

LIBRARIES CONNECTED & CULTURE COMMONS

# Library services in an increasingly devolved policy landscape

INSIGHT PAPER

Published as part of  
**the future of  
local cultural  
decision making**

An open policy development programme  
led by Culture Commons and Partners



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This Insight Paper was produced by **Libraries Connected** as part of [‘the future local cultural decision making’](#) – an open policy development programme led by **Culture Commons** and a coalition of UK-wide partners.

## Abstract

This Insight Paper captures the perspectives of senior library services leaders from across the UK on range of subjects associated with devolution and increased local decision making. This Insight Paper will be submitted as formal evidence to the open policy development programme and inform a suite of policy positions that will be published later in 2024.

## Keywords

libraries; library services; devolution; increased local decision making

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## Culture Commons

Culture Commons bring the creative, cultural and heritage sectors together with the research community and policymakers to co-design new policy and influence decision making at the local, regional and national levels. We are leading **'the future of local cultural decision making'** on behalf of a consortium of UK-wide partners.

You can find out more about us at [www.culturecommons.uk](http://www.culturecommons.uk)

## Libraries Connected

Libraries Connected is a membership organisation representing heads of library services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We take a leading role in the development of public libraries through advocating for the power of libraries, sharing best practice and helping to shape the public library service now and in the future.

You can find our more about us at [www.librariesconnected.org.uk](http://www.librariesconnected.org.uk)

## The Programme

['the future of local cultural decision making'](#) is an open policy development programme led by Culture Commons and a coalition of partners made up of local governments, sector representatives, arm's length bodies, grant giving bodies and leading research institutions.

Together, we are exploring how further 'devolution' and/or increased local decision making might impact on the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem in different nations and regions of the UK.

More information about the programme can be found on the dedicated [digital hub](#).

## Open Policymaking

Open Policymaking was described by UK Government in 2014 as a process that 'opens up the formation of public policy to a wider variety of stakeholders'.

Culture Commons have adopted some of the key principles sitting behind this approach and elaborated on them when designing this programme, particularly the commitment to transparency.

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## **Context**

Library services are part of statutory provision that local authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland must provide to citizens. This means that each local authority must have its own library service which could be delivered directly by local authority itself, or commissioned out to a third party such as a charity or community/mutual interest company.

By definition, library services are therefore already part of decision making bodies in devolved structures – both as part of the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but also within new devolved structures such as combined authorities in England. Being part of local authorities at different tiers can be a help or hinderance.

There is no consistency in which local authority department library services sit within- for example it could sit within Health, Education or Communities etc. This means that different services have different experiences of working within their own local authority structures, let alone devolved structures above or below local authority level.

## Engagement

### **How engaged are libraries with different tiers of local government and to what extent do they support the creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem?**

A headline finding coming through from the contributors we spoke to is that engagement with different tiers of local government varies significantly both across and within local authority areas and regions.

Some unitary authorities (i.e. those that incorporate both county and district council functions) are now devolving responsibilities to Town and Parish Councils because they believe there is more flexibility in increasing local precepts (and hence funding) at that level. This can result in a patchy services (including library services) across the local authority because different towns and parishes have varying resources, levels of engagement and relationships with local authority wide services.

The structure of the local authority can have an impact on the way in which library services are engaged too: for example, unitary authorities were seen by some contributors to be easier to work within and across, particularly for libraries whose work sits across multiple directorates.

There was a general consensus across the group that it fundamentally comes down to professional relationships - there are enablers and gatekeepers across any structure of local authority and having the strategic capacity to cultivate these relationships is key to what the library service can achieve in a local area.

Another significant and recurrent theme during the conversations was that libraries can often be on the periphery of wider cultural discussions taking place in their areas. For example, in areas with City of Culture or other large Mega Events, libraries have often found themselves responding to an established strategy or programme of work, rather than being at the table alongside other key cultural stakeholders as active partners.



For some, this marginalisation is compounded by a predominance of performing arts and other cultural subsectors over, for example, literature and library services when it comes to thinking about cultural policy in place. In some cases, libraries have been able to bring additionality (both in terms of activity and funding) that has supported the programme post facto. It was widely agreed by contributors that this additionality could be leveraged more effectively if libraries were brought to the table in strategic discussions about culture, creative and heritage at an early point.

**“when it comes to expectations and activities of libraries, everyone recognises just how broad the work they do is, but when it comes to funding and having a seat at the table, we’re seen as just a bookshelf”**

Learning from the library services representatives operating within the devolved nations, the group identified a need for libraries to be an active partner in the development of cultural strategies to secure engagement of the wider sector and identify opportunities for libraries to use their physical civic and cultural infrastructures to connect cultural strategies and programme up with citizens and the other policy areas that their services often cut across, including health, education, social care, and community development.

## Risks & Opportunities

### What do you anticipate the opportunities of further devolution and increased local decision making in your region/nation to be for your library service and the broader creative, cultural and heritage ecosystem?

Throughout a wide ranging discussion, contributors identified several potential opportunities:

- **Increased funding and local support**  
Devolving decision making powers to town council's could result in more local funding and support for libraries. Several leaders spoke of examples where town councils had stepped in to support struggling local library services. However, it was noted that where funding has been secured this had often been for specific objectives such as digital skills, enterprise, new business development and not specifically for 'culture'.
- **Services at scale**  
It was felt that working across combined authority areas could introduce a degree of scale and reach for library services that could have several benefits. For example, the West Yorkshire Combined Authority has five local authorities and 119 library sites with over 600 staff whose skills and capacity could be augmented to provide new regional services; for example, digital engagement and inclusion support, frontline business advice, citizen engagement and other citizen facing services. Combined authorities could utilise existing capacity within the library services in their areas to deliver new services at scale while supporting cultural and social infrastructure at the same time.
- **Joint library boards**  
There is a facility within the Public Libraries Act for local authority library services to formally collaborate in a joint library board. If

appropriately adopted, contributors felt this could allow areas to work together in a more concerted way (for example as part of a devolution agreement) to form a single coordinated library service at combined authority level, rather than individual local authorities. However, it was pointed out that this has not been tested yet and that given the Act is now 60 years old, there has not been recent appetite to try this.

In addition, the contributors identified several potential risks that they felt it would be important for the programme partners to consider as part of the policymaking process.

- **Inconsistent support and fragmentation**

It was felt by most contributors that there is a distinct risk of creating an inconsistent level of support for library services across regions, particularly in areas that could potentially be 'left behind' because they are not part of an area with immediate medium term plans to develop devolved governance arrangements. One area highlighted how their new combined authority had 'left out' those places and places just outside the combined authority boundaries despite the library service having a successful collaboration agreement in place between culture and library services.

**“Libraries have been working collaboratively for years, and these new devolved structures don't always line up with this - this puts long standing collaborations at risk”**

- **Marginalisation across devolved areas**

Many of the devolution settlements currently being agreed involve larger (often rural/semi urban) local authorities with small (often deprived urban) local authorities. There are concerns that the needs of smaller local authorities could be subsumed by the demands and resources of the larger partners - and often there is a strong

cultural and historical reason for the establishment of separate local authorities.

- **Structural and relational barriers to effective engagement.**

Several contributors spoke about libraries clearly being part of the cultural landscape, but that they are often at the bottom of the funding and priority list. Another agreed, noting the historical difficulty of getting libraries recognised as key cultural partners. In one devolved region, a representative highlighted the ongoing struggle with underfunding for libraries in the region and the lack of a dedicated advocacy body for libraries.

## **Contributing to devolution**

### **How do you think libraries can contribute and support devolution and increased local decision making - particularly in the context of citizen engagement?**

#### **Enhanced Community Engagement**

A contributor drew attention to a local authority with at least one library in each ward using those libraries as sites for communicating and engaging with citizens, as well as providing a forum for discussions with key decision makers (e.g. through surgeries and workshops).

Another gave an example where libraries were being used as the means of engagement with the public about the local authority's plans to join a combined authority structure. High levels of trust in libraries amongst citizens was consistently cited as a key factor for these engagements being successful. Contributors felt there to be even more scope for libraries to engage and inform citizens about how the ongoing devolution process might impact their lives - for example, on transport, housing and cultural policy etc.

Some libraries are considering engaging in deliberative and participatory activities such as citizens assemblies as a more formalised way to engage local communities in decision making process. The focus of the projects cited during the roundtable was on facilitating 'real' engagements where communication to and discussion with and among communities would sit side by side with overt insight gathering to feed into the development of new plans for decision making processes..

Service leaders were keen to stress how well-positioned libraries are to act as community hubs, supporting citizens to engage with each other, local governance structures and services, including digital services, educational programmes, and community events.

Contributors highlighted that libraries are already increasingly engaging citizens far more than they were a few years ago in areas such as public health, transport and new/proposed housing developments.

**“Our super power is that we know what works in our communities and what doesn’t”**

### **Advocacy and representation**

Libraries acknowledged that they may need to be more proactive in advocating for their role within local cultural programming and strategies. This involves building strong relationships with local government representatives and ensuring that libraries are included in cultural planning and funding decisions, but also that they have the evidence and arguments they need to demonstrate their added value to communities. Making the opportunities and risks associated with devolution is one such way that library service providers can insert themselves meaningfully into local and regional debates on new decision making powers.

### **Leveraging existing relationships**

Successful examples raised during the roundtable highlighted the importance of leveraging existing relationships that library leaders have within local councils to identify mutually beneficial programmes which could help libraries to secure income and support. Collaborations that prove to be particularly fruitful could be scaled up and replicated in other regions to enhance the role of libraries in local decision-making.

**“Libraries are in every community - we know our communities better than any department.”**

## Conclusions

There is significant variability in the levels of engagement between library services and regional devolved bodies and within local authorities. This could see some library services missing out on the opportunities afforded by devolution to collaborate more meaningfully with local and regional governance bodies, and by extension, the local citizens they serve.

There is a clear potential for library services to contribute significantly to the strategic objectives of both local and combined authorities and those of devolved governments, but this often requires someone in a relevant department to recognise that and form the relationships proactively. However, the strategic capacity within the library sector to create, maintain and develop these relationships has been eroded through the broader erosion of public library funding. To exploit this potential consideration needs to be given to how this is recognised across local and combined authorities, ensuring library services are funded to (re)develop the strategic capacity they need, and connecting into library services where the capacity is not currently there.

Library services appear to be too often marginalised in wider cultural strategy and programming activities. Clearly library services need to consider how they might be able to re-position themselves as both critical civic, but also cultural infrastructure, and reconnect with the creative, cultural and heritage sectors within a place. Consideration could be given to how a new forum of some kind could enable this read across to take place in a more concerted way.

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