

Bristol Library Services youth engagement summary.

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Context

Bristol Library Service commissioned the Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) to deliver a series of youth engagement workshops with a range of schools across Bristol, to understand what young people require from the libraries over the next two years. Through community engagement, young people were asked to offer concrete ideas on how they can contribute to enhancing existing library services or take ownership for creating new community opportunities.

Structure

RIO spoke to young people through engagement workshops, challenging them to think practically about how the city's library assets could be maximized and how the current Library offer can be brought into the 21st century. We also discussed transport, opening hours and library volunteering. The key questions underpinning the sessions included:

- How the current library offer could be more attractive to younger people?
- How young people could engage in library activities?
- How can the library and its assets be used to in lieu of community services?

RIO successfully delivered youth engagement sessions with 48 young people from the following education and youth settings.

- St Brendan's Sixth form
- Cotham North Bristol Sixth form centre
- Fairfield Academy
- City of Bristol College
- Princes Trust

Two of the seven schools RIO initially proposed to contact did not take part in the engagement sessions. Cathedral Sixth Form and St Mary Redcliffe Sixth Form were contacted on numerous occasions between late November 2018 and February 2019. No response was received from Cathedral Sixth Form and St Mary Redcliffe were unable to accommodate a workshop, during the engagement period due to student timetables and limited staff capacity.

Additional Bristol secondary schools were contacted, but unfortunately while most school leads understood the value in the engagement activity, student mock exams and limited staff capacity have been a barrier in accessing further cohorts of students. Staff responses stated that academic calendars are full and could not release students for workshops during the timescale proposed.

Profile of young people

- Young people were aged between 15 years and 20 years.
- 4 of young people have used the library only once.
- 7 of young people have never used the library.
- 37 young people currently use the library or have used the library more than once.
- 18 identified as male and 30 as female.
- The library's that young people used included: Bishopsworth, Bishopston, Bedminster, Central, Fishponds, Hanham, Henleaze, Horfield, Junction 3, Keynsham, Redland, St George and St Pauls. Interestingly students from St Brendan's use UWE library as people closer to their age group use its services.

Summary of findings

- Practical themes ran through the feedback and ideas that young people put forward, they prove interesting to read and are valuable to gain insight into what young people across the city want from local library services. Young people who use the library, explained that they enjoy using the library for reading, but more importantly go there as a place to study, collaborate with other students and would value 'their own space' in libraries to do this. Young people who do not currently engage with the library service, "do not see the need" as they can access books and computers at home. They would be encouraged to use local library services if more of their peers attended and wider variety of activities were available. Interestingly, young people who were not current users, but had used their local library, did so when they were much younger (primary school age) and were brought in by a family member usually on a weekend.
- There is a perceived lack of 'visibility' of the library service amongst the young people we engage with. Many individuals agreed that the library is not place that they actively consider using in their daily lives. One young person describes how they walk past the (St George) library most days but doesn't "necessarily think of it as a place to visit or use for studying". The individual explained that he "would be more aware it's services if it was advertised on social media on an A -boards on the street or posters around their school". Young people who are in education tend to use their school library, this was especially true for Fairfield and St Brendan's students.
- A similar sentiment was shared when asked about library careers or volunteering roles, most young people explained that they would consider volunteering if they knew more about it, while some young people did not realise it was an option. One young person from The Princes Trust, recently completed their volunteer training and is starting to volunteer at central library. Young people described that they would be happy to volunteer their time helping to lead reading groups or helping older people use computers or IT equipment.
- Mental health was a significant and recurrent theme throughout the conversations. Mental health and accessibility to wellbeing services is an important dialogue among individuals within this age group. It would be valuable to explore how partnerships with local health and wellbeing organisations can create added value to local library spaces, particularly for young people who wish to access multiple wellbeing services.

Generally, the young people RIO engaged with, suggested they would ‘feel more’ confident starting initiatives at their local libraries in partnership with local organisations, their schools or the library staff. The ideas generated are achievable and young people have a definite willingness to get involved with community activities, but ownership of these ideas was less forthcoming during the sessions.

In summary, young people across Bristol value the library and its services, but through discussions have demonstrated that the library of the 21st Century is a place that is welcoming, inspiring, supports learning but offers a wide range of activities and services that contribute to their overall wellbeing

What young people want from libraries?

We asked young people what would make libraries more attractive, encourage use and future fit. Feedback has been summarised into key themes.

Careers, employability and aspirations.

- All young people described the need for the library spaces to be used in ways that support their future career of learning aspirations.
- As the age range of young people fell between 15 and 20, individuals were interesting in learning more about future training, education of career options.
- Each group made suggestions linked to careers and employability such attending apprenticeship fairs and employability sessions to understand how to write a CV or to gain better employment knowledge.
- Young people expressed a need to learn more about independent Bristol businesses, were interested in meeting “inspiring business people” and attending talks from young leaders or TED talk style events.

Technology

- While most of the young people had access to computers at home or through school and access internet on their phones, there was an appetite amongst the individuals to use digital packages or software that they did not readily use, such as photo editing software, gaming and virtual reality hardware.
- Gaming and virtual reality was popular choice amongst the male participants, with many listing gaming as a hobby.
- Gaming nights were a popular suggestion and were cited as” making libraries more attractive to young people”.
- Young people from the Princes Trust and Fairfield were especially interested in using the library space in a gaming/ virtual reality context and as place to access specific software such as Adobe Photoshop or to “learn how to use computers better”.

- Individuals were interested in offering their skills in helping to run coding clubs or attending coding clubs for younger children at their local library.

Health and wellbeing.

- With almost 1 in 10 young people experiencing mental health problems¹, it does not seem surprising that one of the most common and significant themes among discussions with young people was the topic of mental health support and access to general 'wellbeing' services. Across many of the conversations with the group, young people felt that access to mental and sexual health services was important and using a local library space to access these types of services would be highly valuable to them and their wider communities.
- Young people value the library and see it as a community asset. They would consider using the library more often, if a range of services and activities could be accessed in one go.
- Off the Record have previously hosted mobile or 'pop up' sessions in local libraries and individuals have explained that this was beneficial. Students at St Brendan's explained that they want to access these services, but sometimes travelling in to the center of Bristol can be daunting but visiting a local library would feel less so and would make the service more accessible.

"THE LIBRARY SERVICES TEAM COULD WORK WITH EXISTING SERVICES SUCH AS OFF THE RECORD TO OFFER MOBILE SUPPORT SESSION ACROSS SOME OF THE CITY'S LIBRARIES, SO YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T HAVE TO TRAVEL FAR TO USE THEM."

Arts and cultural activities.

- Arts, creative and cultural activities feature prominently in the ideas that young people presented and when asked about their interests and passions.
- Through the workshops, young people revealed a desire to engage in creative and artistic activities through their local library. Individuals from every cohort, told us that they valued and enjoyed creative activities such as illustration, craft making, music making and dance. In some instances, young people explained that arts and crafts activities were missing from their local communities and presented ideas of hosting creative and cultural workshops at libraries for other young people or children. Ideas ranged from knitting groups, open mike nights, music technology sessions, poetry nights through to maker or craft workshops run by local, young or emerging artists. Some individuals were also looking for opportunities to work together outside of school on fundraising projects or using arts and culture to raise awareness of social issues.
- Young people demonstrated an interest in gaming, both online and traditional board games. There was also a desire to access 'niche' themed events based on graphic novels and sci-fi

¹ <https://youngminds.org.uk/youngminds-professionals/>

game/film genres and to socialise with other young people who had common interests, like 'comic con' events that are held internationally.

- While not a new concept, local libraries presented and utilised as creative and cultural hubs would create interest and hold the potential to increase participation.

Opening times and transport

"JUNCTION THREE LIBRARY CLOSES AT 5PM, SO BY THE TIME I GET HOME FROM SCHOOL, I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO SPEND THERE."

- Young people explained that extended evening and Sunday opening hours would encourage them to use the services more often, particularly with students who were studying and needed a quiet space to work away from their homes. Young people who used the library would most likely use the library more often, if library times were extend.

"SOME FAMILIES HAVE MANY SIBLINGS AT HOME, AND YOU NEED A QUIET SPACE TO STUDY AFTER SCHOOL".

- While public transport was not the main reason young people did not use their local or central library services, the cost of public transport, specifically bus travel is a barrier for young people travelling across the city.

The Library spaces.

- The library space and atmosphere are important to the young people spoken to. While libraries are viewed as child and family friendly spaces, the young people we spoke to felt that they would value a designated student area away from young children or adults, so they study, hold conversations and collaborate with other young people.

"DESIGNATED SPACES FOR STUDENTS OR YOUNG PEOPLE. WE WANT PRIVACY AND DON'T WANT TO FEEL LIKE WE A GETTING IN THE WAY OF OTHERS WHO ARE USING THE LIBRARY. "

- Bright colours and comfortable seating in a young adult specific area would enhance the user experience, as well as using bold colours on the front of the library buildings to make the buildings more aesthetically pleasing.

Branding and marketing of library services and activities.

- Increased social media and general advertising would encourage young people to use their local library service more often. With the less engaged library users, it is a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Young people in this age group comment that have much to deal with day to day and the library sadly, falls to the bottom of the list.

- The groups commented that seeing an advert on their Facebook feed, detailing local library events could help encourage more young people to join their library or take part in activities, or at least remind young people of local library activities.
- The young people spoken to stated that Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook were their top social media channels and used these to find out about events, news and buy products.

“SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING IS IMPORTANT. WE USE SOCIAL MEDIA LIKE SNAPCHAT, FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM. IT MAY BE GOOD TO PAY FOR SOME ADVERTISING ACROSS SOME OF THESE CHANNELS TO GET OUR ATTENTION AND ALSO THE WIDER PUBLICS”.

- Individuals also explained that posters around their school, college or youth organisations would increase the libraries presence across young audiences.
- Word of mouth was also another powerful method of marketing, with many young people exclaiming that “if my friends went to the library, I would probably go too!” and some groups agreed that if their peers used the library more they probably would do the same, or if they heard through friends that there are interesting workshops or talks at the library, they would probably consider attending.
- Individuals described that they want bold colourful branding and web pages that catches their attention and makes them want to use the library services. St Brendan’s students discussed the idea that graphic or web design students could work with library teams to create engaging website pages, one that appeals to young adults.
- A young person from the Princes Trust cohort explained, “If someone from the library came into our sessions, to talk about what is on offer at the library, we would be introduced to library activities”.

The Ideas.

The services or activities that young people felt were missing in their local communities can be spilt into two clear categories; young person centric spaces (it was important that these spaces were not like traditional youth centres) and activities for young people. Young people felt the following was missing from the areas in which they lived:

- Local wellbeing and mental health services.
- Arts, craft, creative activities for young people.
- A space or hub for young people to “hang out”, take part in extracurricular activities and projects.
- Quiet places to study or to relax after school.
- Afterschool, weekend and holiday childcare provision.

Full lists of the all the ideas that young people offered can be found in the attached appendix, but for ease a highlight list is detailed below. Individuals did not feel wholly confident in leading workshops or activities in libraries independently but would feel more comfortable working in partnership with their school, youth group or a partnership organisation to turn their ideas into a reality.

Idea highlight summary

- Working in partnership with mental health service Off the Record to offer 'pop-up' sessions in key local libraries.
- Community swap shop of clothes and fashion accessories run by young people for local community.
- Take over days – young people are given library space out of hours to host various topical events or activities
- Maker/craft workshops run by young artists to encourage young people to express themselves or engage in arts activities
- Opportunities for young people to host or lead 'meet up' sessions with common interests such as gaming or arts/crafts.
- Healthy eating and wellness sessions e.g. how to cook healthy meals and meditation.
- Craft and knitting clubs for 20 – 30 yrs. olds, led by local individuals.
- Lego making workshops led by young people to help individuals with autism.
- A talk series like TED talks with inspiration people.
- Arts/poetry sessions or something that helps young people embrace culture. This can be youth led and young people would pay a nominal fee.
- Reading/art clubs for young children led by 6th form students.
- Young people could work with local organisations and make use of the library space in evenings or weekends and run wellbeing projects.
- The library could incorporate different activities on specific days. For example, they could have Gaming days on a Tuesday and a Reading club /or study group on a Thursday.

Potential next steps

Sitting in the heart of local communities, libraries are valued assets, with a user profile generally more diverse than most of the cultural sector², which offers a broad reach and a great capacity to create social impact for Bristol's young people. Through the ideas of young people, we understand that there is desire for libraries to serve as creative, social and wellbeing hubs - offering multiple services that can support individuals to live fulfilling lives. The following recommendations has been informed by feedback gleaned through engagement sessions and the most prominent themes:

- To explore the idea of developing social media content, targeted at young people and young adults, creating engaging marketing campaigns to connect to audiences within this age group, while featuring young library users in these campaigns. A further recommendation to explore paid advertising that targets youth audiences, if appropriate.
- Work in partnership with sixth forms or youth organisations to create opportunities for young people to work on real commissions or live briefs set by the library teams. Offering young people leadership and skill development on real projects that connect them to their local communities and library settings.

² <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/evidencing-libraries-audience-reach-research-findings-and-analysis>

- Exploring how local libraries and Bristol's growing social prescribing movement can forge links to offer activities and services that support young people's mental health and overall wellbeing. In addition to exploring how pop up mental health services for young people can become a core feature in larger libraries across the city.
- Work with non-formal education and youth organisations such as Princes Trust to ensure marginalised young people and those outside of mainstream education are introduced to the city's library services and young people are encouraged to familiarise themselves with library spaces. (Staff at the Princes Trust would be open to having a conversation with the library team to explore how this could be embedded across their programmes.)
- With arts, creative and cultural activities featuring highly across feedback from young people, it poses an interesting question of how the library and its spaces can be used the fuel this appetite and work strategically with partner organisations to develop the Bristol's future cultural sector workforce and create impact for young people across the city.
- Develop partnerships with arts, cultural organisations across the city to explore how Bristol's key libraries can transform into community creative or cultural hubs for young people. RIO as Arts Council England's SW Bridge organisation can support the Libraries team to create meaningful partnerships with Bristol National Portfolio Organisations as well as organisations within Bristol Cultural Education partnership (BCEP).
- Explore the development of a young person specific volunteer and work experience offer. Most young people explained that they would be interested in volunteering at the Library but are unaware of that this was an option and of the breadth of volunteer roles available to them. Earlier in 2018, the Government published a set of careers and training guidelines for schools and colleges. These note that every school or college should appoint a career lead by September 2018, who is responsible for the delivery of the careers programme which should meet [Gatsby Benchmarks](#) by 2020. Education settings will be seeking to develop partnerships with local organisations to sign post young people to work experience opportunities and future career pathways – a good opportunity to shine a spotlight on Library careers.
- Over the last two years RIO and BCEP partners has been developing a strategic, practical and sustainable model of engaging more of the city's young people in cultural sector work experience activity. We would be happy to share our approach, tools and templates with Bristol Library team.

Research and useful links.

[Culture Matson](#) - a network of arts and cultural organisations, schools, community organisations and residents are working together to create change using arts and culture, across a deprived housing estate in Gloucester, Matson Library is a key partner within this network.

[The Art of Libraries](#) (AoL) pilot initiative – over the last three years Create Gloucestershire in partnership with Gloucestershire Libraries and Information, the Barnwood Trust and Real Ideas Organisation explored o explore the potential for libraries to be hubs for introducing arts and culture to children and young people especially those who do not currently engage with the sector.

AoL have a free to attend [sharing day](#) on March 27th , where library staff gain insight and learn from the pilot.

[Dorset Library](#) – artists working in Libraries in Dorset.

[Power to Change](#) – an organisation and funder that supports the growth of community business across the country Report shining a spot light on community libraries. They also have interesting [Community library research](#) .

[Cultural Sector work experience initiative case study](#) – read about how RIO and BCEP partners have worked strategically to create real and meaningful work experience for young people.

Social Prescribing:

- [University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust announces appointment of Dr Anna Farthing as arts programme director.](#)
- <http://www.mentalhealth.bristolccg.nhs.uk/future-services/primary-care-and-wellbeing/social-prescribing.aspx>
- [Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing report](#)

The Real Ideas Organisation have recently taken over [Liskeard Library in Cornwall](#), more details can be viewed online, but members of RIO's senior leadership team would be open to having a separate conversation if this was useful to Library Service team.

[Rife Magazine](#), led by Watershed is a young person led (content creation and curation) online platform- a valuable resource to advertise or access young audiences across the city.

Examples of Scandinavian Library models and research.

- What [Scandinavian Libraries](#) are doing differently
- [Real world research- Not only books](#)

Inequalities in the [Creative industries](#) - Creative Industries Workforce Demographics report by Panic London.