



**Libraries
Unlimited**

••• ENRICHING LIVES,
••• BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Impact Report 2022-23





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MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIR



PROFESSOR
WILL HARVEY

Chair of the Board
of Trustees

1st September 2023

In line with the rest of the country, it has been a challenging year with rising costs and significant pressures on our organisation and staff. We have had to negotiate significant increases in the energy bills for our buildings and rises in other expenses due to inflation.

Our Trustees have focused intensely on these funding challenges, and I am pleased to report that with strong financial management we have ended the year in a satisfactory position. We have reduced the size of our deficit, delivered savings on our expenditure, reduced the impact of changes to our funding income and increased our income in areas such as room hire, donations and events. We are grateful to have such an accomplished group of staff, managers and leaders to take us through these globally challenging economic times.

We had some excellent news this year with our Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation grant. This £720,369 grant across three years will enable us to bring even more workshops, art events, film screenings, touring theatre, author visits and other cultural events to everyone across Devon and Torbay, including people who are brand new to all that libraries offer.

We have also benefited from the government's Libraries Improvement Fund which gave us a £200,000 boost. The money means we can continue updating our IT infrastructure and improve our digital services. This underlines an important commitment that we have going ahead to invest in our libraries and upgrade our infrastructure, enabling libraries to remain warm, welcoming places and offering the latest technology to reach our customers. The first stage of this will be the introduction of new self-service kiosks in 2023.

This is our first full 12 months out of lockdown, and it has been gratifying to see our libraries back in action as community hubs. They

have not just picked up where they left off but have introduced new offerings such as our Libraries for Life campaign to help people through the financial challenges of the winter. Our staff have worked incredibly hard to meet the needs of the widest possible range of people and we know the feedback they receive for their efforts means so much to them. Recruitment and retention of staff remains a challenge in line with the national workforce shortage and we will continue to do all we can to make sure Libraries Unlimited is a rewarding place to work and volunteer.

Inflation and rising costs are predicted to continue to challenge us in the coming years and at the time of writing we are awaiting the Devon County Council Cabinet's final decision on the future of the mobile library service. However, we end the year in a place where we can be extremely proud of how we have worked together as a team to move through the difficult global financial climate. It has again been a privilege for us as a Board to serve our communities and we are incredibly proud of our staff and volunteers. Thank you for everything you have done. And, of course, thank you to our customers and supporters for all you do to show over again how libraries are a much-loved heart of our communities.

This will be my fifth and final year as Chair of the Board as I embark on a new professional and family adventure moving to Melbourne in Australia. Sadly, this will mean that I will need to step down from this voluntary role. It has been a real pleasure to lead the Board and witness the wonderful impact that Libraries Unlimited and its wider family have made on its communities. I have learned so much and salute you all for the incredible work you do in the service of others. I look forward to hearing about the next exciting chapter in Libraries Unlimited's future. I have absolute confidence and wish the new Chair, Alex our Chief Executive, and you all every success in the years ahead.

ALEX KITTOW

Chief Executive
Libraries Unlimited

1st September 2023



MESSAGE FROM OUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE

2022-23 was the year Libraries Unlimited proved without a doubt what incredibly versatile, vibrant community hubs libraries have become. Gone are the days when they were simply just quiet places to sit and read books.

Indeed, libraries are often really noisy these days! Post-pandemic, in summer 2022 Library Lates returned. This dramatically different way of welcoming people into our beautiful space in central Exeter was pioneered just before lockdown. The library was again filled with live music, DJs, a bar and creative workshops, all after normal closing time until late. And what a success it has been. So much so that we ran it again in November and March, and are extending it to Paignton and Barnstaple this coming year.

We've embraced our first full year out of Covid restrictions with our most ambitious and vibrant programme ever. Visitor numbers this year are well on their way back to pre-pandemic levels. Numbers of visits have increased from last year by 690k from

1,544,000 to 2,234,457. The number of events we've held has more than doubled - from 5,100 to 11,331 – which undoubtedly played a part. But we also believe people are seeking out libraries for the help they've been offering in the cost-of-living crisis. Because just as our communities came out of one crisis, another hit.

Steep rises in food, heating, fuel and multiple other bills left low-income households, even those in work, struggling with their finances. Libraries were there to meet the need. Our Libraries for Life campaign ran throughout the winter, offering everything from free hot drinks, a warm place to sit and a friendly face, to clothing rails, budgeting and cooking advice with access to community fridges combatting food waste. Our warm welcoming spaces were clearly offering extra value and

that shows in our statistics. Customers logging in to our free WiFi took a leap from 124,700 to 164,826 sessions. Our new WiFi printing facility, which has just been launched in every library, will add yet another useful offering to help with daily living, enabling people to print easily and quickly from their laptops or phones via a digital portal from wherever they are, pick up their documents and take them home.

Of course our foundation will always be books, and we're delighted that borrowing numbers are up too, from 1,317,039 to 1,534,610. In its second year, The Secret Book Quest continued to bring a love of reading to children, with over 3,500 signing up again this year, including many who had previously struggled to enjoy books. I've heard countless stories from staff around our libraries of youngsters also gaining confidence and social skills from their regular trips to the library to choose their books and claim their stickers. The initiative has been so successful, Libraries Unlimited is now marketing it to other library services around the country.

2022 also saw one of our most ambitious art projects. The Reading Tree sculpture took shape in the disused Gap store on Exeter

High Street. Over a number of weeks, curious shoppers dropped in to watch artist James Lake sculpt the giant tree out of cardboard, and join in with its creation. The tree is now a firm favourite in the heart of Barnstaple Library, providing a meeting space for further creative workshops.

None of this could have been achieved without the dedication of our incredible staff. Volunteers of course also make a huge impact in terms of what we can offer, and volunteering hours have shown a significant rise as we welcomed them back post-pandemic. On average in 2022-23 our libraries benefitted from over 350 volunteer hours being done a week. Although we aren't quite back at pre-pandemic levels yet, we're at 93% of the same quarter in 2018-19 – this is a great achievement when there is a nationwide challenge around volunteering and people changing their volunteering habits post-pandemic.

It was a landmark year, and I'm deeply grateful to everyone in the team who worked so hard to make it happen. Here's to an even more diverse, vibrant, and...yes....noisy in parts, 2023!

Book reading with writer Annabelle Sami in the Pop-Up Library



ANNUAL REPORT

KEY STATISTICS 2022/23



380

Mobile
Library stops



239,533

eBook
downloads



129,569

digital magazine
downloads



visits to our libraries





number of events

11,331

event attendance

190,834



1,534,610

books borrowed



235,342

eAudiobook
downloads



25,081

audiobooks
borrowed



56,808

large print
loans



164,826

WiFi sessions



163,921

public computer
sessions

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS 2022 – 23

Promoting a **love of reading**

Author Events

Author events continue to draw healthy numbers of enthusiastic readers to libraries to meet their favourite writers – and the sessions are now also reaching more customers online. From internationally renowned authors to local writers and those at the start of their careers, the events remain a bedrock of our mission to encourage a love of reading and books.

At the start of the year in April, Cridton Library hosted three online author talks for World Book Night. Louise Fein, Gabriella Braun and Victoria Scott met their readers over Zoom and answered their questions.

In September 2022, as part of the International Agatha Christie Festival, Brixham and Paignton libraries hosted crime author Kate Ellis, creator of the popular Wesley Peterson series. And Torquay Library welcomed six renowned crime writers for their cosy Crime Noir Night. Stephanie Austin, Elizabeth Ducie, S.M Hardy, Michael Jecks, Sarah Pearse and Susan Wilkins joined their readers to enjoy a chat, hot chocolate and marshmallows.

Stephanie Austin, author of the Death Mystery series, enjoyed delivering a talk and book signings at Newton Abbot Library as part of the Pen and Ink Convention, which celebrated comics and book art.

And Exeter Library's livestreamed author events were re-started this year under the new title: Meet the Author. Julie Anderson, who created the series of political thrillers featuring Cassandra Fortune, was the first guest to launch the refreshed programme of online events.

Kate Ellis murder mystery author event at Paignton Library



The Secret Book Quest makes a difference beyond Devon

The Secret Book Quest was launched in November 2021 with the aim of giving children a structured, fun way of achieving a 50-book goal using a free booklet illustrated by Emily Fox.

Thousands of five to 12 year olds around Devon and Torbay have boosted their reading skills with The Secret Book Quest, using their booklet to guide them through ten themed library zones, collect stickers, decipher a code and then get a special finisher prize and enter a free prize draw. In Devon and Torbay, by the end of March 2023, 6,000 children had signed up, and over 600 had read 50 books. Seventy two even carried on the Quest and hit the 100 book super target.

The Secret Book Quest helps to combat the decline in children's literacy as a result of the pandemic, with 78% of schools saying they were concerned. Children who've signed up to the challenge since its launch have borrowed three times as many books as other youngsters, on average. It has also boosted the retention of new children to the library by 15% and of existing child users by 26%.

As of March 2023, The Secret Book Quest was made available as a licensed model for other libraries and local authorities to run in their areas via an annual subscription, with the hope that children across the country can benefit from this creative initiative.

"Nothing can be more important than encouraging children to read. This is not simply about examination success, but about discovering a lifelong love of the joy of books - how they transport us to other worlds, allow us to learn about other people and places, and help us understand ourselves. The pandemic has highlighted the educational inequalities that have always been there - and the work of Libraries Unlimited to engage with the many disadvantaged children in Devon is critical."

Debra Myhill, University of Exeter Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for Research in Writing



Summer Reading Challenge

While The Secret Book Quest is Libraries Unlimited's year-round reading challenge for children aged over five, the Summer Reading Challenge runs specifically over the summer break to ensure children of all abilities are given fun incentives to keep up and improve their reading skills.

This year's Summer Reading Challenge set out to get children excited about science. The Gadgeteers introduced six fictional characters who use their curiosity and wonder to understand the science behind a whole range of everyday interests from fashion and technology to cooking and music.

This year 10,338 children took part in the Challenge, which is produced by The Reading Agency. Participation has increased significantly and is now almost back to pre-pandemic levels, with children signing up to read six books during the summer holidays – a time when reading skills can traditionally dip.

The Gadgeteers was launched at Newton Abbot Library and showcased the famous Railway Studies Collection, with a railway recycling challenge and the chance to dress up as a train driver for a special selfie.



Providing free access to resources and information

Supporting Ukrainian Refugees

Libraries were quick to step up to support refugees arriving after the start of the war in Ukraine on 24th February 2022.

As women and children settled in to life with their new host families across Devon and Torbay, libraries proved to be vital in helping them with everything from free computer sessions to support with employment.

Dozens of families were welcomed as new library members and given extra help and a range of services. English classes for Ukrainian speakers were rolled out across a number of libraries, and in Barnstaple there were special sessions held to help with visa processing.

The Community Renewal Fund Digital Devon Project helped families with digital skills and access throughout libraries. Libraries Unlimited also purchased and welcomed donations of over 500 printed books in Ukrainian, and offered a number of eBooks – all for free. Library Work Clubs welcomed the new arrivals to sessions helping them with CV writing, job applications and training.



21,492

volunteer
hours





Barclays Digital Wings helps customers with online safety

Helping customers become more alert to scams and fraud, and raising confidence online, was the focus of the Barclays Digital Wings project which was introduced this year.

Libraries across the county hosted experts from the programme throughout March. The free drop-in one-to-ones were aimed at boosting online skills, which can be used for everything from banking to job applications, as well as passing on valuable information on the sophisticated methods used by financial scammers.

The partnership is continuing in Newton Abbot Library with a local Barclays branch available for drop-ins five days a week. Over the next year this offer will be extended with similar services in more libraries including Honiton, Bideford and Torquay.

Inspiring everyone to learn, create and realise their potential

Boosting enthusiasm for science and engineering

Budding scientists and engineers were treated to free fun during the summer holidays. The Willmott Dixon-partnered Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) sessions were rolled out in 14 libraries including Exeter, Okehampton, Paignton, Torquay and Honiton.

Running alongside the Gadgeteers science-themed Summer Reading Challenge, the free activities invited six to 16 year olds to experience virtual reality and build their own bridges.

Approximately 200 children and young adults took part in the sessions, which were aimed at igniting children's enthusiasm for science and technology, and helping families struggling to find free things to do during the summer holidays. Willmott Dixon also supported Exeter's pop-up library in the autumn with free half term virtual reality sessions.



BIPC opens new hubs

Our Business & IP Centres (BIPC) in Devon expanded this year. The existing hubs in Exeter, Paignton and Barnstaple were joined by two new locations in the more rural communities of East and West Devon – Seaton and Okehampton.

The Women in Business initiative in 2022 coincided with International Women's Day and saw more than 23 events welcoming 169 women to the hubs across 13 weeks. There was a chance for co-working, networking, and free webinars, in-person events and online live sessions. The initiative was such a success it ran again from March 2023 – with 250 women signed up.

In April BIPC joined forces with FabLabs to help new businesses across North Devon and Torridge, and in July the Art of Business programme offered specific help to early stage creatives in music, writing, film-making, photography and art.

A budget of £15,000 was set aside specifically to help start-ups founded by people from ethnic minority backgrounds in August, and in September a £20,000 grant from NatWest helped 18 new female-founded businesses in the She Started It programme. The same month saw the ten-week Bedroom to Business course introduced for those wanting to launch their businesses, and in October it was followed by Business to Boardroom to help them grow to the next stage.

BIPC Devon also paid regular visits to Exeter Prison to meet with those soon to be released and chat about what the library can offer, and how the BIPC can support them to start a business.

Overall BIPC helped an impressive 2,309 people across 368 activities, its biggest numbers ever since the programme started.



Women In Business Course Launch event at The Botanist, Exeter

Multiply Maths initiatives in libraries

A new initiative to help people boost their maths skills was rolled out across 12 libraries in March, with funding from Devon County Council.

Free games sessions were offered which made learning fun. Visitors enjoyed everything from Monopoly, Uno and Dominoes to number-based app games, and 2D and 3D design workshops.

Multiply Maths was part of the government's Skills for Life programme, which aims to equip people to reach their potential and upskill to get the job they want.

The library sessions were designed to help people feel more confident in using numbers in their everyday lives, and there was even the option to progress to a maths qualification.

Enabling everyone to **explore** and **connect** to the wider world

Retail Carts in the heart of communities

The lobbies of libraries in Exeter, Paignton and Barnstaple were turned into mini marketplaces throughout the year.

Sellers and small home-grown businesses were given the chance to rent Retail Carts in libraries from as little as £20 a day. The cost-effective opportunity to showcase their products to local communities was taken up by a wide variety of sellers from rotary clubs to artisan makers.

The cart can be booked in Exeter Library for as little as a single day, or a full five-day week rental for £100. Options for retail stands are also available in Paignton and Barnstaple.

Two Library Bazaars were also hosted in partnership with MarketsInExeter, seeing more than 20 different traders participate in the takeover of the foyer in Exeter Library in October and December.





Digital skills support

Libraries provide a wealth of support for people who need a little extra help in accessing technology and the internet, which is now such an important part of connecting to everything from healthcare and banking, to educating children.

The Digital Champions project has been vital in helping people improve their digital literacy and confidently navigate the online world. At Northam Library, Digital Champions helped one man who had never used the internet and had no WiFi or device. He has now been gifted a tablet and a dongle via the scheme, and has an Amazon account for shopping and a Spotify account for accessing music. He said it has 'opened up a whole new world' for him.

Volunteers at Okehampton Library hosted one-to-one Family History sessions, teaching people how to access Ancestry on the library computers and trace their family tree. And in Bideford Library, Digital Assistance sessions have helped customers connect to the wider world in numerous ways including help with online voting, setting up Zoom, shopping and booking transport.



Offering welcoming spaces

Welcoming those with hidden disabilities

Initiatives to make libraries even more inclusive were introduced this year.

Thirty-three libraries showcased the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme. The initiative means that people with less visible or invisible disabilities are given an extra warm welcome and any additional help they may need.

The Sunflower is a globally-recognised symbol for non-visible disabilities including autism, chronic pain, learning difficulties, mental health conditions, speech impairments, and sight and hearing loss or deafness.

Staff now wear 'I Support the Sunflower' badges to indicate to customers with hidden disabilities that they will be supported with kindness, patience and understanding. Lanyards and wrist bands are also on sale for people who want to show they have a disability or condition that may not be immediately apparent. The proceeds help to raise money for Libraries Unlimited.

And libraries now stock the new 'Give me Space' logo-ed items, an initiative created in partnership with the RNIB to support people with disabilities to maintain social distancing during the pandemic. The use of the emblem has since evolved to encompass people with conditions such as autism or who don't like to be touched, to those with dementia who may become confused with strangers coming close.

Feedback from customers was overwhelmingly positive, and it's hoped to expand the scheme to more libraries around Devon and Torbay in the near future.



A new look for Kingsbridge Library

Customers to Kingsbridge Library had a spring in their step after a new carpet was fitted throughout the building.

The work was part of a programme of exciting improvements at Kingsbridge, which included the opening of a new meeting space created with £10,000 National Lottery money (along with Co-op Community Fund, Friends of Kingsbridge Library and Devon County Councillors). The room has a large Smart TV for presentations, free WiFi, a projector and screen. Users of the room can also access brand new kitchen facilities.

In March, the library unveiled a fresh look for the children's library and the area used by young people. The children's area has been decorated with a striking marine theme including a large mural of a whale and fish-shaped beanbags, and the area for young people has seating, fairy lights, houseplants and a chalkboard mural.



WiFi printing makes life easier

Customers using their laptops or phones in the library can now easily print out documents with a new WiFi printing service.

The facility was created after requests from customers. Two libraries undertook a trial of the system before it was rolled out across the board. Printing costs as little as 10p a sheet and there's the capacity to produce larger A3 size prints.

Customers can even print from home or on-the-go by logging into the Cloud printing portal, and then go to their library later to pick up their printed documents.



164,826

WiFi sessions



Supporting the **health and wellbeing** of individuals and communities

Grief brought to life through art

Artwork and music captured the stories and feelings of those who attended special grief cafes and workshop sessions in Paignton, Okehampton and Holsworthy.

The Finding Connection Through Loss project was launched in early 2022 with Arts Council England funding. The material gathered from the art workshops, music events and other activities was collated by creative collaborators and put on display in the libraries.

Composer Hugh Nankivell worked with communities around Paignton, hosting discussions about grief and loss with small groups and individuals at the library. The result was An Empty Space, a set of 22 songs about grieving. Artist Amy Shelton from Honeyscribe ran workshops in rural communities around Okehampton and Holsworthy along with the mobile library service and local support agencies. Participants dedicated their pressed flower creations to the people they missed, producing a final artwork bouquet of preserved flowers. The third artist was Sorrel Millen who captured images of the sessions with Amy and Hugh on paper with paint and drawing, and spent time on the mobile library.

An exhibition of the completed works toured Paignton, Okehampton and Holsworthy libraries at the start of 2023.





Walking groups

Getting out of the library became as important as time spent in the library this year! New walking groups were introduced in several libraries, helping combat loneliness and boost fitness and wellbeing.

St Thomas Library partnered with Sue from Exe Nordic Walking as a base for her classes. Participants enjoyed walks and companionship in locations ranging from the Ludwell Valley to Exeter Quay. The library also loaned out Nordic Walking poles, so people could go out and enjoy walks in between sessions.

Walk and Talk at Torrington Library proved to be a popular and friendly group, enjoying 30 to 40 minute walks exploring routes around Torrington, before stopping for a cuppa, cake and a chat at the local cafe.

Barnstaple Library hosted a weekly walking group for the over 55s called the Wednesday Wanderers. The group took part in Naturally Healthy May with funding from Active Devon, venturing out on a history walk to Barnstaple Guildhall and a tour round the Penrose Almshouses. There was also a walk and talk with Mark from One Small Step, a royal themed walk and visit to Barnstaple's Jubilee exhibition, and a trip to the Green Space Dark Skies event at the Valley of the Rocks.

Libraries for Life supports communities through the cost of living crisis

An ambitious six month programme to help communities through the winter 2022/23 cost of living crisis was rolled out across libraries, with funding and support from the Devon County Council Community Grants team, Torbay Council, The National Grid and Dartmouth Town Council.

The Libraries for Life campaign emphasised how libraries offer warm welcoming spaces and friendly faces, along with practical resources to help with loneliness, budgeting and health and wellbeing.

Existing in-library facilities such as community fridge projects and coat rails were expanded. Many libraries offered free hot drinks and other refreshments, and hosted advice sessions on debt and cooking on a budget. There was a renewed invitation to enjoy the free WiFi and computers, and join Bounce & Rhyme groups for babies and toddlers along with baby weighing sessions. Book clubs, Scrabble, digital skills sessions, Work Clubs, craft sessions and many more events and groups were promoted. Support and skills for finding employment and running a business were also showcased. Libraries displayed Reading Well selections of books covering a wide range of aspects of mental and physical health.

For more on the success of Libraries for Life, please see pages 30-33.

CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

Previously known as Evolve, Creative Communities is the programme of cultural activity in our libraries supported by the Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding and Exeter City Council. It brings together a wide range of creative events to communities across Devon and Torbay.

Looking back at the year:

WHAT IF YOU SPOKE?

Ten talented young journalists, poets and illustrators saw their work in print thanks to the What if YOU spoke? masterclasses, led by Libraries Unlimited in partnership with Pen to Print, University of Exeter, Africa Writes, Literature Works and Exeter City of Literature.

Literary prize-winners, published authors and award-winning illustrators ran the free online sessions for 15 to 25 year olds.

Devon-based winners and runners-up had their work featured over two issues of Write On Magazine by Pen to Print, which has a readership of over 55,000 across 178 countries. They were also given mentoring to continue their development. The free masterclasses continue to be available for other young people and anyone interested in creative writing.

“Winning helped me cement the understanding that writing is very important for me, and it has strengthened my confidence to follow and develop this passion.”

Filippo Rossi, Winner of Ali May's masterclass 'Journalism 101'

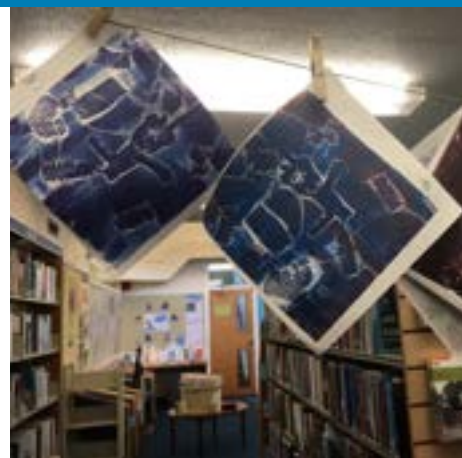


SUPPORTING THE INGRID POLLARD EXHIBITION

Libraries Unlimited collaborated with experimental visual art curator and producer Talking on Corners to run workshops and book displays to complement their exhibition of 2022 Turner Prize-nominee Ingrid Pollard's work at the Thelma Hulbert Gallery in Honiton.

Ingrid Pollard: Three Drops of Blood featured photography, print, mixed media, installation, text and found objects. It invited people to consider the complex effects of the historical importation and travel of plants and people, and some of the work was inspired by Devon including the rich lacemaking heritage of Honiton.

Honiton Library displayed a selection of books relating to the artist's work and practice, as well as offering a drop-in family-friendly collage workshop, led by visual artist Monica Shanta Brown. A workshop was also held for primary school children in Honiton, led by printmakers Double Elephant, which teachers said was "engaging, therapeutic, enriching".



POP-UP LIBRARY

One of the year's most popular events was the creation of the Reading Tree in the former Gap store in Exeter's High Street, which received an overwhelming amount of positive feedback and engagement from customers.

The break-out initiative brought library services and creativity directly to people in the city centre, who watched local sculptor James Lake create a life-size cardboard tree in six weeks. Visitors were encouraged to join in by painting leaves for the project and had the opportunity to stay and chat with James while getting creative.



Street performers entertained and directed people to the space, where there was a mini library on display with a range of books to borrow, the opportunity to find out more about libraries in Devon and Torbay and a chance for people to join the library.

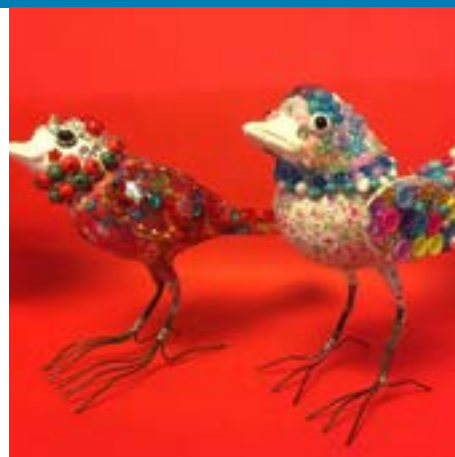
The pop-up library also hosted half term activities such as storytelling and zine-making workshops, as well as virtual reality exploration sessions delivered by Willmott Dixon. Exeter Seed Bank put on some free nature workshops and seed swaps, and there were author and artist talks along with wellbeing charity information stands and opportunities to view The Glass Room Exhibition on technology digital privacy. There were even drop-in sessions with the Business & IP Centre Devon, offering free business advice and support to visitors.

Once completed, the tree took its place in the heart of Barnstaple Library as a space for people to meet, relax and read.

DEVELOPING AUDIENCES

As part of a longer term Audience Development project, Libraries Unlimited commissioned art workshops aimed at reaching people across a diverse range of communities, including those who have never or rarely been to a library. These also sought to build deeper relationships with existing customers to enhance their experience of using libraries.

This audience development pilot was delivered in Barnstaple and Ilfracombe across six weeks. Artist Athena Jane Churchill ran art workshops under the branches of the Reading Tree sculpture for library visitors to join in, without pressure or expectation, as well as linking up directly with newly-formed communities of Ukrainian refugees, members of the Barnstaple Memory Café for people living with dementia and their carers, and organisations including Women's Refuge and residential children's homes.



Feedback was extremely positive, with visitors reporting their reservations about joining the library had been overcome. Work continues on creating the Audience Development Strategy and these pilot projects provide valuable data.

We also brought back some of our popular events and touring library experiences this year, including the film festival Films at the Library, augmented reality installation Unlocking the Cage and escape room experience The Lost Librarian. Exeter Library hosted three more Library Lates evenings of art and music after hours, which have become a staple in Exeter's event calendar.

CREATIVE COMMUNITIES: AN EXCITING YEAR AHEAD

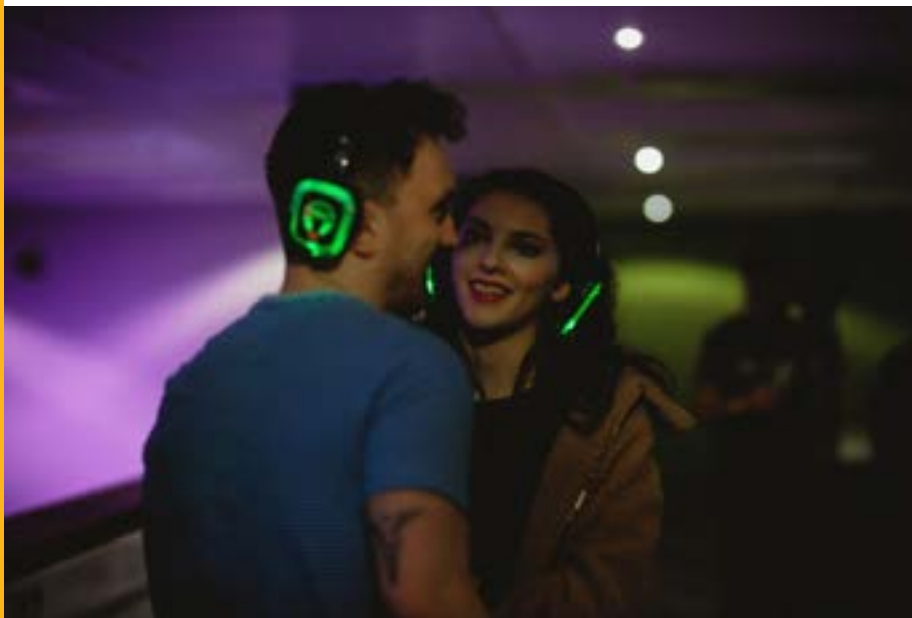
New funding and a great programme of events to come

Libraries Unlimited received the affirming news that it secured Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding to extend its thriving programme of music, films, workshops and creative events over the next three years.

The £720,369 grant will run from 2023 to 2026. It's a continuation and increase in existing Arts Council funding which began in 2018, and means that activity will be extended beyond Devon and into Torbay. An additional £10,000 has been secured from Exeter City Council to continue their support of the Creative Communities programme.

Plans are under way for a range of high quality creative and cultural opportunities across Devon and Torbay. Library Lates will be extended to Barnstaple and Paignton after being successfully trialled in Exeter. New and inspiring artwork, developed with and for communities, will be commissioned and displayed. More film screenings will also be rolled out, along with creative workshops, cultural events, touring theatre, talks and author events, all with an emphasis on community engagement, equality, diversity and inclusion.

The money will have a particularly big impact in Torbay, with additional investment of over £196k. Paignton will be the focus of this initiative as, together with North Devon, it's identified as one of ACE's Levelling Up for Culture Places. Our events programme links into ACE's 10-year Let's Create strategy.





Three special seasons of events are planned for 2023-24 which will utilise the ACE funding:

SPRING

PRIDE OF PLACE

was being rolled out in spring 2023. It's a push to connect communities through a celebration of people and where they live.

AUGUST

GET CREATING

launched in August with a focus on creative fun for everyone.

DECEMBER

A BETTER TOMORROW

kicks off in December to celebrate local action and the global environment.

Cultural activity will come to all libraries throughout the three-year NPO programme, with libraries having the opportunity to curate events and activities for their communities. Customers can also expect to see familiar offers such as our touring installations and film screenings at their library.

The new cultural programming scheme will ensure access to events for everyone, with different price points that feel right for our communities, which we very much hope will break down barriers for participation and bring cultural events to all.

Funded by:



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

EXETER
LIVE BETTER



Impact story

Florence's love of books has come on in leaps and bounds with the help of the Summer Reading Challenge.



Seven-year-old Florence was struggling to learn to read. But after two summers of the Summer Reading Challenge, and a little healthy competition with her older brother Charlie, she is now enjoying books! With the chance to go at her own pace, and stickers to collect along the way, Florence thrived. The Challenge medal and certificate at the end was the icing on the cake.

Mum Kate said: "We've all noticed such an improvement and so has her teacher at school. She is happy now to read aloud in the presence of other people. Before this Flo has never shown a great interest in books, despite us reading to her a great deal as a baby and toddler. Her grandmother, my Mum, Carol, is the Library Supervisor at Sidmouth Library and Flo has visited regularly and taken part in library activities from an early age. But she never really asked to be read to or found pleasure in reading independently."

"When she started school, we soon discovered she was finding phonics and learning to read challenging. She struggled through years 1 and 2 with very little improvement or understanding. Then a new teacher who had a wealth of experience with dyslexic children and adults said she felt Flo was dyslexic."

Flo struggled where her friends didn't. However her family and teachers persisted, and slowly Flo began to make progress. By the summer of 2021, Flo said she was ready to join her brother in signing up for the Summer Reading Challenge.

The first year was a success. And in 2022 Flo managed eight books across her summer holidays for the Challenge - and even finished faster than her brother Charlie!

Kate added: "She is now able to recognise and read to a certain level, she is starting to enjoy books. She loves Julia Donaldson and also any books about animals. Charlie has always been fascinated with books, finds reading a huge pleasure and sails through any reading material. I feel this has also helped to spark a little flame for reading in Flo, as they are typical brother and sister and compete in everything!"

Grandmother Carol is Flo's favourite person to read to, and encouraged her love of books from the start.





Kate said:

“Mum will bring over selections of books for Flo to try, and always makes reading a cuddly, quiet nice activity. Flo now surprises me every day by suddenly reading words and sentences with ease! Her confidence and ‘give it a go’ attitude has grown hugely and she actually believes in her own ability now. We still don’t fully understand why she was a slow starter. But with persistence and support on all fronts - at home, school and in the library - she’s now getting started on what we hope is a lifetime adventure of loving books.”



ARTS AND CRAFTS:

Bird making at
Barnstaple Library



Painting leaves at
the Pop-up Library



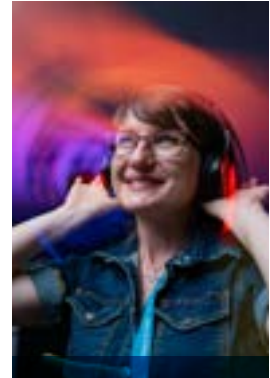
Creepy Crafts at
Okehampton Library

LIBRARY LATES:

Playing the
Nintendo Switch



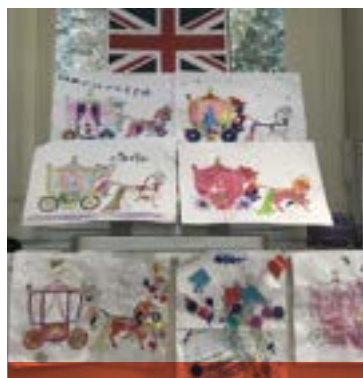
Group art workshop



Silent Disco

JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS:

Crown making at
Sidmouth Library



Colouring competition at
South Molton Library



Royal memorabilia collection
at Barnstaple Library

CHILDREN'S EVENTS:



Summer Reading Challenge launch at Newton Abbot Library



Bridge Building with Willmott Dixon



Interactive storytime at Totnes Library

50TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS:



Teignmouth Library turned 50 in January

FUN PALACES:



Moretonhampstead Library Fun Palace



Crediton Library Fun Palace



Churston Library turned 50 in March



Paignton Library Fun Palace

VOLUNTEERING

Find out the highlights from your libraries



Volunteer numbers see a significant rise

Without our volunteers, we wouldn't be able to connect with communities day-to-day in the way we do. They support our staff in a wide range of different ways, from putting on events or organising clubs to fundraising, and this year also helping staff to run additional opening hours as part of the Libraries for Life campaign. They're a very important part of Libraries Unlimited – 'People' is one of the pillars of our five-year strategy to demonstrate our commitment to both staff and volunteers.

The pandemic, of course, sent numbers of volunteering hours plummeting to almost zero. But the good news is in 2022-23 they were back with a bang. In the last quarter of 2021-22, there were 2,757 volunteering hours but by the same quarter this year, there were 6,690 hours! On average, there were over 350 volunteer hours done every week. We're back to 93% of the levels we achieved for the same period pre-pandemic in 2018 – 19, and we hope to continue to grow our volunteering over the coming years.

These figures are even more meaningful in the context of the fact that it's been widely reported that people have changed their volunteering habits post-pandemic and there is a nationwide challenge in finding volunteers. We are so grateful to all of our volunteers who give their time for free to enrich lives and build communities across the county. Our success is in no small part down to the library staff teams and our central volunteering team who all work hard to make sure our volunteers are valued, fulfilled, and their individual skills and abilities recognised.

We celebrate our volunteers every year during Volunteers' Week in June, with gifts, lunches, teas, and other fun events to bring volunteers and staff together.

This year, we also held our first Volunteer Awards to coincide with Volunteers' Week. There were four awards that each celebrate a volunteer for their outstanding contribution in a specific area: The Enriching Lives, Building Communities Award, the Advocate Award, the Excellent Teamwork Award, and the Young Volunteer Award. Winners came from libraries across Devon and Torbay, and each received a certificate and a small gift.

This year, we also introduced our Volunteer Voice newsletter, which goes out to volunteers twice a year. This is another way to help keep volunteers informed about volunteering with us and being part of the wider charity and is also a space for volunteers to share stories and experiences with each other.

"Volunteering at Paignton Library has been a wonderful experience helping people with their problems. The staff are wonderful and friendly and make me feel a part of the crew."

Paignton Library Volunteer

Volunteers' Week celebrations at Okehampton Library



Impact story

“My experience at South Molton Library has been life changing.”

South Molton Library has supported Ruth in myriad ways since she moved to the town. With the help of staff, groups and resources available through the library, she's discovered her volunteering skills, made friends in the community, found a job and helped herself through mental health challenges.

Ruth moved back to South Molton in 2019 after six years living away, and a gruelling period of treatment for cancer. While she was waiting to have broadband connected in her new home, she came to the library to use the internet.

“I returned to South Molton following a year's worth of cancer treatment for an aggressive form of breast cancer. As I had no employment to return to, I thought downsizing my property and moving back to an area I knew would be a good idea as I had no network of support in Tiverton.”

Living alone, Ruth was also pleased to find a warm, welcoming place that was a hub for many activities and events in the town. This included the Better Together programme which runs once a week and brings people together in a relaxed group to enjoy free refreshments, make new friends, share experiences and discuss wellbeing. Ruth signed up and was soon enjoying attending regular sessions.

“I joined the Better Together group to help me find a network of support and get to know local people and activities available to those like me with disabilities and health conditions as I was feeling isolated. The local Social Prescriber, who ran the group, suggested some volunteering opportunities in the library including the Census role - helping people who came in to fill out their Census forms online.”

With this experience on her CV, Ruth was able to get a part-time temp job that turned into a permanent role. But she soon realised her work/life balance wasn't right. So she contacted the library again, and was welcomed back as a general volunteer on Thursday mornings.

“The full-time job was of course a great step. But I was still struggling with anxiety and a

feeling of isolation. I saw the Social Prescriber again, who encouraged me to re-join the volunteering team at the library as I'd enjoyed it so much. I now help out one morning a week at the library, and found that this is a way of balancing my work/life and also being part of the community in South Molton. I'm really glad I returned, and I love the good vibes particularly on busy days. I've also continued to learn new skills and really benefit from being around other people.”

Another benefit from being around books during her volunteering hours – Ruth has got back into reading.

“During the pandemic, I lost interest in reading and struggled with anxiety, so I started borrowing self-help books on how to improve my mental health. I then spotted some quick-read books, which are very good when my concentration is poor and I have explored new genres. Talking to Alice in the library about getting back into reading was a real relief and I wasn't alone in this.”



2022 was extremely traumatic with family and work problems for Ruth, but continuing to volunteer at the library proved to be a lifeline.

“Throughout all of this, the library and its staff have been wonderful and my confidence has grown. I now feel a sense of belonging. I recently resigned from my job but quickly found a new position just outside of South Molton. I am looking forward to joining a new W.I. Group and their craft group (which is based in the library) when I have settled into my new job.”

“My experience at South Molton Library has been life changing for me and I just want to express my sincere gratitude to the staff and Libraries Unlimited for all that they do and all that they provide for the community.”

LIBRARIES FOR LIFE

Community support to help with the cost of living crisis

A wide-ranging variety of support was launched across all libraries this winter to meet the need for warm, welcoming spaces and help people through the cost of living crisis.

The Libraries for Life campaign ran between October 2022 and March 2023. From free teas and coffees and comfortable spaces to sit and read or join in with a group to donated food and rails of free donated coats, libraries pulled out the stops to help.

The campaign aimed to cover six areas of need: the cost of living; loneliness and community connections; food; health and wellbeing; digital access and support; and employment, skills, and businesses.





Most of what was on offer was free and included:

Warm welcoming spaces Many libraries secured funding from Devon County Council Community Grants, Friends Groups, and elsewhere to provide free hot drinks and biscuits in order to welcome everyone to spend time with them. Alongside the free WiFi and computers, visitors were encouraged to join the library, and sign up for groups including Bounce & Rhyme for babies and toddlers, book clubs, Scrabble, and craft sessions. Libraries partnered with organisations such as Citizens Advice to host sessions on energy efficiency, cost-effective cooking and debt advice.

Community fridge projects in Tavistock, Tiverton and Exeter, gathered surplus food and offered it for free to anyone with no questions asked, whilst helping to reduce food waste and protect the planet. The food was predominantly from local supermarkets, where it is collected by volunteers who fill the fridges, although some libraries took donations from local people and even allotment-holders. In March a second Exeter fridge opened in St Thomas Library, run by Love Food CIC, along with a new Community Larder in CREDITON Library. More fridges and larders are in the works with launches planned in Seaton and Newton Abbot libraries in April and May.

Coat rails in many libraries were run in partnership with Ikea, Willmott Dixon and Julian House, with more libraries signing up to the initiative this year. Warm winter coats were donated by library users and others from the local community for anyone who wanted one to take. Other libraries acted as clothing collection points.

Work Clubs in Bideford, Barnstaple, Exeter, Newton Abbot, CREDITON, Cullompton, Tiverton, and Tavistock libraries offered support in CV writing, developing skills and applying for jobs.

Business & IP Centres in Barnstaple, Exeter, and Paignton provided courses, webinars, one-to-one coaching and advice for budding entrepreneurs and local startup businesses. Two new locations opened in November, in Okehampton and Seaton, extending the offer of local business support across the county.

Warm Packs were carried with home library services and handed out to customers in need around Devon and Torbay. These included blankets, thermos flasks, hand warmers, thermal hats and socks.

Other services promoted during the campaign were the free baby weighing facilities across many libraries, displays of Reading Well books on physical and mental health, and free drop-in IT sessions.

Colin Bray, Service Development Manager, Health and Wellbeing for Libraries Unlimited, said:

“We heard from one customer who had not been out of her house for over two years. She had heard about the hot drinks and decided the library would be a good place to rebuild her confidence. She thoroughly enjoyed the cup of tea and a chat with people, and felt she was getting her confidence back. Another library customer said they come in because it saves them boiling their own kettle - they don't have a hot drink until they come into the library.”



LIBRARIES FOR LIFE



Libraries are a ray of sunshine

In November the Libraries for Life campaign was given a boost with funding from Devon County Council. Natural sunlight lamps were installed in each of the 54 libraries which emit safe UV-free natural sunlight.

Research has suggested exposure to light identical to sunlight from a light box can be helpful in addressing Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or the 'winter blues'. This may help people recalibrate their body clocks and relieve symptoms of SAD.

Open more hours

Five libraries secured extra funding from the National Grid to enable them to stay open for longer across the winter, to offer a place to go for people struggling with the heating bills.

The £9,900 grant facilitated extra staff time, heating and lighting for up to four more hours a week in Torquay, Torrington, Holsworthy, Tavistock and Bovey Tracey. The funding is from the Community Matters Fund, provided by The National Grid and delivered in partnership with Localgiving. Thanks to the Friends of Great Torrington Library and The Friends of Tavistock Library, the extra opening hours at these libraries were extended into April.

“Well now! This is just to say that I am one of several who have taken advantage of our library opening on unscheduled Monday mornings to welcome (and I do mean that) the older generation in out of the cold. I have very much enjoyed sharing the ‘free’ tea and coffee and biscuits with friends and indeed meeting and making new friends. People do matter. Thank you.”

Torrington Library Customer

At the end of the winter, many libraries decided to permanently extend elements of the campaign that had proved to be particularly popular, such as hot drinks, different seating layouts and new partnerships with external organisations.

Libraries for Life will be rolled out again this coming winter with a continuing emphasis on the cost of living and helping people keep warm.



MISSION

To bring ideas, imagination, creativity and knowledge to enrich lives and build thriving communities.

CORE PURPOSES

Promoting a love of reading

Providing free access to resources and information

Inspiring everyone to learn, create and realise their potential

Enabling everyone to explore and connect to the wider world

Offering welcoming spaces

Supporting the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities

STRATEGIC PILLARS

People

Community

Diversification

Environment

Infrastructure

OUR VALUES

Inclusive & Inspiring

OUR STRAPLINE

Enriching lives, building communities

We have been working hard to deliver on our strategy this year. Here is a round-up of some of the progress we have made towards our strategic pillars.



PEOPLE

- ✓ Brought all salaries in line with the Real Living Wage
- ✓ Increased volunteer hours back to 93% of pre-pandemic levels
- ✓ Forged new and deepened our existing partnerships and collaborations, locally and strategically

Read our full strategy here:



COMMUNITY

- ✓ Increased visits to 73.6% of pre-pandemic levels
- ✓ Offered services through our Libraries for Life winter campaign that customers reported helped with loneliness and improved wellbeing
- ✓ Increased new child users to the library by 27% with The Secret Book Quest
- ✓ Supported thousands of people with their business aspirations, with 2,309 attendees to Business & IP Centres Devon events and activities



DIVERSIFICATION

- ✓ Established a supporter's scheme for regular donations
- ✓ Launched a fundraising lottery to increase donations
- ✓ Developed strategic partnerships with other charities, organisations, and banking institutions
- ✓ Developed The Secret Book Quest as a product to be licensed by other libraries across the country



ENVIRONMENT

- ✓ Added three more community fridges or larders, with two more opening in 2023-24
- ✓ Worked with Exeter Seed Bank to raise awareness of seed swaps and provide drop-in sessions in the pop-up library on Exeter High Street
- ✓ Increased use of our spaces by the community out of hours by advertising rooms for hire at more libraries



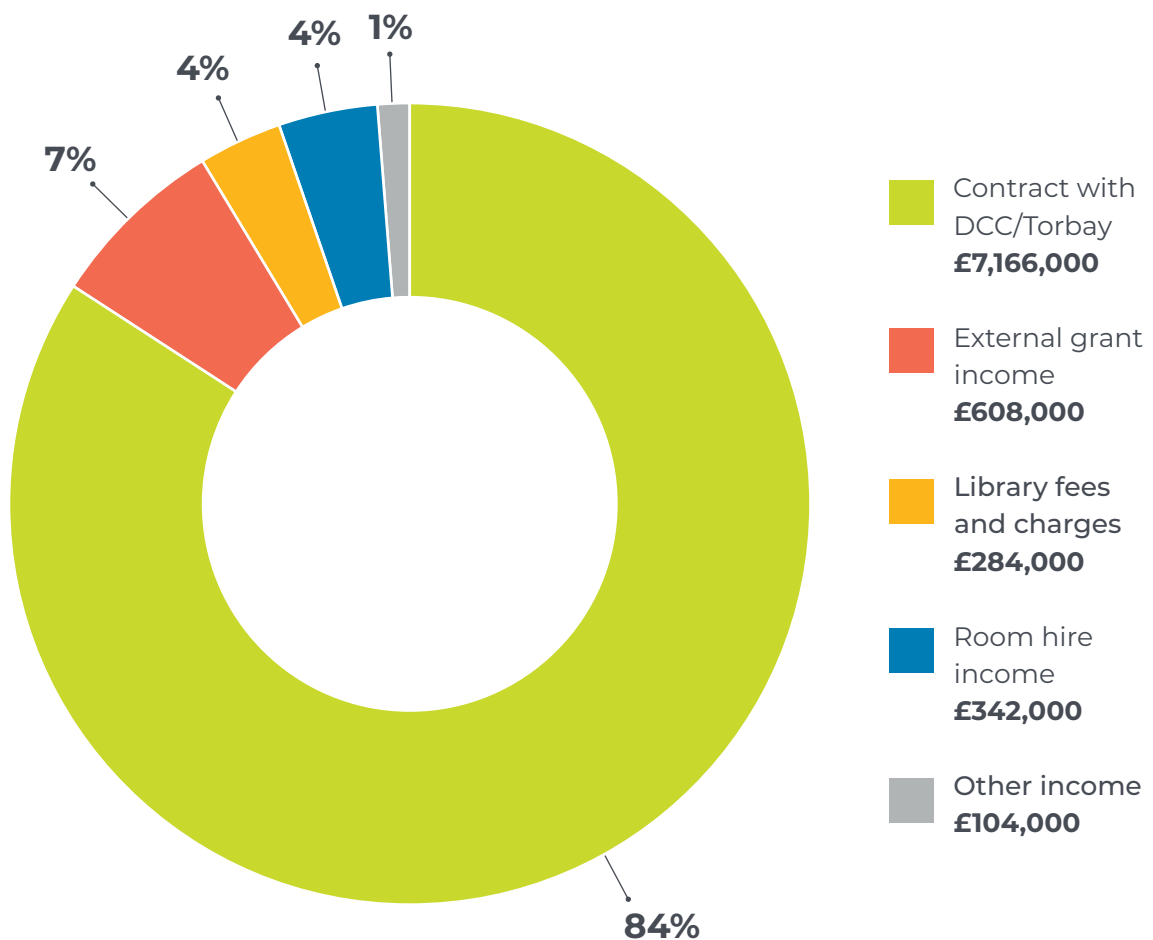
INFRASTRUCTURE

- ✓ Introduced WiFi printing in all libraries
- ✓ Upgraded IT infrastructure, and secured funding to upgrade self-service kiosks
- ✓ Invested in a new website platform to launch in the next financial year, to ensure our online space is accessible and inclusive

FINANCIAL REPORT

Where our money comes from

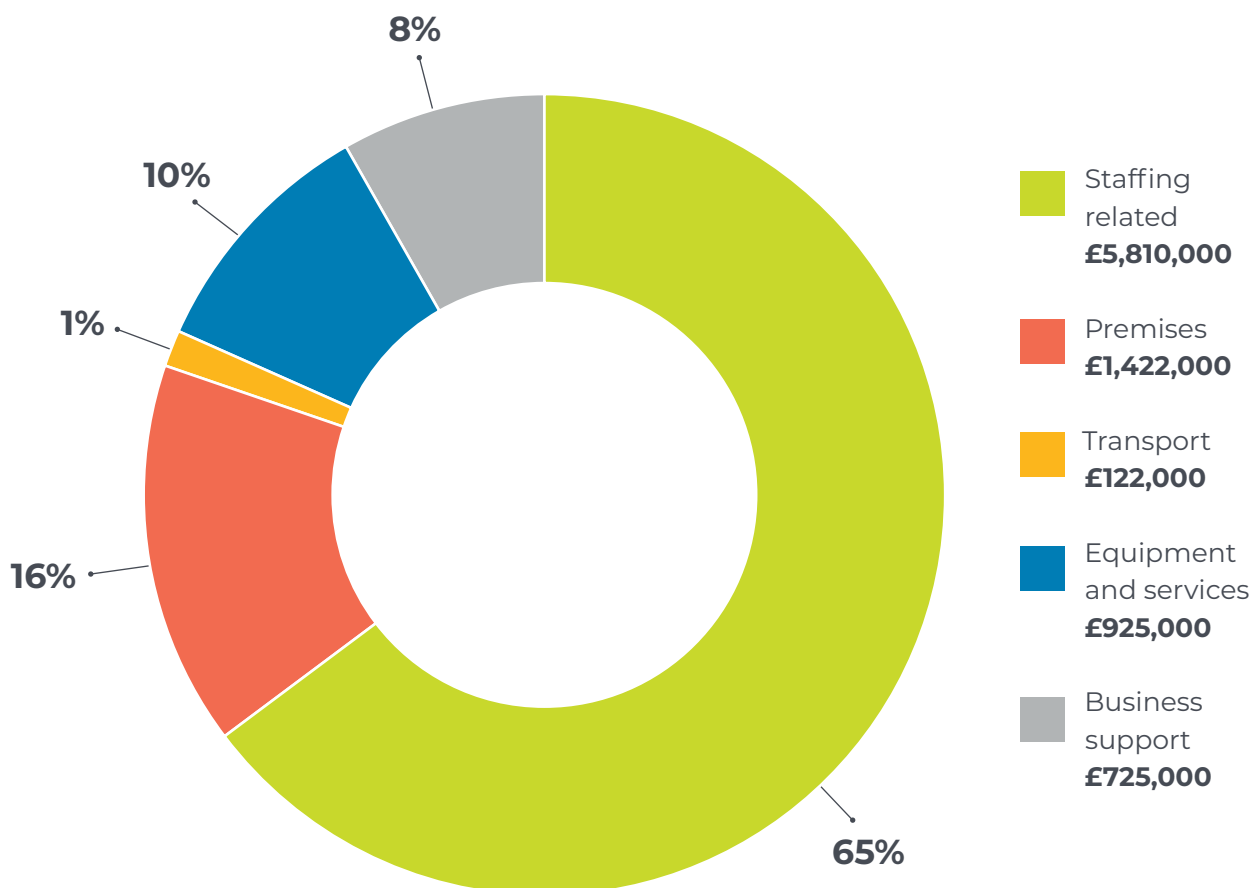
£8,504,000



NOTES:

Spending on new stock resources for libraries is excluded from the below. Libraries Unlimited manages these budgets under an Agency agreement with Devon County Council and Torbay Council, and expenditure is disclosed within the Local Authority's accounts.

Expenditure analysis excludes capital spending.

How we spend our money**£9,004,000**

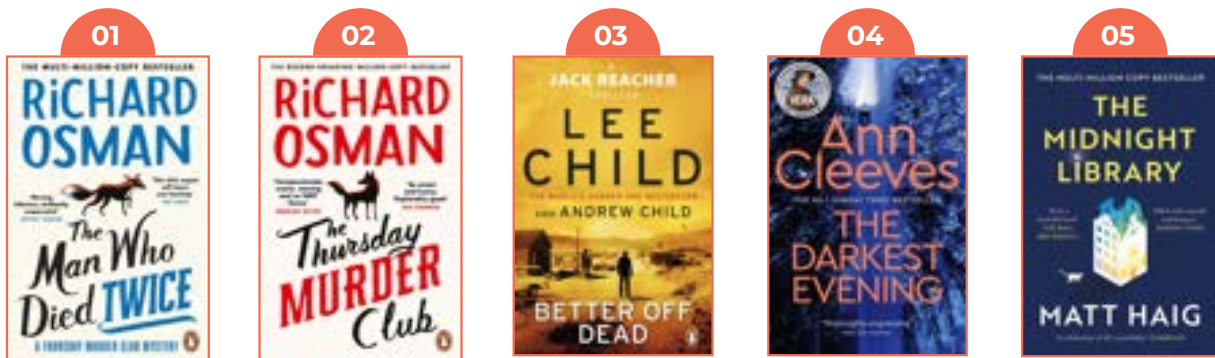
POPULAR BOOK TITLES

Find out the
most-borrowed
books from
each library

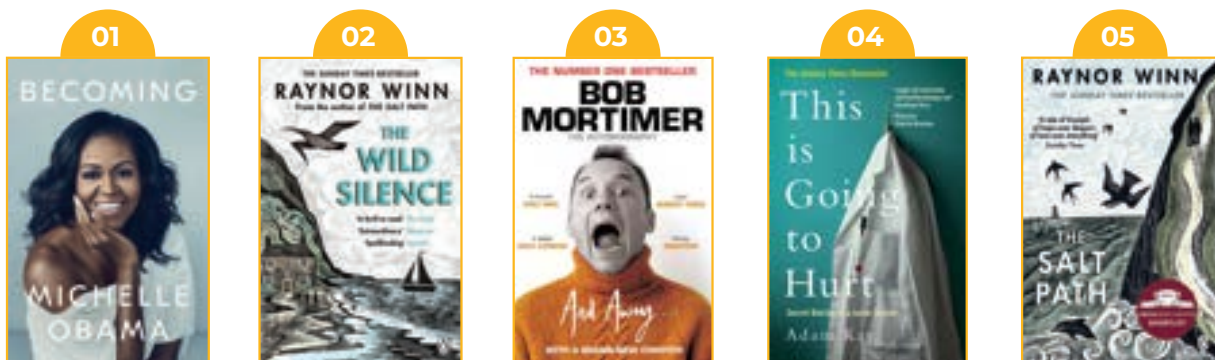


There are some familiar names in our Top 5 books this year! Richard Osman still holds the top spot for readers of adult fiction, this time with the second book in his gripping Thursday Murder Club series. Michelle Obama's *Becoming* is still your number one in non-fiction too. Great stories endure, and we are so proud to be able to bring our customers the very best in books. If you haven't read them already, consider these a recommendation.

Adult fiction top 5



Adult non-fiction top 5



Junior top 5



Libraries Unlimited

Libraries Unlimited, an independent charity, runs the public library service in Devon and Torbay, including 54 libraries and 4 mobile libraries.

Libraries Unlimited also runs:



**Business &
IP Centre
Devon**

Libraries Unlimited Board of Trustees

- **TBC** | Chair of the Board of Trustees
- **Marie Chadwick** | Deputy Chair, Independent Trustee
- **Crystal Carter** | Independent Trustee
- **George Lossius** | Independent Trustee
- **Morgen Witzel** | Independent Trustee
- **Lynn Morris** | Independent Trustee
- **Sue Simmons** | Community Trustee
- **Andrew Prince** | Community Trustee
- **Chloe Reynolds** | Staff Trustee
- **Zoë Woodbridge** | Staff Trustee
- **Alex Kittow** | Ex Officio Trustee

With special thanks to the Trustees who stood down:

- **Professor William Harvey** | Chair of the Board of Trustees, Independent Trustee
- **Tom Glanville** | Independent Trustee

THANK YOU

We would like to thank our staff, volunteers, Friends Groups, Trustees, suppliers, partners, collaborators, commissioners, funders, landlords and tenants for their help, support and commitment.



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Registered Company Number
(England and Wales): 9822597
Registered Office: Exeter Library,
Castle Street, Exeter, Devon EX4 3PQ

As a registered charity, Libraries Unlimited is legally required to produce an Annual Report.

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info@librariesunlimited.org.uk

