

## Community Engagement

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It is now generally accepted that public services that involve their users are likely to be of higher quality, and more relevant, to the communities they serve. The Scottish Government has built the principle of community engagement into policy and guidance to public services.

The National Standards for Community Engagement defines community engagement as “Developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public body and one or more community groups, to help them both to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences”.

This is a very sound definition, but as far as library services go, we also need to bear in mind the needs of individual users as well.

From a library service point of view, a slightly better definition of community engagement would be “The process by which organisations and individuals build ongoing, permanent relationships for the purpose of applying a collective vision for the benefit of a community”.

This is simple to say but difficult to do.

However, libraries are in a unique position to make the most of the opportunities offered, and can play a central role in engaging with virtually ALL of its local community.

It can be involvement that ranges from imparting information through to giving individuals and groups full involvement in decision making for policies and planning.

We will come back to some of those opportunities a little later.

Each community is unique, and each opportunity will be different, and will also face different challenges.

This training module should not be thought of as a “one size fits all” guide – there is no such thing for any library service, let alone community engagement!

This module will aim to offer you some suggestions for things to consider in your approach, offer some thoughts on putting “building blocks” in place, as well as providing some examples of approaches that have worked well in some library services, as well as highlighting some guidance that may help you to avoid any pitfalls!

It is important to be flexible, and adopt an approach which takes into account local differences. Using methods that have worked in other libraries may not fit your service needs.

It is important to think about how your community is put together – the idea of a Work Club may sound the sort of thing a library should offer, but should it be a priority if your library is in an area of low unemployment? It may be that your time is better spent focusing elsewhere.

Alternately, if your library is in an area of high unemployment, the creation of a Work Club in the library may well need to be high on a list of things to attend to!

Talk to your colleagues and see if there are any common areas where they feel the service could be improved so that your community can benefit

Well thought out and planned community engagement can bring a wide range of benefits to those involved. It can increase trust in your library service, and in your local authority or parent organization, and also deliver improvements to services

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

First impressions count!

If you plan to engage with individuals or groups in your community, it's very likely that at some point they will visit your library

Don't forget that you are engaging with every person that comes through the doors of your library, whether they are a potential new customer, a manager of a group you would like to work with, or a customer that has been visiting the library every week for 30 years – it's important to leave a good impression.

This is especially important for anyone "new" coming to the library. Those people will have already begun to form their opinion of the library before they even step in through the doors.

Take a moment to think of your expectations when you visit a new shop.

- What are you hoping to see?
- Does the immediate first impression make you think it will meet your expectations?
- Does it look welcoming?

These are the same thoughts that go through the minds of people visiting the library for the first time, whether they are a child or an adult.

It is also possible that the manager of, for example, the local Job Centre will be thinking this as well, but with the added question of "Does it look as if this library can help me with the project I want to do?"

Before he or she enters the library, they will already be forming their answer!

So what kind of things should customers and/or potential new customers and partners expect to see? What "messages" will they receive during the first two minutes of their visit?

Some of the following questions may appear very basic, but take time to think about them, and ask yourself honestly if all of them can be ticked off in your library – the chances are that at least one or two will make you stop and think!!

- Is the approach to the library clean and tidy, and devoid of any litter?
- Is the signage accurate and up to date? Have any opening times changed recently? If so, are those changes reflected on the external signage?
- What is the visitor being "told" in the entrance foyer? Are they facing a forest of posters? Remember that too many posters on display may mean that the visitor doesn't actually read ANY of them. Posters imparting essential information should always be placed centrally at eye level!
- Are the posters sending out "negative" or "positive" messages? Unfortunately, research has shown that often posters sited in library entrance foyers are "negative" - "Don't use mobile phones in the library"... "No dogs allowed except Guide Dogs", and "No food or drink to be eaten in here".

It may be worth just offering a simple "Welcome to XXXXXXXX Library" in the foyer, and nothing more e.g Llandudno Library in Conwy, Wales has a welcome wall with "Welcome" translated in to several dozen languages, and no other information – simple, but very effective

- Bear in mind the "Four Step" rule – research has shown that people visiting any commercial establishment are not interested in stopping to take in information for the first four steps after entering a building. All they want to do is get through the door, and out of the way of anyone coming in behind them!! Therefore, any information you want to give them should be after that point – libraries are no exception! Try taking four

steps from your library front entrance door, and see where you end up in relation to the library floor. What information have you by-passed in doing that?

- Is the library counter or a member of staff easily seen? Are the library staff easily identified as such? (Badges work well!)

There has been a trend in the last few years in libraries to move to Self Service and RFID kiosks, but it has also led to some library counters being removed, and even some of the kiosks are placed away from the immediate entrance of the library.

Whether this is good or bad is open to discussion, but a new visitor will be expecting a point of visual reference if they need help!

- Is the visitor acknowledged by staff? Even if all staff members are busy, eye contact and a smile shows the visitor they've been noticed, and helps them feel welcomed. This may sound basic and perhaps insulting, but how often do you go in to a shop and not get acknowledged?

- Do conversations between staff stop when a visitor comes to the counter? Again, acknowledge the person even if the conversation with colleagues is work-related and valid.

Ask yourself how you feel when two people in a customer service environment fail to acknowledge you because of a conversation they are having!

- Develop a "mask" for your bad days!

We all have them, it's a fact of life – you could have had the worst morning of your life, but as soon as you start work, or the library doors open, you have to provide a warm and welcoming atmosphere. One scowl or one snapped reply to a visitor can undo a lot of excellent work, or give the wrong impression of the library service, so be prepared to put on a happy and smiling face, however you might be really feeling.

If you really feel that being on the library counter is too much for you, talk to your supervisor and ask if you can be assigned duties away from the library floor for a while – if you have a considerate supervisor, they will understand, and it's better than leaving visitors with a poor impression of the library!

- Staff should avoid using personal mobile phones on library counters, except in emergencies – especially if you have a large poster in the entrance foyer asking visitors not to use them!! And no visitor will be impressed if they are kept waiting while a staff member checks how many "likes" their latest Facebook post has received!!

Again, it sounds basic – but it happens!!!

- Ask visitors, especially newly-registered customers, if they would like to be shown around the library space. YOU know the library and could walk around it in your sleep, but a new customer doesn't – "The biographies are just behind the horror collection" will mean nothing to a first time visitor, and neither will reeling off a list of areas while pointing to all directions of the compass from your library counter!!

Most new users will be happy to get to know the space for themselves, but if they would like it, physically take them on a tour – they will appreciate it enormously!

There are obviously other factors that will create an impression for your library users, depending on what the purpose of their visit is, but the first two minutes of a visit is crucial – essentially, in that time, a person will decide if they feel comfortable in your space, and will be deciding if they really want to come back or not!

Here is a very basic checklist that can be used by library staff. It may be worth using it to do a library walkthrough once a week or so. If so, task different members of staff to do that – different eyes see different things!

**Library Checklist**

Library..... Date completed.....

No.	Item for Check	✓ or ✗	Comment	Initials
1.	Up to date fines and charges posters on display			
2.	Doors with keypads kept closed at all times			
3.	Library entrance kept clear of obstructions			
4.	All posters are up to date and relevant			
5.	Supervision of children statement present and visible			
6.	Library space is clear of trip hazards			
7.	Staff are clearly identifiable			
8.	No items with sharp edges are present in the childrens section			
9.	Library signage is clear and relevant to the stock in that section			
10.	Library stock is displayed invitingly			
11.	If serving tea and coffee, fresh supplies are available			
12.	Latest editions of newspapers and magazines are on display (if provided)			
13.	Appropriate CCTV. signage is prominently displayed			
14.	Incident book is available to record incidents of concern. Crime numbers to be recorded for all criminal damage and actions			
15.	All staff are aware of events and meetings taking place, including names of official visitors, and staff being met, where relevant			
16.	Signing in book for engineers and technicians is present, if appropriate			
17.	All staff are aware of logbooks and Asbestos Registers, if needed			
18.	All staff are aware of fire safety and evacuation procedures			
19.	Use of incident book to record all damage and vandalism – crime numbers recorded for all criminal damage and actions			
20.	No personal information of customers and staff are visible			

**Recommendations and resulting actions with dates completed**

**Signature**

**EXERCISE – Spend 5-10 minutes looking at your library as if you were visiting it for the first time.**

- **What is welcoming?**
- **What is NOT so welcoming?**
- **Is a member of staff visible and identifiable?**
- **Is the information you're visually getting where you would expect it to be?**
- **Are you getting too much information to absorb immediately?**
- **What are the library staff doing?**
- **Can you hear what the library staff are talking about?**

Jot any thoughts down in the box below. Anything you record will be only for you, and is confidential. However, if there is anything you see of concern, you may want to discuss it with your supervisor at some point, or during your next one-to-one meeting

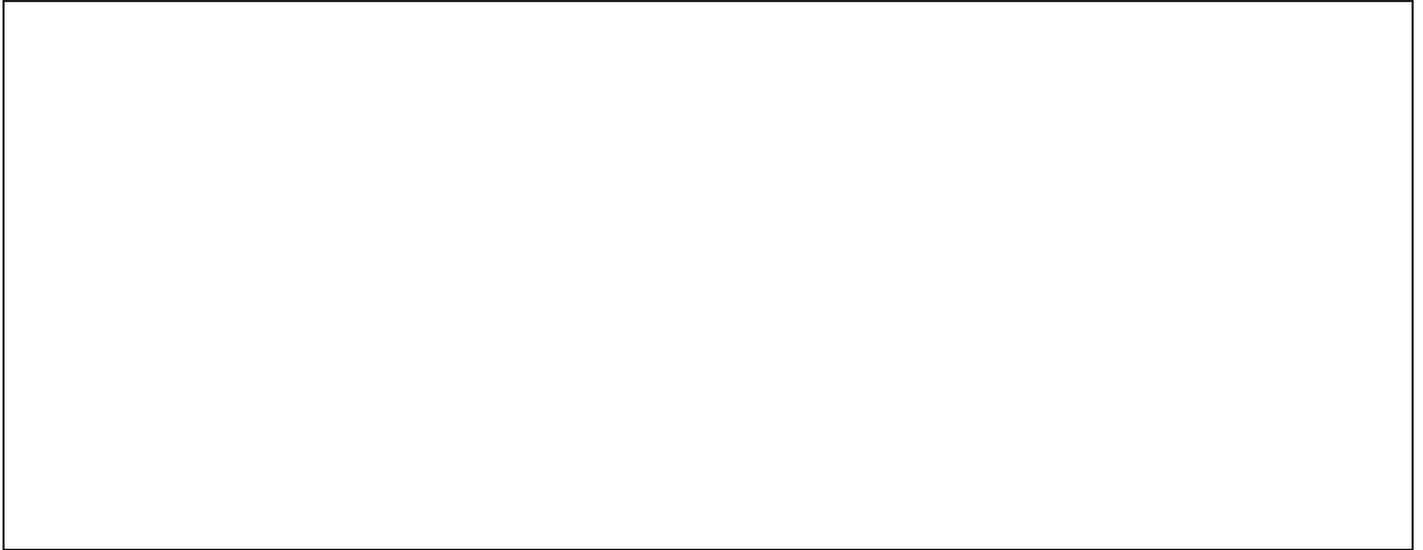
At some point, you may want to consider developing a “critical friend”, who has never visited the library before, and ask them to carry out the same exercise with totally fresh eyes. That can be quite revealing!

**OPTIONAL EXERCISE – At some point, carry out a routine task for 5 minutes or so, away from the library counter but within earshot – listen to the conversations taking place. Is it work-related, or a personal conversation?**

You might be surprised at the amount of personal conversations that take place between staff members – and then remind yourself that your library visitors will hear much more than you realise!

It doesn't always give a good impression of the library, especially if library customers are being discussed! Community engagement is about fostering trust in your services, and in the ability to deliver to them – don't endanger it by talking casually on the library counter!

Also, from a personal security perspective, the less information staff members give away about themselves, the safer they will be!!



We will now begin to take a look at the different user groups that are either existing users or potential users of your library

Libraries have the opportunity, and capability, to offer a “cradle to the grave” engagement. The next few sections of this module will look at some of the broad demographic groups that your library will be engaged with.

Remember that some suggestions will be just as effective with all demographic groups, and should not be seen in isolation.

## **CHILDREN**

Let's begin at the "cradle" with children.

Libraries become engaged with children very soon after their birth. The Bookstart scheme in England and Wales provides information packs to parents of newly-born babies, and contains information on libraries, along with a registration card – [www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk)

This almost immediately brings babies into contact with a library. Much library publicity is correct in proclaiming "You're never too young to join the library!"

Bookstart also gifts free books to all children at two key ages before school to help families read together every day and inspire children to develop a love of books and reading.

There are other great initiatives for children under the age of 5. You will certainly be aware of

- Rhyme time sessions
- Baby signing sessions
- Baby massage sessions in libraries (with qualified practitioners)

There are opportunities for libraries to offer storytelling and activity sessions to local playgroups. These sessions can be supplemented by group loans to the playgroup for them to take books away to further engage children

Similarly, it's good practice to build relationships with any registered childminders in your community. Your local Social Services Department should be able to provide you with a list of registered childminders.

Again, encourage childminders to take out group loans. They will be grateful for the extra "resource" to help entertain the children in their care, and it boosts your issue figures! Needless to say, it also helps children engage with books and stories.

Every library will invite local schools to bring classes to the library for visits. It helps to engage children with books and the library, and often helps to foster a real love of books and reading at a young age.

- Use these sessions to get something "back", as well as the obvious issue figures. Ask for some evaluation or feedback from the accompanying teachers, and use that feedback as an advocacy tool. You can use that to demonstrate to other groups, if need be, that the library offers real value
- Talk to the teachers beforehand about what "expectations" they will have from the session – what they hope to get from it? Do they see it as an introduction to the library? Or do they hope to tie the session in to a class topic that is currently being studied?

It can put library staff on the back foot if a class arrives, and they are told by the teacher the class is studying grasshoppers, and wouldn't it be lovely to have a story about a grasshopper?? Knowing in advance gives you at least half a chance to find a suitable story!

(Talking in advance might also give you the chance to establish a few "ground rules" about the visit. It can be very dispiriting to be reading a story to the children, and giving them your best "Who's been eating MY porridge?" voice, only to see a teacher or accompanying adult tapping away on their phone!

If you can see them doing that, so can the children!! Try to prevent it happening at source!)

- What does your library do about schools that are considered to be out of walking distance to the library? Some contact is better than none at all
- Library staff can visit the school and still promote the library and what it offers. It's nowhere near as effective or desirable as a visit to the library, but you are still engaging with the children, and raising awareness!
- The time of year may be relevant.

A long walk for a class of school children may not be reasonable during the winter months, but it may be more appealing on a nice spring or summer's day. If you have a good "offer", it will be worth the trip

- Could the library service find some funding to provide transport for schools outside of walking distance to bring classes to the library?

We are all well aware that funding for libraries is becoming increasingly challenging, but it may be worth considering the benefits of the investment.

Talk to your supervisor if you think it's a good idea!

If that isn't possible, there may be other possible avenues

- Talk to the Headteacher of any school you want to target. Emphasize what the children will get from a visit, or even better, a series of visits, to the library (increased literacy levels from prolonged opportunities for reading, etc). Schools all have targets to meet, and they may be receptive to any ideas that can help that. If you manage to convince fund holders that what you're proposing is of benefit to them, it's amazing how often a "small pot of money" can be found!
- It may be possible that some joint-funding can be used to allow the visits to happen
- Most schools provide transport for the pupils to visit leisure centres for swimming activities, etc – might there be enough spare seats on the transport to allow a group of pupils to visit the library at the same time? The bus could drop off the group at the library before going to the leisure centre, perhaps? Have some persuasive arguments ready!
- Does your library have a structured plan for registering classes of school children at a time? The Every Child a Library Member (ECALM) has targeted getting every member of a specified year group in schools registered with their local library, with considerable success
- ECALM is a funded project, but registering classes of school children can be done at any library! Talk to the local headteacher and outline your intentions. One suggested way is outlined below.

Create a letter that can be sent, via the school, to every parent in the class you want to register.

Talk to the Headteacher, and explain how the scheme would work, and what would be expected of the school (distribute the letter, inform you of any “objections” from parents, and provide you with lists of the classes to be registered)

This would essentially be an “opt out” letter, where the parent would return it only if they did NOT want their child to become a library member.

Explain that the child would be issued with a library card, and would be eligible to borrow books

Give a “return by” date (roughly one week from the day that the letters will sent to the home)

You will need to be mindful of the requirements of current GDPR data protection requirements, and state in the letter what the information given to you will be used for – (i.e. registration for library membership)

Collect the information needed from the school to allow you to register the children (essentially, name, address, and date of birth is usually enough)

Arrange for a class visit to the library, where they can be issued with their brand new library card, and a chance to explore the library!

It may be worth one of your senior managers meeting with the Head of Education in your local authority to inform them of the scheme, and the benefits for the children – one or two headteachers have expressed concern over data protection, but their concerns quickly disappear if the project is endorsed by the Director of Education!!

A sample letter that can be used is shown below – feel free to adapt it as required for local circumstances!

Of course, libraries can engage with young users in other ways

Your library details

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian

**Anywhere** library is working with **Anywhere** School to register every child in Year X at the library, and is part of a project that we hope will see all children in **(name of town here)** become regular users of their local library.

This will give every child the opportunity to engage with their local library to discover the world of books, and hopefully instill in them a lifelong love of reading and literature. Previous projects like this have also shown a distinct increase in literacy levels among children who read and use the library on a regular basis.

We are contacting you to let you know how the project will work.

On **(insert date here)**, the school will provide the library service with details of all pupils in Year X, who will then be registered with the library, and a library card supplied to them. They will be able to borrow books with that card, and also able to take any items borrowed home with them. These items will not be confined to being kept in school.

The information supplied by the school will **not** be used to offer marketing information, or be sold to third party interests, and will be held in the strictest confidence. It will be used **only** for the purposes of library registration

We are very excited by the prospect of your child becoming a library member, and the opportunities that brings. However, if you do **not** wish your child to become a library member, please notify the school by **(insert date here)**, and your child's information will not be passed to us. You will be under no obligation to offer a reason for doing this

We look forward to being able to show your child the wonderful world of books and libraries in the near future. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact your school, or the library **(contact details here)**

Yours sincerely

- Childrens' reading groups can be established in libraries, e.g. Chatterbooks - <https://readingagency.org.uk/children/quick-guides/chatterbooks/>  
Libraries have formed very successful Chatterbooks reading groups across the UK e.g Carrickfergus Library in Northern Ireland
- Carnegie and Greenaway Medal shadowing groups can be established. Consider inviting a school class or a small group of junior library users to take part in selecting their "winners", and see if the judges agree!  
You might even consider hosting your own "Awards Ceremony" on the day the winners are announced – and build the event around that announcement!

- There are other book awards that you might consider participating in, such as the Smarties prize, or the Blue Peter Book Awards

It might be that your library has standing orders in place for longlisted or shortlisted titles for some of these awards. Talk to your stock selector if you're not sure. Discuss with them whether they might agree to buy extra copies of shortlisted titles if you want to put together a promotion

**EXERCISE – Take 5-10 minutes to go online and research briefly what Childrens Book Awards there are. See if one of them appeals to you as a promotion or a project you can undertake. There may be a lesser known award you find that could be a lot of fun to do!**

- Summer Reading Challenge – This will dominate your engagement with children during the summer months! But don't wait for the children to come to you – get out to the schools during the last two or three weeks of the summer term, and promote the heck out of it!!

Consider having some sort of “launch event” in your library in the week after the school term ends (Just a suggestion – but animals in libraries always work well, and bring in an audience!)

- Author and storyteller visits – These have become less frequent in recent years because of funding pressures, but are hugely enjoyable for children (and for adults as well!).

Consider the impact on children of seeing one of their favourite authors in person – that should never be underestimated

It should be pointed out that that writers and storytellers are professional, working people, and generally should expect to be paid for their time. Some will require a fee, some will attend for expenses only, and some will, very occasionally, appear for nothing.

It is generally regarded as good practice, and courtesy, to at least offer a fee and/or expenses.

This can be challenging for some library services, and it may be worth developing a relationship with organisations that promote literature and literacy, e.g. Arts Councils in the various areas of the United Kingdom. These organisations may be able to offer writers or storytellers as part of a tour taking place in your area. Very often, those people will be available for a much lower fee than a one-off appearance.

Organisations will invariably have lists of writers in their areas, and be able to provide contact details, e.g. Literature Wales have their “Writers of Wales” lists

Publishers are also worth engaging with. If you host an event with them, and do it well, they are much more likely to return to you in the future.

There are also organisations such as Speaking of Books who will work with libraries to arrange author visits on their behalf.

Don't feel as if you have flounder when arranging an author event – there is lots of help out there!

- **School Library Services**  
Not all local authorities have School Library Services, but for those authorities that do, keep in regular contact with them!  
It's surprising how often the School Library Service and the public library service work in isolation! Talk to one another, and find out what you're both doing – you might be surprised at the “overlap”
- **Let people know what you're doing!**  
Libraries do many remarkable things, and make a real contribution to people's lives – but what they are not good at is singing their own praises!  
Show people what you're doing and achieving – take photos of events and get them out on social media, in local newspapers, and let your community know what a wonderful, talented skilled and professional organization you are!  
If need be, play the “political game” – invite your local councilors, or your Member of Parliament, to an event and make sure there's a press photographer there as well! They will be very unlikely to turn down publicity, especially if it's linked to a “good news” story.  
Perhaps it would be worth inviting the local authority Director of Education to a class visit, or a children's event, and let them see for themselves what you do, and how well you do it!

## YOUNG ADULTS

Library services do a wonderful job in engaging with children from almost the day they are born, up to the age of eleven or twelve – roughly, the time they leave primary school

And then, by and large, we lose them until much later in life!

Why is that?

Trying to answer that would take a whole other module in itself, and is not the purpose of this training module

Instead, we'll consider some general questions, and offer some discussion points that can be considered at a local level wherever you are. That might lead to some ways where you might be able to engage effectively with the young adults in – and outside – of your library.

- Think back to the “First Impressions” section of this module.
- What would a young adult's impression of your library be? Would they find it welcoming? Would they find it appealing?
- What about the interior? Some libraries have created self-contained designated young adult spaces, e.g. Treorchy Library in Rhondda Cynon Taff, Wales  
Not all libraries are fortunate enough to have the floor space available to incorporate such great ideas, where young adults are given “ownership” of such spaces, but it's something that may be worth considering if refurbishment projects are planned at some point.
- Where is the young adult section situated?  
It's very unlikely that any self-respecting young adult will want to be seen anywhere near the designated childrens' section if that is where the YA stock is placed!
- Libraries often cite video games as something that will draw in young adults.

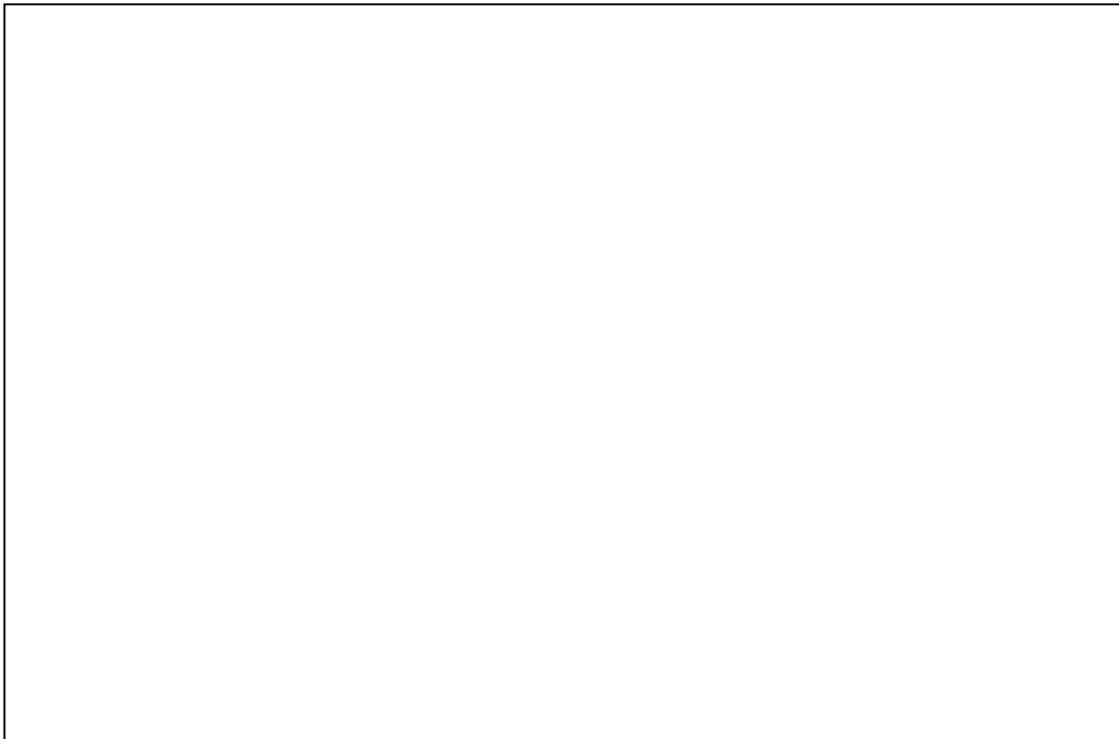
Is that true nowadays? With smart phone technology developing all the time, games can be downloaded very easily to them!

- Sales of console games have fallen dramatically in recent times, and are people really interested in the “back catalogue” of games? Or is their interest focused on the latest releases? And in what format?  
There is no right or wrong answer. This is something that has to be discussed and decided at a local level, and some difficult decisions may have to be made, especially considering levels of cost and funding available.
- Do libraries actively engage with young adults, and find out what **they** want from our libraries?  
When was the last time your library service undertook a user survey with young adults?  
If a library service takes its community engagement seriously, it should be doing it for all groups, and listening to the feedback that comes from it, even if that feedback is sometimes painful!
- No names will be mentioned here, but there have been some disastrous attempts by library services to engage young adults on social media!!  
There is another training module that focusses on social media, so we won't dwell too much here, but in trying to show that libraries are “hip” and “cool”, some attempts have ended up being the social media equivalent of “Dad dancing” as far as young adults are concerned!  
Social media is a great opportunity for engagement, and not just to engage with young adults. But if you are going to “target” young adults, why not ask a trusted young adult service user to post on social media for you as a “champion” of the library service?
- Does your library service involve young adults in stock selection?  
It's a great way of engaging with them, and making them feel they are contributing to the service.  
Consider putting together a small group, and giving them a monthly stock selection budget, access to a stock selection list, and watch them go!  
They will also choose what their demographic group **want** to read!  
Consider partnering this group with your young adult social media champion to promote the stock by virtual means!
- Does your library ever organize events aimed primarily at young adults?  
Libraries across the UK have held successful Health and Beauty events, as well as Fashion Shows aimed at a 14-20 age group. They have often drawn large numbers, and also led to the library service being seen in a new light by what has always been a traditionally hard to reach demographic group  
Perhaps there is a local college offering courses that you can work with to create an event in a library around a course taught in the college? They would probably be very happy to work with an external partner to raise the profile of the college, and the work of their students – and you would engage with a new group!  
You could also involve your social media champions again to promote any such event!

**EXERCISE – Think of one way you will try to engage with young adults in addition to what you do at the moment.**

**Note down some thoughts of how to develop it, and put your ideas to your supervisor.**

**It doesn't have to be original – just practical and effective!**



## **ADULTS**

We have looked at the impact that the library appearance can have on

engagement, and how important it is to have that positive “first impression”.

We have also looked at some opportunities and examples for the library service to engage with the staff of the local authorities in which we work

Now it’s time to look at the largest demographic group that the library engages with – adults. By “adults”, we are referring to users who are 16 years of age or older.

Generally speaking, all adults will “approve” of libraries. When asked about libraries, almost everyone will say something like “Libraries are great!”, although we often hear people add, or qualify that statement with “I don’t use them myself”!

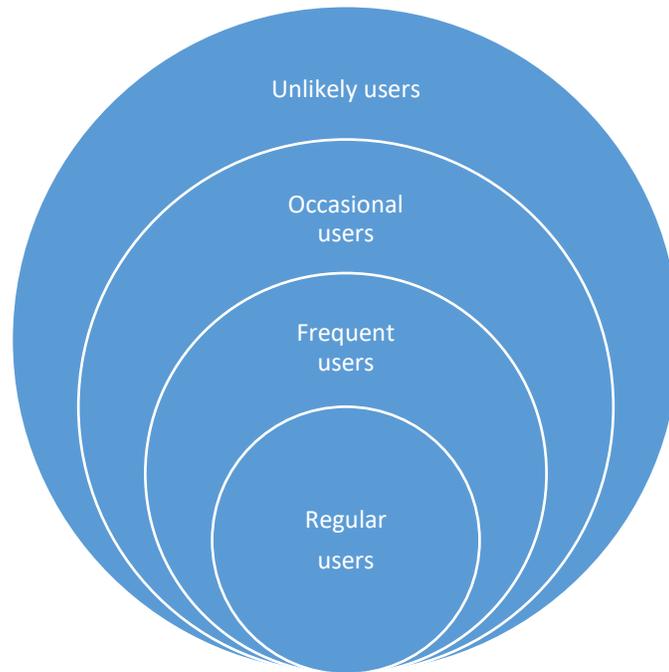
Why is that?

We’ve already discussed that we don’t let people know well enough what it is we do, but that is just one reason

- The other staff in our own local authorities are often unaware of what services libraries provide, and how they can help provide wider local authority services
- It’s sad to say, but very often, the Directors and senior managers of the departments where libraries sit in a local authority structure, don’t know what we do!
- Library budgets are getting tighter, so there are less resources available to fund service improvements directly ourselves
- Public perception of what we do is still worrying – large amounts of people think of libraries as just being about books. Think back to the last time you saw a scene in a movie or TV drama that was set in a library – the chances are, it was a deathly quiet place, with a forbidding and elderly member of staff controlling it with a rod of iron!

When libraries try to change these things, we often end up trying to be all things to all people, and looking to target **everyone** at once – our current users and all our potential users together, including those potential users who will be the most difficult to engage with

Consider the following diagram



The complete circle at the lowest part indicates your regular users – the week in, week out people who will visit the library in all weathers, throughout the whole of the year

The circle around that one is the band of people who represent the group that will happily use libraries when they need them, and who are very supportive of libraries. They are very aware of the services that libraries provide, and are very supportive of libraries.

The third circle is the group of people who will use libraries when they really HAVE to, but who are generally apprehensive of using libraries, and are unlikely to immediately think of libraries when seeking help or information

At the very outside of the circle, sit the areas of the community that are the least likely users of a library service, which can be for a number of reasons.

Some of these people may even be actively hostile towards libraries.

The problem that libraries have had in the past is to try and engage with **ALL** of the different layers of the user circle at the same time, to try and encourage people to use the library.

It is much better to work from the full circle outwards, and engage with the potential user base in the circle immediately surrounding the central one first because they are the most likely to “move” into the central circle and become regular users.

There are times when there is a seismic change that can bring people from the very edge of the outside circle directly into the central circle. In recent years, the introduction of Universal Jobmatch and Universal Credit has seen this happen in library services across the UK, allowing us to engage with individuals that may have been difficult for libraries to engage with

Try not to think of any situation as a library having nothing to offer people, but rather consider developing services and an “offer” that users and potential users can engage with at a time in their lives when they are ready to do so

When the time is right, you will be ready for them!

## THE OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities for library services to engage with their communities are numerous because of the strengths that are inherent in libraries everywhere

- They are adaptable
- They respond quickly to changes in society, and in their communities
- They have a holistic view of their communities
- They **know** their communities
- They are trusted by people
- They are “neutral” – they have no political agenda, and neither are they trying to sell anything, in the literal sense
- They are, by and large, free to use
- They have trained and very knowledgeable staff, who can adapt to almost any situation – there are very few public services where staff, quite literally, do not know what they will be asked by the next person to come through the library entrance!

What we all need to do is get that message across to users, potential users, our senior managers, and potential partner organisations!

So how can we do that?

We are going to take a look at some varied examples of how libraries across the UK have successfully engaged with their communities

We are not going to suggest that this is a full and comprehensive list of engagement examples, however!

Some of the following examples will already be carried out in your library service, but we hope that some of these examples will be “new”, and which may offer some opportunities for the ways in which your library can further engage with its community

Most of the examples listed here were created with little or no cost to the library service. Where any significant expenditure to the library service was required, it will be clearly indicated

## READING

Let's start with the obvious!

As well as cultivating a love of the printed word, reading provide a boost to mental health

Research has shown that reading fiction for seven minute each day can reduce levels of stress and anxiety. Why not put that as part of your email signature? Or include the author and title of the current book you're reading in your email signature?

- A study carried out by researchers at the University of Sussex showed that reading was more effective at tackling stress than listening to music or taking a walk, and can reduce stress by 68%
- Reading keeps the brain active, and can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's Disease

Reading groups in libraries can tackle the problem of social isolation for many people

Book chains can offer the same benefits without a person having to make a commitment of having to be present in a library at a particular time on a particular day. However, it can be beneficial if the library arranges an occasional coffee morning or afternoon for the participants of book chains to meet in person

Shared reading groups can be a wonderful way for libraries to engage with isolate community groups. Excellent engagement has been done with mental health groups, carer groups, and homeless people.

- An excellent engagement scheme was carried out in Cardiff Libraries, where the library service set up a shared reading group for homeless people at breakfast time – and persuaded a local bakery to supply hot bacon rolls for the sessions!

Facilitating a shared reading group can benefit from having trained staff leading the session. Training is available from The Reader Organisation ([www.thereader.org.uk](http://www.thereader.org.uk))

What stock is available for multi-cultural communities?

- How often are members of those communities consulted? This need not be formal surveys, but often a five minute conversation in a library can be very beneficial
- Can stock be leased instead of purchased? It might be worth having a chat with your Stock Manager
- Is there a neighbouring authority that you can arrange to swap stock with when necessary?

## IT users

This is often a group that is seen as “separate” from readers, but has become a very large demographic group of library users. They will have certain expectations and requirements

- A reasonable level of quiet to work
- Privacy
- A good range of up-to-date programmes and applications, e.g. Microsoft Office
- A good filtering policy
- Good Wi-Fi throughout the library so that users can bring their own devices to work with

### **SAFEGUARDING**

Your library service should have a robust filtering policy to prevent access to illegal and pornographic sites, but it is still important for all staff to be vigilant.

- Find a task to do in the vicinity of your PCs and make sure that users are aware of your presence in the vicinity
- If you see anything that gives you concern, your booking system may allow you to check what a user is looking at
- In your library or incident book, make a note of what you believe you saw, along with the name of the user, the time, and the PC you saw the activity on
- Report it immediately to your supervisor, or first available senior manager.

Whilst not wanting to sound alarmist, it should be noted that offenders released from prison are required to submit new benefit claims online. This is sometimes done in libraries.

Police forces will unofficially acknowledge that they are happy to see ex-offenders use PCs in libraries – a robust filtering policy is in place to prevent access to illegal and/or pornographic sites, and thus, some degree of “control” can be offered. It also allows them to “know” where some ex-offenders are for much of the day.

It is worth library staff being vigilant, and developing a good relationship with their local police staff

### **UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND UNIVERSAL JOBMATCH**

Recent changes in how jobseekers and benefit claimants are expected to submit applications, and show how active they are in seeking employment, has meant that libraries have seen a major change in engagement with their communities

In many areas, low levels of digital ownership, and low levels of digital literacy, has meant that the library service is not just seen as a place where the technology is available, but where expert help is also available.

This is the service demand that has led to the biggest increase in engagement “opportunities” for libraries in decades. It has also led to other engagement opportunities, allowing libraries to foster a number of close external partners in order to provide the expert help required by Jobseekers and benefit claimants.

## Jobseekers

It is now a requirement for all people who are claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) to show they are actively seeking employment

For many jobseekers, not only is a low level of digital literacy a major inhibiting factor, but so are general levels of literacy and numeracy.

Despite this, jobseekers are required to create and upload CVs to jobsites, and are often given little or no guidance or help by the organizations who expect this of them.

This can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety among jobseekers, which in turn, can lead to them becoming much less effective in the employment marketplace. Sometimes it can lead to sanctions being put in place against individuals

Libraries have offered a number of ways that they can help with this, at no cost, and also create good working partnerships with external agencies

- Create a basic CV template for users, and hold it on a USB stick for when it is needed
- "Create an email" IT sessions – many jobseekers (and other users) will not have an email to start out with, which is essential for registration on the sites Jobseekers will need to access
- CV building sessions  
It's a great opportunity to work with a partner organization on this, such as careers organizations, or a volunteer group, and run weekly sessions in the library.  
Inform your local DWP office so that they can advise their clients of when those sessions take place
- Try to work with your local careers advice organization for them to hold regular advice sessions in your library
- More and more DWP offices are encouraging their advisers to be based in the community itself – again, try to encourage regular sessions by them in your local library. In some libraries, they have an almost constant presence!

## Work clubs

Some libraries run regular work clubs which involve a number of partner organisations working together holistically.

Careers Advice agencies, Basic Skills Agency, Adult Education departments are always good to involve, as well as any agency involved in the employment process.

Working together in this way can be hugely successful, with real "end results" – but also a need for literacy skills can be identified early by one partner, and that person immediately referred to another partner present, so an immediate plan of action is put in place

The library acts as the focal point for individuals AND partners, and provides added levels of engagement over and above the actual work club session itself

## BENEFIT CLAIMANTS

More and more benefit claims are required to be made online. As already mentioned, any new claim for Universal Credit must be submitted online. Also, many applications for local authority housing are having to be made exclusively online

This can lead to problems for people who are unable to access the digital requirements, or who are lacking the requisite digital skills.

Libraries are perfectly placed to help – they have the technology, and they have the skilled staff to assist people – make sure that you ask the relevant departments in your local authority to remind claimants that help can be found in the library

It's also a great opportunity to show anyone accessing the library for this what else you can offer!

## ADVICE SESSIONS

Libraries across the UK have formed excellent partnerships with a large number of external agencies to hold advice and counselling sessions in libraries.

All of the following examples have been hugely productive and beneficial in terms of community engagement, and have encouraged hitherto difficult to reach groups to visit the library

### Mental health

Organisations such as MIND have offered advice and awareness sessions in libraries

- Try to have a confidential space available for anyone who may need a one-to-one conversation with an adviser
- Bear in mind that MIND will also offer and deliver staff awareness training sessions – and often free of charge!

### Citizens Advice

Libraries have had great success by hosting regular sessions for Citizens Advice

Advice seekers are often more comfortable in visiting a neutral and non-threatening environment in which to seek advice – libraries fit this perfectly!

### Counselling sessions

Once again, because of their welcoming and non-judgmental reputations, libraries are great places to provide counselling sessions for external partner advisers to meet with clients. Some examples of counselling sessions held in libraries are

- Financial advice  
These can be more “awareness” sessions, available for all users, with such agencies as Money Advice, or perhaps the Benefits Section of your local authority  
They can also be confidential one-to-one sessions with counsellors, offering advice on debt, or of how to “manage” the process of Universal Credit, e.g. Your Money Your Home – a collaborative approach between the Wales Co-Op and Blaenau Gwent CBC
- Drugs and alcohol addiction
- Gambling addiction
- Smoking (Stop Smoking Wales)
- LGBT groups
- Victims of crime support groups

All agencies and clients find the relaxing atmosphere and welcome of libraries an easy environment in which to relax with an adviser from the relevant agency or agencies in a way that is not always possible in an office, or in their own homes

Be mindful that some of the organisations mentioned will understandably require a totally confidential space for their sessions. Not all libraries can offer this, but if your library is able to so, consider letting some agencies know!

### CHARGING FOR ROOM SPACES

At some point, the question of whether you levy a charge on room hire in your library will be raised, especially if you are offering a confidential space

More and more so, library services are expected to raise income for their local authority or parent organization, such as a Trust.

Against that is the argument, that what you are trying to offer is beneficial to the community, and at least theoretically, is available to everyone in your community.

This is a difficult balance to achieve, and much will depend on the policy of your parent organization – you may be expected to charge a room hire irrespective of who wants the space.

This makes it difficult if you approach an external partner to offer the library as a space in which their goals can be reached as well as yours, and then have to discuss charging

Try to arrange as many events as possible to be held on the library floor, at a time that the library is open – it's impossible for anyone to argue that this space should be charged for

It's more difficult when it comes to "confidential" spaces. Organisations such as Citizens Advice will require a totally confidential space for their sessions, and this almost certainly means a dedicated room.

Essentially, any space that can be closed off with a door can be considered as being confidential

This may lead to a senior manager expecting a room hire charge to be levied. Organisations may well be happy to pay a charge, but it might be worth taking time to convince those people of the benefits and advantages of offering these sessions free of charge to external partners – and that the advantages of offering that space far outweighs any £15 per hour charge, for example

There is no "right" answer to this, but it is something you will have to think about as it will inevitably raise its head at some point

Macmillan  
Cancer  
Support -

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/>

Most libraries across the UK have some degree of contact and support with Macmillan Cancer Support, if only through arranging their annual "World's Biggest Coffee Morning" each year

Some library services have also acquired funding to appoint a Macmillan Cancer Support Information Officer to their library service, for a fixed funding period.

Their role is to provide an information service to cancer sufferers, and their families and carers.

This has been very successful when based in library staffing structures. The work of many Information Officers has been met with great acclaim, and it has allowed libraries to engage with users in a way that would otherwise have been very difficult

Carers groups

Libraries are great meeting places for carers to meet – why not consider establishing a carers reading group? Or perhaps a weekly or monthly coffee morning for carers to meet together?

## Hate Crime

A number of libraries have worked with local police forces to become centres for the reporting of hate crimes e.g Sandwell Libraries

Library staff have been trained to become the first point of contact for people to report hate crime incidents

Specialist training is offered to library staff, and the staff pass on the initial details of the alleged incident to police for further investigation.

However, the key factor in this is that the library is considered to be a safe, trusted and non-judgmental building and service by the community, and open to all

Bear in mind that a confidential space for this will be required, and that you should factor as much time as is necessary to take full details

## COMMUNITY ADVICE SURGERIES

There are also other avenues open to libraries to help engage with their communities

- Police Advice Surgeries  
Cultivate your local police station to offer weekly or monthly advice surgeries in your library.  
People may well be more prepared to discuss issues in a library setting, instead of visiting a police station – or doing nothing at all!  
It's also a great way of displaying close links between the library and the police, especially if you have any "shifty elements" visiting your library!
- Member of Parliament surgeries  
All MPs hold their surgeries in their community on a regular basis – why not contact your local MP's office and offer the library as the venue for an upcoming surgery?
- Consider doing the same for your local MSP in Scotland, your AM in Wales, and Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly
- Also, local authority councilors can be invited to do the same  
It brings people in to your library that might not otherwise visit, also gives you a chance to show someone very influential what the library service has to offer – maybe even think about arranging some sort of event at the same time so they can see what the library is doing

## COMMUNITY LINKS

### One Stop Shops

Many library services are already part of a One Stop Shop approach by their local authorities.

It helps establish the library as a focal point in the community, and can be central in helping deliver the local authority deliver its objectives and policies

But try to make sure if you can, that it's the library which is the "lead partner" in a One Stop Shop approach – or you may find libraries taking a back seat to other agencies!

### Recycling bags

If the library is not part of a One Stop Shop, being a distribution point for something such as food waste recycling bags brings in a surprisingly large number of people for those alone, allowing opportunities for further engagement

All local authorities are having to increase recycling targets – talk to your local authority recycling team, and see if there are ways the library can help. Having one central point in a community for collecting bags seems a very good idea – why not let it be your library?

If it happens, keep the bags at the library counter, so that users have to engage with a member of library staff – there's no harm in asking them if there's anything else they need from the library!

### Tell Us Once

Many library services in England, Scotland and Wales actively participate in the Tell Us Once scheme, allowing one contact to enable a number of other organisations to be notified for instances such as births and bereavements, along with a number of other relevant agencies

### Family and Local History groups

People everywhere are becoming increasingly interested in Family History, and their ancestry

Setting up a library group to support people to trace their family tree is always popular

Ideally, because of the time requirements this often needs, try to establish a volunteer group to help facilitate your sessions – they will often have the time and the very real interest in helping people trace their family tree

Some libraries have offered short, introductory courses (sometimes at a charge) in helping people trace family trees by partnering with a local Archive organization or established Family History Group

### Open University advice sessions

The Open University (OU) are very interested in working with libraries to promote their courses and services, and also to have a representative available for anyone undertaking an OU course to be able to meet someone in person to discuss any issues

Some library services have worked with the OU to arrange regular (monthly or quarterly) sessions, and have used these sessions to promote their own services at the same time e.g. the availability of ILL loans

### Election Polling Stations

Libraries have occasionally become polling stations for voting during general and local elections, bringing in a large number of potential engagement opportunities

An appropriate and dedicated room will be need, devoid of any “through traffic”

Staff will have to be flexible in their working patterns on the day of the election (someone would be needed to open the building at about 6.30 am, and be present to close and lock the building at about 10.30 pm)

It also brings a decent amount of income to the library for the room hire (your Electoral Office WILL have the money to pay!)

## SENIOR CITIZENS

Everything that has previously been said in this module applies to the elderly and/or impaired people that use libraries.

However, just a few more things need to be considered for these users and potential users

### Stock

- Is there a wide range of stock available in Large Print and Audiobook formats? Not all Large Print and Audiobook users want a diet of Mills & Boon romances and Agatha Christie mysteries!
- What percentage of the library bookfund is spent on Large Print and Audiobook stock?  
Is that percentage proportionate to the percentage of issue figures generated by these areas of stock?
- Is any of your library publicity material available in Large Print, Braille, or audio formats?
- What services are provided for your housebound customers?
- How much engagement does the library service have with housebound customer over and above their regular visit?

Some library services have been successful with housebound customer book chains.

It should be easy to set up and administer, and has also been found to lower the sense of social exclusion and isolation felt by many housebound people!

### Links with Social Services Departments

Libraries can successfully set up partnerships and projects with Social Services departments to mutually benefit their customers/clients

- Blaenau Gwent Libraries, in Wales, have successfully formed a partnership with their local authority Social Services to deliver stock and enhanced services to customer as part of a Visually Impaired project  
An annual grant is given by Social Services to the library service to deliver stock and equipment to visually impaired customers on behalf of the Social Services department  
It allows the library service to form partnerships with external agencies such as the National Library for the Blind (NLB)  
It also provides an extra source of funding to add Audiobooks to its stock, which is available to all library users of Audiobooks

## Library Design

An increasing number of staff across the UK have undertaken Dementia Awareness training

Some libraries have become “dementia-friendly” spaces, consciously designing spaces to lessen the possible confusion of people suffering from dementia, along with carefully selected furniture and colours (e.g Sandal Library in Wakefield Libraries - <http://designinglibraries.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=574>)

There is an obvious cost associated with doing this, but in some instances, funding may be available to meet the costs of doing this, either in full or partly so

## Events

- Consider events aimed specifically at Senior Citizens
- Consider liaising with your Social Services department to see if there may be able to help with transporting housebound users, or a group of people from residential homes
- Libraries have been successful in arranging reminiscence sessions for elderly people, and can be particularly successful with dementia-sufferers  
Consider working with a local residential home and school on a multi-generational project – these have worked extremely well in many places (and it also provides excellent photo opportunities to let everyone know what the library is doing!!)
- A very popular event is to invite an audiobook narrator to read to a visually impaired group in a library  
See if you can persuade your Stock Manager to cultivate the representatives from the audiobook publishers your library services buys its stock from – most reps are very happy to work with library services to arrange an event. This may come with a fee required, but very often they can be free of charge!

**EXERCISE – Register on the training forum and post one engagement project that has worked well in your library. It can be something similar to what has been mentioned in this module, or something completely different!**

**Don't be afraid to share your success – let people know about it**

**Also, check back on the forum occasionally to see if any ideas might work well in your library – let the forum be about sharing good practice and stimulating new ideas!**

## **CONCLUSION**

Community engagement is not always easy, and can occasionally be frustrating.

It can take persistence, constant persuasion, and sometimes a degree of financial investment and support that has to have a business case made for.

But the rewards for the library service can be wonderful

- Community engagement can put the library at the very centre of the community it serves
- It shows that libraries can challenge the traditional perception that they are just about books, and lets people see the library service in a new light
- It demonstrates to senior managers in local authorities, and local councilors, that libraries can be used to deliver their corporate policies and objectives
- It can also be very rewarding for staff at a personal level to see that the work they do has a distinct and positive effect on the people in their communities

We hope that this module has made you think a little about what services your library currently offers, and has also given you an idea or two about what your library may be able to offer in the future.

Good luck with whatever you do – and don't forget to share what you do with others, whether it be on a local level, or further afield!

**SING YOUR OWN PRAISES LOUDLY!!**

