staff. Two members of the team are always looking at what is being published and keeping up with industry developments. Checking the condition of returned resources- especially artefacts- is another ongoing job. A lot of staff time is taken up with applying for

external funding; it can feel like chasing the money comes to dominate the work. While grants have several advantages, funder requirements can sometimes limit the other kinds of services that the SLS would like to explore.

The SLS is due to relocate to an old school building in a few months. The current location is very expensive. The whole professional development centre is moving and the SLS will have some space in the former gym and the kitchens. The SLS has always been squeezed into spaces that are not purpose built and it is not clear how long the new location will be available for. The SLS will be working alongside other education support services, as well as other council services not related to education. Being part of the Education service has advantages because SLS is seen as and works in collaboration with other educational support services. However, the particular needs of the SLS and its staff are not always understood. Office space for example is essential, as SLS staff need ready access to the books and artefact collections. Working remotely from home is not a possibility.

The current space is set up as a library with around 10% of the shelves used for artefacts. Schools can come in to use the space for meetings. The artefact boxes are ready made up, but all the book boxes are bespoke.

School systems are quite fragmented with academy chains, independent schools and others having different curricula and therefore different requirements. Organisations, including charities, offer very cheap book collections to schools and the SLS can't compete with that. But the selections are all the same, wherever you are in the country, which might not be the right thing for every school. The SLS creates bespoke boxes as the best solution to meeting schools' diverse needs. Schools appreciate the flexibility and the fact that they can make special requests for individual children if need be. Special Educational Needs has become an increasing priority in the area, so more work is going into putting those resources together.

The local area is very diverse and there is a lot of call for dual language books, and there is a lot of focus on underrepresented groups, particularly on their part in history. However, the diversity has also led to some schools self-censoring books which might not be well received by the community. It is a very complex area and local knowledge is paramount. It's all about providing teachers with the tools to tell the stories about all the communities. The SLS is very flexible and helps teachers whenever they need resources to support new student communities and their relevant requirements.

As an education service the SLS is valued locally, though school budgets remain an issue. A lot of schools still value connection to the services offered by the local council, even though school provision has become fragmented across academy chains. Schools need to accept that libraries are expensive and take investment- it can't be done on the cheap. Even a newly developed library needs to be nurtured and updated, otherwise it will wither away again; not all schools seem to understand this. The SLS needs to be able to communicate the value provided, especially to some of the bigger academy chains. School libraries themselves have been underfunded for so long that people don't always understand the value they can provide. There's a whole generation of teachers and even SLT who haven't experienced a good quality, working school library. There's a memory gap to fill and SLSs need to be good at demonstrating what they can offer. Connecting with other SLS can help, and supporting schools in areas where the SLS has closed is a way to spread knowledge about the services. The website and promotional videos can

give a taste of what is available, but it is better if teachers come to visit- they are amazed by what is available.

The heart of the service is the team- their knowledge and enthusiasm, and the variety of resources that are available for loan. A key element is being part of the local education support network with the council. This shows that an SLS is professional education support. You can't operate in a silo and need to be part of a wider network. Being part of a wider local network is important as is being flexible in terms of the offer to schools and having the freedom to adapt. An SLS also needs staff who are specialists in children's education and children's literature- it needs to be more than just a bookshop. One day there'll be some kind of revolution and every area will have its own dedicated SLS again!

Case study 5

Book knowledge- getting the right book to the right child

This is a very large SLS with almost 500 schools, covering a whole county in the south of England. There are four centres which serve schools in different parts of the county, which has both rural and urban areas. Each centre has around 100 schools. Centres in the north of the county are able to recruit schools from other areas where there is no SLS, which is an important growth area. Each centre has a lead advisor who liaises with the schools. Because these roles are term-time only it has got harder to recruit qualified librarians to these roles. It is hoped that the CILIP apprenticeship will help with this. Each centre also has clerical assistants and drivers for the small fleet of vans. There are about 2.5FTE staff in each centre which means they are very busy. In addition, there is a stock and systems team at the headquarters who administer subscriptions, stock, the virtual learning environment and the digital library.

The service has seen a lot of change in the last five years, and is dynamic, flexible and responsive. There is a constant drive to be relevant and improve. There are book awards going on throughout the year, they have been spread out to make the workload manageable. There is a picture book award for key stage 1, and an information book award and an illustrated book award for older readers. The local area book award is for years 8-9. There are usually six shortlisted books for each award and content notes and information are provided to go with them so that teachers can use them in lessons. There are always booklists being created - such as transition booklists - and lists of recommended reads for different year groups are created throughout the year. Also going on throughout the year is book selection, the arrival of new stock and weeding stock. This summer all the books have been computerized so there was a complete stock take. Alongside this there are the routine exchanges of resources. The assisted selections option gives schools two exchanges a year which are agreed individually with schools. There are no project loans with fixed return dates, the loans are effectively indefinite. Budgets for the coming financial year have to be set in autumn, so there is always a sense of looking ahead to what is coming next.

Very few schools have dedicated librarians, especially in the primaries. This means that schools are needing more advice and support- including how to shelve books.

Sometimes a box is taken into a school to be exchanged and the previous one is still there and hasn't been unpacked, which is really disheartening, but it is about time and expertise. A lot of schools don't have or want a library management system because it

takes too much time to administer. Some of the newer systems for schools will chart a child's reading and progress, but there's no staff to administer it or use the data. A more basic one is more popular in schools in this area. It can be a real challenge working with schools when the staff change- or the person with responsibility for the library changes, and then the relationship has to be built again from scratch.

The SLS operates as a business within the county council framework and though was previously top sliced and provided to all schools. The SLS is a 'sold service' which needs to cover its costs and ideally make a surplus. The pressure on council budgets has increased the pressure on the SLS to generate a surplus. Covering costs includes paying rents on the different buildings as well as other bills. The current headquarters space is a top floor in the public library building and is available for teachers to come in to use and select books. It is possible that in the future this space will be under pressure or required for other council services.

Covid made a huge difference and led to a lot of digital upskilling. Changes in leadership have been significant in thinking about the service differently and enabling it to develop. The sustainability agenda has also been a key aspect in recent changes. The mobile libraries for each centre were discontinued because they weren't very economically viable or very green. Now the vans are used with the assisted selection model, taking 200 books out to 4 schools at a time. In light of schools' budget pressures, there has been a lot of thought about what to charge- how to give schools value for money whilst keeping the service sustainable. This has led to targeted activities like 'SLS at Home' in which schools nominate pupils to receive books to take home over the holidays. This last summer 1000 pupils were supported in this way. Teachers and SLTs can see that these initiatives really benefit the schools, but also meet some county literacy targets and show that the service is part of a bigger picture.

There is also 'reading role models' which is a summer reading challenge for teachers- very similar to SLS at home but for teachers. If a member of staff registers, they are sent something to read over the summer, which they then fill in a short online form about. This form generates a poster that can be put up in their classroom to show what they've been reading. About 900 staff registered this year- not just teachers- and they get to keep the books for their school. The books sent out are no more than 3 years old, just to try to broaden teachers' knowledge of children's books. The feedback has been really good and headteachers are very positive about it. These kinds of things help to raise the SLS profile, because it showcases expertise too, in terms of reading culture and book knowledge.

There is a really good relationship with lots of schools, though lead advisors have schools they want to target who don't use the service or don't make use of what they are paying in to. Once there is a foothold, the relationship usually develops well and some new schools- including from out of area- are coming to the SLS based on reputation. Working closely with the local advisory service means that the SLS can respond to the identified needs of schools. For example, if a school is struggling with literacy levels the inspectorate might recommend that the SLS goes in to support school improvement. The area is quite mixed with wealthy areas and pockets of deprivation, but it's not ethnically diverse. So the SLS has to contextualize its collection of diverse and inclusive books differently than in some other parts of the country.

One of the challenges is not being able to demonstrate impact on the end user- i.e. the children. It would be great to say that literacy levels went up in a school because of the



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SLS but they couldn't prove it, except anecdotally. When staff come from areas which don't have an SLS, they sometimes don't appreciate the role the SLS can play. Even if it is in just exposing children to books their schools couldn't afford, the SLS does make a difference. Schools wouldn't continue to subscribe if it didn't. If schools pull out and stop subscribing, it could mean the SLS isn't having enough impact for them to see it as value for money, but feedback always gives them very high value for money ratings. Maybe they take this service for granted! Financial instability is a challenge and is the real reason schools pull out.

Not all schools even have libraries- a lot were lost during Covid when schools had to use the space differently, and in other schools the library gets moved round every term. For some headteachers the library just isn't important, and this means it is such a lottery for children. To some extent, being possibly under threat makes the service innovative and always ready to try to give schools what they need. It is also about making things as easy as possible for schools. They don't have the money and they don't have the time. In future, thinking about how data is presented to show the impact of the service will be key- but presented simply such as in a graphic. This might help with advocacy- having something simple to demonstrate value, such as to governors or PTA. Advocating to governors is potentially impactful and so online sessions have been run for governors to get them to think about school libraries. It is about being creative in terms of how the SLS can influence decisions at school level.

The heart of the service is the books and the exploitation of the books. The books fund is healthy and new books are bought every week; the SLS adds keywords and levels the book, then classifies it. These keywords are constantly updated and teachers/school librarians can use them to look for specific themes, genres and books they'd like for their classroom. It isn't just about the books, it's about the information and expertise the SLS provides about the books that can then help teachers/school librarians get the right book to the right child. The SLS works with advisory teams and sources high quality texts, not just the latest bestsellers- this really adds value, and there is strength in this collaboration. Schools can see the whole SLS catalogue and search using keywords, then select books they would like. The SLS buys books if schools request them. There are not any different levels of subscription- a school either buys in or it doesn't, there is no 'menu' of choices. This is because there is a risk that schools always choose the cheapest option and then the service becomes unviable. The secondary subscription does have levels, but they are bigger and need more books; it would be difficult to run an SLS with primary schools alone.

Case study 6

Local connections

This is a small urban SLS in the northeast, staffed by one librarian and two assistants, serving around 58 schools. It is very closely embedded with the Public Library service and there is a lot of joint working. There is a crossover in terms of budget and staffing, which is a unique feature of this SLS. The SLS has an income target but isn't self-financing. The income target has to be generated through school subscriptions, but the service doesn't need to cover staffing costs. The book fund is within the public library funding. At the start of the year there will be a budget set for children's books and the SLS receives a portion of that.

The assistants work across the public library and the SLS, and have customer support roles too. The library services have recently been rebranded as community hubs with a range of help and support services being offered in the same building. The assistants can be pulled away from SLS to take on other front-line roles, but equally at busy times the SLS can call on extra help from the Public Library so the close working can be a benefit. Knowledge is shared across the teams and everyone working in the public libraries is very supportive of each other. People will help to deliver projects, for example, if a school has missed a delivery. Some of the services and events provided cut across both the SLS and public library- a good example of this is the Northern Children's Book Festival. All the library services in the region are involved, and the librarian from this SLS organises the events that are most local to this service. So, she might organise the visits of authors and illustrators to schools, but on the day of the event the whole team gets involved. This means the SLS can deliver and be part of much bigger events despite its small staff. The working group for the festival has representatives from each library authority- it has been running for 41 years.

There are good links with other SLSs in the region- although not every area has one, but being part of the public library service means the SLS is very connected and well networked. Problems, suggestions, contacts and information are shared across the different SLSs in the region- there is no sense of isolation. Different SLSs have different strengths and insights, and this collective intelligence is shared in regular meetings. Although it is a small area people are all connected through different networks and the things they are involved with, so it might be ASCEL or Libraries Connected, or the book festival. Planning for this SLS is in tandem with the public library children's service, including events and outreach, community work and so on. They can't really do one thing without the other. The current SLS librarian was formerly a children's librarian in the public library and has a huge amount of knowledge.

The working year tends to follow the academic year. Schools buy in through an online portal which opens in January but most leave it until the last minute! Around Easter can be a worrying time, waiting to see whether schools will buy in. Subscriptions can be taken on at any point during the year on a pro-rata basis which helps if schools aren't able to fully commit right at the beginning of the year. Taster boxes can be a good way of getting schools on board. Teachers always love them, but they aren't usually in charge of the finances. They have even had teachers enquiring about individual personal subscriptions when a school won't/can't subscribe to them. It is not a subscription option the SLS can offer but it demonstrates the value of the service the SLS offers.

There are four subscription levels, with the highest-level including deliveries, consultancy and discounts on author visits. In addition, schools can buy add-ons, such as a Chatterbooks reading pack or a library refresh. Chatterbooks is the Reading Agency's reading group for children- it comes with lots of nice resources. Prices are not per pupil or per book, the prices reflect the level of service, so schools can opt for what they want. They also developed a separate reading for pleasure offer which is popular with secondary schools that their service struggles to serve with its current stock. It is also used by schools who subscribe to the more basic levels as an add-on feature. It is really a modular system because even in a small authority one size doesn't fit all.

The service is always reactive to any changes, either at policy level, locally or within individual schools. For example, the Reading Framework was a good opportunity to promote the service. When the SLS switched to online order forms, they lost in personal

communication what they gained in administrative efficiency. There are now fewer opportunities to speak to teachers, who would previously come to the SLS office, and discover their different priorities in order to better serve them. The SLS continues trying to find ways to receive nuanced and relevant feedback from schools and teachers to be able to support their changing needs and stay relevant. A key thing is making sure that people still know about the SLS and are using it to full capacity. It might be that in a school a couple of teachers are really involved but other staff don't necessarily get the message. If a headteacher isn't aware and doesn't understand the value of the services that can affect whether schools subscribe; so it is really important to keep getting the message out. Schools have lots of demands on their finances and SLS is not always the top of the list.

The schools in the area are a mixture of two and three tier systems, so there are some middle schools as well as primary and secondary. Sometimes there is a geographic reason for not buying in- they might be able to get services elsewhere, but generally money is the key factor. The quality of the services and resources is very high, all the project boxes are bespoke for each teacher, even with the small number of staff employed. This is why it helps if schools get their requests in in good time. Some of the topic requests coming in are very niche, and there are not always books published to meet the requirements- but the public library can sometimes help. The contents of the boxes are matched to the schools for appropriateness, rather than keeping a generic set for common topics.

A year 1 class in one school can be very different to another school, so having very good knowledge of the schools means the resources can be well matched to their needs. The SLS is continually buying stock throughout the year, because needs change all the time- there might be new topics coming through, or a need to replenish different areas of stock.

Strategically, there is a need to make sure that the SLS offer is one schools can't do without, and for that you need knowledge of what headteachers want and what influences their decisions. Although this isn't always possible, the service does have a good relationship with the School Improvement Service, who are very supportive. They invite the SLS to network meetings including a slot on the agenda to talk about anything new coming up. The School Improvement Advisor runs a teachers' reading group and members of the SLS team are involved. Sometimes if the meetings are in person, they are held in the SLS building which is a good way to introduce teachers to the resources. Online, they link to the SLS website and catalogue to constantly highlight the fact that schools can borrow these books rather than buy them.

Being networked outside the region can help with confidence in the service; it helps to see what other people are experiencing and put your own experiences into context. All SLS are unique and there isn't a one size fits all, but it helps to have an open relationship with other local SLS so you can work together without any sense of 'poaching' each other's schools. The SLS very much values and prioritizes its local connections and networks. There's a limit to how much this service can take on and they do not necessarily want/are able to expand. Their aim is to keep the current roster of schools that use their services happy. They also value fresh perspectives and implement changes in their service based on these new viewpoints; this has ended up helping both SLS and school staff. Every year, the team also discusses and plans add-on offers to their service based on their experiences and observations.

Being linked with the public library, as well as organisations like Book Trust and Book Start helps get a good sense of the local areas. The team know the authority well and understand which are areas of deprivation; this might affect the books that are recommended to different schools. Schools have been encouraged to come for class visits to the library, which again is useful for getting to know the makeup of the school. Until recently there was a children's mobile library which would visit the more geographically isolated areas that couldn't access a public library.

The service is valued locally, but people might think it is just about giving resources to teachers, whereas it is much more than that. The SLS underpins children's life chances in the area. The SLS promotes reading, education and attainment, which affects future prospects. This message about the holistic importance of their service is one the team want to consistently communicate. Teachers should be well-resourced and not have to buy things themselves- they have a right to a library service. If the service was under threat people would fight for it- but who knows if that would work? Support and advocacy from management leaders is a key component of this thriving service.

In terms of development, if there were more staff, different add-on services could be offered- such as actually running the Chatterbooks groups in school, not just supplying the resources – something schools have requested since they don't have the staff to do this themselves. It would be great to get out into schools more and keep the conversation going with schools so the service can always stay relevant. Teachers would like book lists because they tend to stick with what they know. The SLS team's expertise can help expand the books the teachers use in their classes to include more contemporary, local and diverse literature.

Knowledgeable staff are at the heart of the service because this allows for bespoke provision. Staff need enthusiasm and experience- not necessarily a library qualification. They are encouraged to draw on their diverse range of experiences as well as learn new skills to improve what the SLS offers. Another key ingredient is having adequate resourcing so they are able to have good quality stock that is current, relevant and constantly refreshed.

There needs to be advocacy, both from the SLS promoting its own service within the local community but also from the advice offered by national SLS networks. This advocacy can't be generic; different SLSs need to be able to tailor it to best represent them. It needs to suit their service, to promote the uniqueness of their specific SLS, and show what they can offer their local community and support its diverse needs.

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