



Photo credit: Matthew Feeney

# Libraries and the cost of living crisis

Briefing note  
June 2022



**Libraries  
Connected**

# Introduction

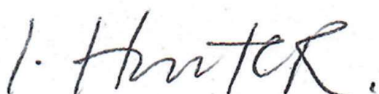
Libraries Connected represents, supports and promotes public libraries. Through constant dialogue with our members - all public library services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland - we can identify emerging challenges before they become apparent to government and local decision-makers.

The cost of living crisis is one such challenge. Libraries told us they were experiencing increased demand for information on personal finance and budgeting, for help reducing household bills and for practical support accessing food and clothing. They said that vulnerable people were increasingly using libraries to keep warm, to avoid paying for energy.

To quantify the impact of the crisis and get a clearer national picture, we surveyed heads of library services. The results of that snapshot survey are presented in this briefing note. Over 30 heads of service responded, representing almost a fifth of all our member library services.

The survey revealed that more than two-fifths of public libraries have already experienced increased demand for services related to the cost of living crisis. And the vast majority predict the problem to get worse - with over 80% expecting the number of people using libraries to keep warm to increase. The survey also shows the breadth of support provided by libraries: food and clothes banks, cooking on a budget classes, help with household bills coffee mornings and holiday activities for children are just some of the ways they are responding to the new economic reality.

The results show that public libraries are already playing a crucial frontline role in helping people navigate the cost of living crisis. As the crisis deepens, this role will only become more important and entrenched. Library services are ready and willing to respond but they must be adequately funded and supported to fulfil this vital community role.



**Isobel Hunter MBE**  
Chief Executive  
Libraries Connected

## 81%

of library services expect to see an increase in people using libraries to keep warm this coming winter

## 44%

of library services have already experienced increased demand for services to help people through the cost of living crisis

## 38%

of library services have already introduced new services specifically to help people through the cost of living crisis

# What libraries leaders are saying

“ We are seeing increasing numbers of people in need through our doors.

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“ We are being approached by partners to help them reach families and the vulnerable with specific support around warmer homes initiatives, mental health support and scam awareness as there are reports people are being offered bogus help with their financial situation.

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“ We have more people who are “just sitting” in the library - also increased numbers of homeless people using services.

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“ Lots more use of the internet looking for money saving tips, whether they should change suppliers and where to access additional financial support.

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“ We are already seeing an increase in people spending long periods of time in libraries, some of whom tell us they are avoiding using energy at home

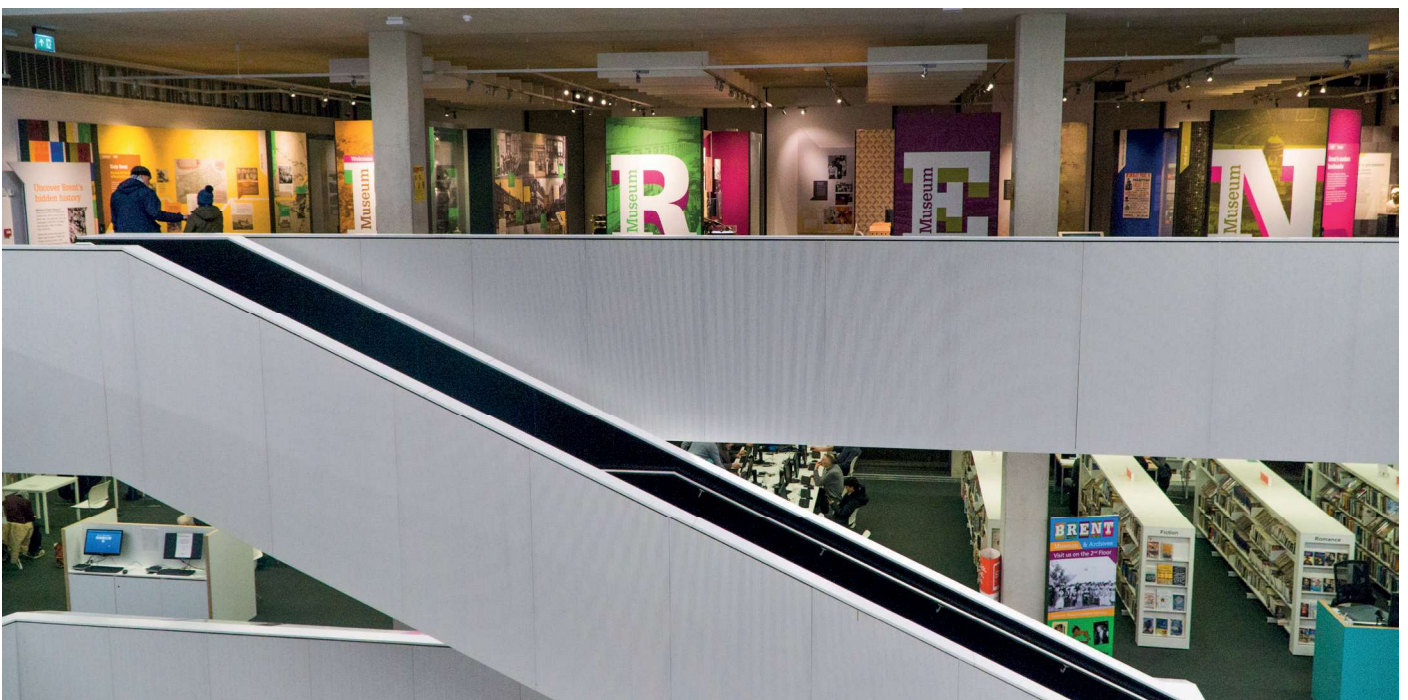
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“ Libraries have always been a safe haven. We are seeing increased homelessness and more people living at the margins.

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“ Library staff have supported customers to use the public computers to access switching sites for utilities, online deals for energy efficient white goods and signposted to council services for help with housing and benefit enquiries. There has also been an increase in people seeking information about debt advice.

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# What libraries are doing

Our survey showed that libraries are delivering a very broad range of services to help people navigate the cost of living crisis. Some of these are part of the library service's core offer - others have been specially developed in recent months to address those struggling with rising prices and falling wages. These services fall into five broad areas:

## Information and advice

A traditional way that libraries help people with the cost of living crisis is through books and resources on budgeting, personal finance and debt, along with fiction titles exploring these themes. Over a quarter (28%) had developed their stock on these topics in recent months. The vast majority (88%) also signpost users to advice and advocacy organisations such as Citizens Advice or Age UK. Many libraries also host advice sessions run by charities or local council service points.

## Digital support

Every library in Britain offers free use of computers and free wifi, with most also offering one-to-one support with using PCs. Our survey suggests that libraries are increasingly being asked for help using the internet to switch utility suppliers, find the best deals on household goods and apply for the £150 council tax rebate to help with rising energy costs. Library PCs are also being used to claim and manage Universal Credit, which can only be done online.

## Skilling up

Libraries have reacted quickly to programme a range of learning events to equip people with essential skills that could lessen the impact of the crisis. Examples include informal drop-in sessions on reducing household bills, budget cooking workshops and intensive support for rough sleepers looking for employment. The vast majority of these sessions are free and open to all.

## Food, clothing and hygiene banks

Over half of library services surveyed host food, clothing or hygiene banks - or act as donation and distribution points for them. Libraries are a natural choice for this role as they are located in the heart of communities, are convenient to access, have high local recognition and, as they are used by a very wide range of people for many different purposes, may be perceived as less stigmatising than other venues. Examples of clothing banks hosted by libraries include school uniform swaps, winter coat rails and smart outfits to borrow for job interviews.

## Clubs and cultural activities

Every library service in the country runs clubs and cultural activities. It could be scrabble club or "knit and natter" sessions aimed at older people, rhyme time for young children and their carers or a reading group for all ages. Libraries told us they have noticed an increase in people attending these events and then staying in the library for the rest of the day. Importantly, most libraries (59%) provide free drinks and sometimes food at these events. Many libraries also host Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) events, which support to children in receipt of free school meals through holiday periods.



**47%**

provide help using price comparison websites

**88%**

signpost users to advice and advocacy organisations

**56%**

host food, clothing or hygiene banks/ donation points

**19%**

offer personal budgeting classes and workshops

**66%**

offer help applying for and managing Universal Credit

# Why libraries?

## **A trusted service**

Librarians are among Britain's most trusted professions<sup>1</sup> and for many people libraries are the natural place to go to find high quality, independent advice and information. They know that books and information resources at their local library have been carefully selected by professionals.

## **A warm welcome**

Libraries work hard to create welcoming and accessible spaces, with friendly staff. For this reason, people in need often feel more comfortable approaching a library than a council building. Users also know they can stay all day if they need to, use the toilet and charge their phone with no one asking intrusive or difficult questions.

## **An unrivalled reach**

There are almost 4,000 public libraries across the UK<sup>2</sup>. In fact, there are more libraries than branches of McDonalds<sup>3</sup>. Located in our town centres, high streets and villages, they are a constant presence in our lives, frequented by people of all ages and walks of life. As such they are ideally placed to reach those most affected by the cost of living crisis.

<sup>1</sup> [www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row](https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row)

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-libraries/libraries-taking-part-survey-201920](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-libraries/libraries-taking-part-survey-201920)

<sup>3</sup> [www.mcdonalds.com/gb/en-gb/help/faq/18510-how-many-mcdonalds-restaurants-are-there-in-the-uk-and-the-world.html](https://www.mcdonalds.com/gb/en-gb/help/faq/18510-how-many-mcdonalds-restaurants-are-there-in-the-uk-and-the-world.html)



## Case studies

### Barnet

Barnet's library service, in North London, has seen a much higher proportion of vulnerable adults - particularly those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness - visiting their libraries since the cost of living crisis began. "The needs that we are trying to meet seem to be more acute and it appears as if people have less support than before the pandemic," explains Hannah Richens, Barnet's Head of Libraries. In response, the service has teamed up with a local skills and employment organisation to provide regular weekly sessions focused on youth employment and supporting rough sleepers into work. The service is also about to embark on a coat donation scheme from Finchley Church End Library in partnership with a local Jewish charity.

### Hampshire

In Hampshire, work started to facilitate the Household Support Grant in winter 2021, which included signposting customers to utility/food vouchers and, in areas of most need, giving out "warm boxes" and food packs. A number of libraries provide space for a community pantries or fridges which support cost of living challenges and help reduce food waste. Library teams have also developed engaging events using the Holiday Activity Fund to help families during school holidays – this includes snacks or meals, a creative activity and an introduction to libraries. Hampshire Library Service is developing further plans to offer practical support for its communities, including fuel poverty initiatives.

### Norfolk

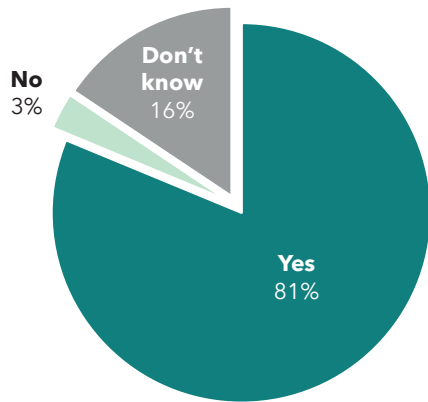
"We are seeing more ways to work with others to meet the needs of local people," says Sarah Hassan, Assistant Head of Service at Norfolk Libraries. Over the winter Norfolk County Council saw libraries as a natural pick-up point for free warm clothing, toiletries and period products. The service has gradually been increasing its stock of books and information resources on topics such as personal budgeting and debt management. It has also expanded its business information for people needing different income streams because of the economic situation. The service is now planning Feed and Read sessions at schools and community centres over the summer, which offer children a free healthy lunch while giving them access to books

### Cheshire East

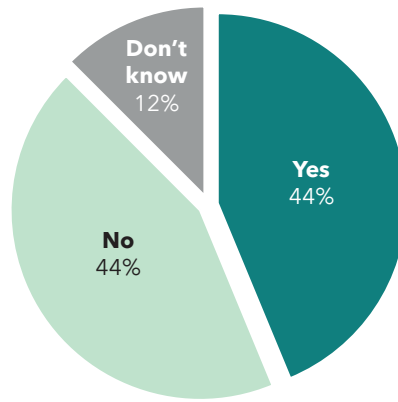
Libraries in Cheshire East have seen an increase in people asking about emergency assistance, food banks and help with heating costs. Over the winter library workers noticed more older people taking advantage of Winter Wellbeing resources, including duvets, throws, handwarmers and thermal socks. Some people attending regular activities have asked if they can stay for the entire day to save putting their heating on. In response, the service has organised Help With Household Bills coffee mornings in 14 of its libraries. These drop-in sessions offer practical advice on reducing costs and highlight how libraries, other council departments and charities can help. The service also hosts food and clothing banks, and has increased the number of free activities on offer.

# Survey data

Do you expect to see an increase in people using your libraries to keep warm this coming winter?



Has your library service experienced increased demand for services supporting people through the cost of living crisis?



		Yes	No	Don't know
1	Has your library service experienced increased demand for services supporting people through the cost of living crisis?	14	14	4
2	Has your library service increased its provision of books or information resources on topics related to the cost of living crisis (eg personal budgeting, debt management)?	9	21	2
3	Do you expect to see an increase in people using your libraries to keep warm this coming winter?	26	1	5
4	Has your library service experienced increased demand from small businesses for meeting space, wi-fi, printing or other essential business amenities?	16	11	5
5	Does your library service provide free food and drink at events?	19	12	1
6	Is your library service considering increasing its provision of free food and drink in response to the cost of living crisis?	8	21	3
7	Has your library service introduced any other new services specifically to help people with the cost of living crisis?	12	20	0

## Question 8

Does your library service offer any of the following?

Signposting to advice and advocacy organisations	28
Help with applying for and managing Universal Credit	21
Help with using price comparison websites	15
Food or hygiene banks/donation points	14
Clothes banks/donation points	7
Personal budgeting classes or workshops	5

Total responses: 32

## About Libraries Connected

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

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