



LIVING LIBRARIES

THE CASE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES,
IN THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO USE,
WORK IN AND RUN THEM

A policy intervention using original oral histories

Living Libraries: The case for public libraries

PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE WORDS OF THOSE WHO USE, WORK IN AND RUN THEM

The logo for Living Libraries consists of two overlapping circles, one yellow and one pink. The words "LIVING LIBRARIES" are written in a stylized, hand-drawn font across the circles. A thin yellow line extends from the right side of the yellow circle towards the left.

A policy intervention using original oral histories

Public libraries are one of the cornerstones of our society. Free and open to all, they provide, in the words of one Living Libraries interviewee, Rachel, “somewhere to be, somewhere to read, somewhere to learn, somewhere to connect”, with “no bar to age or background” as another interviewee, Elaine, explained.

But in a national context of declining public investment, libraries are under increasing strain. Both “vital spaces when other spaces are reducing”, as Carol put it in her interview, and subject to continued budgetary constraints, as several Living Libraries interviewees reported, libraries have over the last decade been required to deliver more with less, year on year. This has been, as Sue stated, “to the detriment of the service”.

The case for public libraries

Living Libraries makes the case for public libraries through the real-life experiences of those people who use, work in and run them. Rachel, Elaine, Carol and Sue, quoted above, are just four of our interviewees. Between August 2019 and January 2020, Living Libraries researchers gathered a total of forty-seven oral histories from staff and users of five public libraries and with national figures in the library sector.

Drawing on and developing the compelling evidence of the crucial role played by public libraries showcased in reports by the Carnegie UK Trust, CILIP, Libraries Connected, Libraries Taskforce, Arts Council England and others, Living Libraries demonstrates how public libraries across the UK contribute to social, cultural, economic and educational policy

goals. The interviews carried out as part of the Living Libraries project bring these contributions to life.

Using first-person testimony from those at the frontline of public libraries, we demonstrate the value of libraries to policymakers, decision-makers and other funders, in order that the UK’s public libraries might continue to be maintained as a statutory service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, and supported, developed, and invested in for future generations.

The Living Libraries interviews

We spoke to people who use, work in and run Falmouth Library, Peterborough Central Library, Colliers Wood Library, Storyhouse, Chester, and Newcastle City Library. We also interviewed Carol Stump, President Elect,

and Mark Freeman, President, Libraries Connected; Nicholas Poole, Chief Executive Officer, CILIP; Sue Williamson, Director of Libraries at Arts Council England; and Lord Graham Tope CBE, former co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries.

The Living Libraries archive

Through the partnership with National Life Stories at the British Library all interviews gathered for the Living Libraries project will be archived in the British Library Sound Archive, where they will be made publicly accessible, dependent on any access restrictions requested by interviewees. This archive will be preserved in perpetuity as a valuable resource for future researchers.

Our recommendations

While libraries might occupy a unique space in the social fabric, they do not operate in isolation. Funded and run or commissioned by local government, libraries are integral to local authorities' public service strategies, and, as a 2018 report by DCMS notes, it is crucial that libraries are considered an asset rather than

a cost. Supported, developed and invested in appropriately, public libraries can help local authorities and national government to deliver many of their most pressing policy goals.

Living Libraries recommends:

1. Public libraries' key role in supporting public health and social care provision, including mental health services, should be recognised and funded appropriately.
2. Library staff should be adequately trained and supported if they are providing mental health support or other health-related advice.
3. Libraries' role as both physical and virtual community spaces should be recognised and funded appropriately, including maintenance of library buildings and vehicles, and strengthening of libraries' ability to build and sustain their online communities, for example, through social media.
4. Library staff should be supported with appropriate training and advice to continue libraries' inclusive, diverse and equitable engagement with all members of the public.
5. Libraries should be supported in their continued mission to provide accurate, reliable, verified information, and to maintain their local studies and history archives for the public good.
6. Libraries' capacity to provide face-to-face digital inclusion support for the broadest possible range of users should be invested in appropriately and supported through staff training.
7. Libraries should model good environmental practice through their buildings, supplier choices, and through staff and user behaviour.
8. Public libraries' capacity to offer reliable information, welcoming space for discussion and action, and practical, rapid-response support around key public health, political and environmental issues should be recognised, supported and invested in appropriately.

Living Libraries: The case for public libraries

IMPROVING HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Libraries' role in health and social care



When Elizabeth became house-bound through illness, books “became a lifeline” and a “salvation”. Home visits from her local library service provided much-needed social contact, while reading proved an absorbing, calming activity. “It was just so nice to know that I had another chapter to take me out of myself,” she explained. “I had something to look forward to. I would not have coped as well [...] without the library”.

Libraries and wellbeing

Reading for pleasure is beneficial to health and wellbeing. Through reading, Sue explained, people are “transformed from people with a disability or an illness, or a loneliness issue, to people [with] opinions, ideas, thoughts that they wanted to share”. But beyond books and reading, libraries improve people’s quality of life. As Elaine put it, “it’s not just about the reading, it’s about

the chat and the contact and the social event”. Carol described how “some people come into that library and that’s the only place they go, in a day, it’s the only interaction they get.” “Libraries are alive” with creative and social activities for all sections of the population, as Jayne put it.

“Libraries are alive.”

- Jayne, Falmouth Library

Improving health literacy

Several libraries work with the Reading Agency’s Reading Well: Books on Prescription scheme, delivered as part of Libraries Connected’s Universal Health Offer in partnership with healthcare practitioners. Rachel reported that “a lady who’d been referred to one of those books from her GP [...] came in and said, ‘I’ve lived with this for fifteen years, and I’ve felt completely isolated, and this book has

changed my life.’” For this library user, “having access to that book, in a difficult financial [...] and mental situation” provided “a label for her condition that she could then go and manage. And she didn’t feel alone, she didn’t feel isolated, she felt understood.”

Accessing accurate information

Libraries enable people to access reliable health information in confidence. “It’s not just about coming in for a pleasurable read,” explained Victoria. “It’s a place that you can go for help.” Young people benefit greatly from such support, with teenage pregnancy, anger management and issues around LGBTQ+ identities all mentioned by library staff and volunteers. Victoria described one library user, “a young girl, who was worried that she had an eating disorder, and didn’t want to talk to her parents, teachers, but just wanted to read up a

little bit.” She was “very worried that her mum would be able to see what books had been on her account. So we could reassure her that [...] we don’t give out information to anybody else about what books have been borrowed.”

Library staff facilitate access to resources with discretion and sensitivity. “We can promote our access to websites, our collections [...] we’re not saying that a book always helps you solve your problems,” explained Carol, but “that information is there if you want it. You can talk further if you need to.” The services and signposting offered by public libraries “save the NHS at least £27.5m per year”, according to a report commissioned by Arts Council England in 2015.

Filling gaps in health and social care

Public libraries offer a free, welcoming space for some of the most marginalised people in society. “We’ve had an increase in people with mental health issues, definitely”, Carol explained. “As people are cared

for more in the community, it’s the space that people want to use during the day.” Elaine adds that there are “more people out there without the support that they might have had years ago [...] more and more people without housing.”

Making a much-needed contribution to the health and social care provision available within many communities, public libraries fill a crucial gap in frontline services. From providing a hot meal in the school holidays for children who otherwise receive free school meals to supporting people who may be struggling with their mental or physical health, including issues around ageing, disability or chronic health conditions, “libraries respond to people’s needs”, as Carol explained.

Conclusion

Public libraries play a significant role in contributing to and maintaining the mental and physical health and wellbeing of all sectors of society, from children and teenagers to adults, including older people. Reading for pleasure, participating in

creative and social activities and accessing reliable health information in a free, welcoming space are all vitally important for healthy communities. But libraries’ willingness and ability to alleviate pressure on underfunded health and social care services, and the capacity of their staff to support those members of their communities most in need, must not be taken for granted.

Living Libraries recommends:

- Public libraries’ key role in supporting public health and social care provision, including mental health services, should be recognised and funded appropriately.
- Library staff should be adequately trained and supported if they are providing mental health support or other health-related advice.



Living Libraries: The case for public libraries

CREATING A SAFE PLACE FOR EVERYONE

Libraries as vital community spaces



"Whoever you are, wherever you're from, whatever your personal circumstances," Jayne explained, the library is a "safe, inclusive place to be, where everybody is welcome". A central pillar of the post-war social project, the public library has been for many a constant in a rapidly changing world. "We moved around a lot", recalled Elizabeth. "And libraries were a lifesaver. They provided a continuity and a consistency in an ever-changing life." Patricia agreed: "we always joined the library, wherever we went...it was comforting. Books were our friends".

Even for non-readers, reported Victoria, the library offers "a safe place to go, somewhere to go for help, out of the cold and the rain". Into the twenty-first century, as we face ever more challenging times, the space offered by the library – social, physical and virtual – remains urgently

necessary for our communities.

Libraries as social infrastructure

Public libraries are inclusive, diverse and equitable spaces: no matter your age, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, all are welcome. Hafsa described Peterborough Central Library's "really big community languages section. We've got books in Lithuanian, Latvian, Italian, Portuguese", including dual language books for parents and children to read together. But while book groups are thriving in several public libraries, including groups for shared silent reading, reading aloud, and visually impaired readers, the "comfort" provided by libraries goes beyond books. As Henrietta put it, "we have no labels" for the communities served by the public library. "You don't even have to be able to read." From Scrabble and Lego to coding or language-learning, public libraries are hives of

activity, providing opportunities for social connection and supporting social cohesion, including helping to embed asylum seekers and refugees into their new communities. Carol reported that one Syrian refugee, a beekeeper, "now does talks in our library about beekeeping. He's got an allotment, he's settling in [...] the best place [people] can be welcomed is the library".

"A library is for books, for computers, for informal learning. For a meeting place. For safety. For warmth. For companionship"

- Chrys, Colliers Wood

Libraries as free, welcoming public spaces

"The living room for the city centre", as Mark put it, or "a public square with a roof on"; the physical infrastructure of the public library is of utmost importance and must be invested

in appropriately. "People see libraries as their space, as their place in the community," Sue explained. The library is "somewhere that is not intimidating to them, it belongs to them, they pay for it through their taxes".

"This building belongs to me," stated Martyn, "like it belongs to everybody that uses it." As an older gay man, Martyn is alert to the importance of libraries to LGTBQ communities. "I've gone through my life looking for places where I can be myself, where I'm accepted, where I'm wanted", he explained. Storyhouse in Chester is "my safe place [...] And lots of other people, whether they're gay or not, feel exactly the same about this particular building." The public library is an essential alternative to other council buildings. "Sometimes it's the only civic building in a town centre," explained Carol. "Sometimes it's the only community venue in isolated communities." Support and help can be made available in a friendly, non-stigmatising environment, bypassing some of the barriers of officialdom.

For one library user struggling with addiction, the library was "the only place he'd been actually out of his house to in quite a number of weeks," reported Carol. Colleagues "started talking to him, they started signposting to help and support, he started reading, he started talking to the library staff. He now actually volunteers for us."

Beyond buildings

While the bricks and mortar of the library are undoubtedly essential to its functioning, the public library extends beyond its physical infrastructure. Those who cannot access the physical library space are able to benefit from the library's services through home visits, mobile libraries, e-book and audiobook borrowing and magazine subscriptions. As Rachel commented, "some people only access us online". Increasingly, libraries are building their online provision, in order to deliver virtual events such as storytelling sessions or author talks.

Conclusion

Public libraries provide a uniquely valuable space for all sectors of

society - open, welcoming and free. Fostering communities of readers, and around certain activities, libraries also offer a meeting place for a diversity of users, of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds, and with differing needs. The space offered and occupied by public libraries within communities is social, physical and virtual, and must be protected and sustained into the future.

Living Libraries recommends:

- Libraries' role as both physical and virtual community spaces should be recognised and funded appropriately, including maintenance of library buildings and vehicles, and strengthening of libraries' ability to build and sustain their online communities, for example, through social media.
- Library staff should be supported with appropriate training and advice to continue libraries' inclusive, diverse and equitable engagement with all members of the public.



Living Libraries: The case for public libraries

ACCESSING INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

Libraries, information technology and digital inclusion



“Every single day, without fail, for years,” reported Caroline, a group of “very dedicated newspaper readers” have gathered at Storyhouse in Chester. The public library has long been both repository and provider of trusted information; a keeper of facts and holder of records, archives and local history, freely accessible to all: a “resource within a community”, as Jayne put it. But in recent years, the media and information landscape has undergone dramatic changes.

The fight against misinformation, disinformation and fake news

In public libraries, verified information can be disentangled from so-called ‘alternative facts’. In Newcastle, for example, NewsGuard software has been rolled out across the library service, advising users of the veracity and accuracy of the websites they visit. A library is

a “reassuring presence”, Jayne explained, which can “point people in a direction that’s safe and appropriate”. Countering the ‘echo chamber’ of social media, libraries are “that place of democracy where you’ll hear different opinions, you’ll see different information,” explained Rachel. “If you can be informed, then every decision you make will be a better one”, Alan concluded.

“People come into the library to make sense of the world”

- Carol, Kirklees

Access to IT and online services

“The two core tenets” of a public library are “reading and information”, according to Anthony. But, as Sue pointed out, in the twenty-first century “the information we require, in order to be active citizens, and the ways in which we access it” is

changing rapidly. Getting online is now essential for people to access services in their borough, or their city. As Alan put it: “people *need* skills now. They *need* to access the library.”

Public libraries provide essential access to computers, printing and scanning facilities and the internet. Users include younger people who may not be familiar with non-touchscreen technology; older people “in their eighties or nineties”; those who have been made redundant or who had been expecting to retire; manual workers who must complete training online; those who need to access the Home Office’s visa service, choose their child’s school place, or claim Universal Credit.

“We get lots of people coming in asking about CVs [...] the council will send them to us, the Job Centre, the Citizens Advice

Centre, they send everyone to the library," reported Hafsa.

Public libraries enable another kind of connectivity, too. In providing computers and internet access, the library offers something "that isn't available elsewhere in the city"; a way for new immigrants "to connect with the people back home", explained Pete, adding, "that's a service I'm proud to be involved with". Alan contributed another perspective: "if you're estranged from your family, you'll probably get a similar response [to] an email or a phone call, but the email is easier to send."

Libraries and digital inclusion

"So many people don't have basic digital skills, and don't really have any way of learning them," Caroline pointed out. Public libraries encourage people to be digital citizens, to "not be disenfranchised by digital progression", as Rachel put it. Libraries support people "to be on the electoral register, to know how to book tickets, to be able to check their bank accounts." "People can't claim [benefits], unless they can use a computer,"

Alan added. "And it's not just a case of having basic skills, you have to be able to read what's on the screen, you have to be able to understand what's on the screen. It's not just a case of ticking a box."

The human connection provided by library staff is key. "Lots of other services around the city have either closed or changed," Hafsa pointed out. Often, people are "really angry, really frustrated [...] all the other places where they've been to, they've probably not actually spoken to a person, whereas when they come to the library, we're probably one of the few places where you could come and ask us anything."

Conclusion

Public libraries are a rich repository for verified information concerning both local communities - through archives and records - and the wider world. Staffed with skilled professionals trained to navigate to trusted sources, libraries provide a crucial public service.

In addition, the essential need

in the digital age for a freely accessible space where a diverse range of people can access computers, printers, scanners and the internet, and build their skills in using information technology, cannot be overestimated.

Living Libraries recommends:

- Libraries should be supported in their continued mission to provide accurate, reliable, verified information, and to maintain their local studies and history archives for the public good.
- Libraries' capacity to provide face-to-face digital inclusion support for the broadest possible range of users should be invested in appropriately and supported through staff training.



Living Libraries: The case for public libraries

CONTRIBUTING TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Libraries and the environment in a time of climate crisis



In moments of crisis, people turn to their public libraries. In February 2020, as Storm Ciara battered the UK, Kirklees Library supported its local community through the storm's impact and aftermath. Library staff were asked "where possible to bring in waterproofs and wellies" to work, in case they were "deployed to help people in flooded areas". Libraries welcomed in those affected, offering cups of tea and a warm, dry place to shelter. Libraries are both a sanctuary and a necessary public gathering-place; in the library, we can regroup, share, learn and equip ourselves to act in response to disconcerting challenges to our environment, political climate, and public health.

Educating, informing and equipping

"We've got books on the environment, and the kids are doing the environment at school

[...] so we support that", explained Pete. Elaine agreed: "providing information, allowing people to find out more, having access to journals and books about how you can be greener and what the impacts are"; all these modes of "education and information" are "a big part of [tackling] climate change" and are also "what libraries are about"; one of the things that they do best.

As meeting places, and spaces for sharing ideas, libraries also offer ways for interested members of the public to discover more about environmental issues. In Falmouth, the local Extinction Rebellion group meets in the library, "local activists, who want to get together, recommend reading to each other, maybe to debate, maybe to discuss", as Henrietta explained.

"We're recycling books every day. We're recycling information and we're sharing stories"

- Rachel, Storyhouse

Libraries as models for sustainability

"From the very fact that each book is not single-use", as Jayne pointed out, the public library offers an easy-to-grasp model for environmental sustainability. The reduce-reuse-recycle maxim is embedded within the library system. Library books, and other resources available for borrowing, "are multiple use by multiple families, multiple people". "Think of the library like a big recycling centre", suggested Jayne, "What we recycle are stories. You all come in and you borrow a story and you take it home and you enjoy it and you bring it back and then somebody else can take that home." Elaine backed this up: "rather than

fifty people buying the book [...] you have one copy that is being shared and returned and shared again. Book borrowing in itself is an environmentally friendly thing to do.”

Towards greener libraries

Libraries’ other major contribution to environmental activism and awareness-raising is what Pete termed “getting our own house in order” - “making sure that our suppliers are environmentally aware, that we’re recycling as much as we can”, and helping “to get that really vital message across”. Storyhouse has beehives on its roof; in Colliers Wood, solar panels have been installed. In Newcastle, Mark reported, “we’ve just bought an electric van for our service. We are recycling our rainwater”. The library and its staff are “spreading the word to their own lives, to the people that they meet, that come in”.

Conclusion

Public libraries contribute to a sustainable future by modelling good practices and behaviours. Using a library limits consumption, enables the ‘recycling’ of books and

other resources, and provides access to accurate information and verifiable facts about our contribution to, and the likely outcomes of, climate breakdown. As accessible, democratic civic buildings, libraries can model good practice, both by offering space to share ideas, learn and debate, and by taking action: recycling, using solar power, investigating the green credentials of their suppliers. Although perhaps underexplored in current policy, libraries have a clear and significant role to play in growing climate-related attitudinal change.

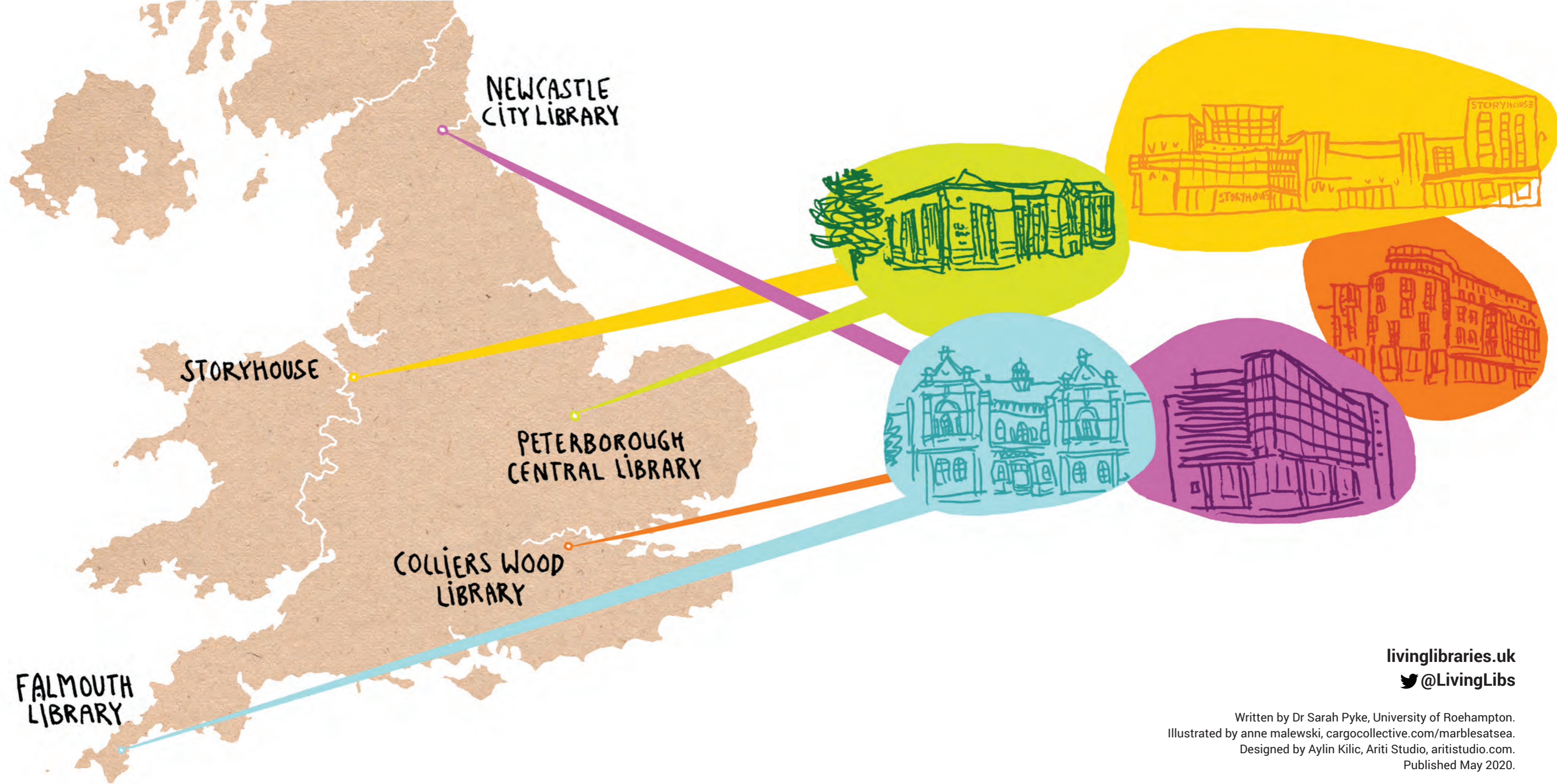
Climate breakdown, however, is just one of the extreme challenges that humanity will face in the coming years. The Covid-19 pandemic is another. Libraries’ benefits to mental and physical health, their capacity for connecting and supporting diverse communities, the information and services they provide - all come to the fore in moments of crisis. Public library staff demonstrate repeatedly their capacity to respond to difficult events with an invaluable combination of practical

support and personal contact with their broad range of users. Libraries hold past histories of environmental and human-caused disaster, with evidence of how such events have been dealt with and overcome. Libraries provide the necessary information, tools, art and literature to equip us to face new challenges, as they unfold in the present and the future. The value of public libraries is immense. As Elaine concluded: “Don’t ever lose libraries!”

Living Libraries recommends:

- Libraries should model good environmental practice through their buildings, supplier choices, and through staff and user behaviour.
- Public libraries’ capacity to offer reliable information, welcoming space for discussion and action, and practical, rapid-response support around key public health, political and environmental issues should be recognised, supported and invested in appropriately.





livinglibraries.uk
@LivingLibs

Written by Dr Sarah Pyke, University of Roehampton.
Illustrated by anne malewski, cargocollective.com/marblesatsea.
Designed by Aylin Kilic, Ariti Studio, aritistudio.com.
Published May 2020.