



More than words: local libraries in the spotlight

When was the last time you enjoyed a family visit to the library? Liz Lowe investigates what's on offer and finds far more than she expected

Libraries are unique places: they offer something for everyone yet cost nothing. These welcoming, family-friendly places sit at the heart of a community providing free entertainment and education, with resources that can be accessed 24 hours a day. For children, they're a space where complete freedom of choice can be enjoyed, interests developed and passions fueled.

"Reading for pleasure has a dramatic and positive effect on children's futures, increasing wellbeing, confidence, creativity and educational achievements," says Development Librarian

Sophie Hillier, who manages children and young people's library services for the whole of Wiltshire. "Our libraries always welcome new families and are there to help them on their reading journey," she says.

Access to a vast and wonderful world of books is reason enough to visit, but modern libraries have much more to offer.

Appealing to children

With his mum Sue, eight-year-old Felix often visits his local Devizes and Calne libraries. "What I love most about the library is all the books – and being able



Children love visiting Trowbridge Library for one of its regular storytime sessions

to borrow audiobooks and films. I enjoy listening to talking books at bedtimes when I'm too tired to read," says Felix. He goes on to highlight the environmental advantages of libraries too, saying: "It's good for the planet to borrow books instead of buy them, but sometimes – if I've read a really good book – then I do want to own it and keep it, like with the Dog Man and Kid Normal books."

Felix uses the library computers while his mum is busy searching the shelves. The online resources of libraries are extensive: users can research their family tree, investigate local history, read a wide archive of newspapers and magazines, and much more. All of this can also be accessed online at home.

Praising his local library staff, Felix adds: "It's cool that as a kid I can ask the librarians to order me special books and stuff for free. The librarians in Devizes are really kind and helpful."

Bright and spacious, the children's area found in Trowbridge Library makes it a popular destination for families. "Over 30% of library members are under 15, making them and their families the backbone of the library service – that's pretty exciting for our future," explains Chris Moore, Wiltshire Council's

Library Operations and Development Manager.

The focus on families ensures there are plenty of reasons to visit. Regular activities include Saturday story-times, school half-term and holiday activities, two reading groups (for children in Years 5 and 6, and for secondary school pupils) and an open-ended reading challenge called the 100 Club, where children see how long it takes them to read a whopping 100 books. Younger children love the book train and reading nooks, while older kids can take advantage of eBooks, coding devices and homework resources.

Family activities

During the summer holidays, the main focus is the annual Summer Reading Challenge. This national initiative encourages children aged four and upwards to read at least six books during the summer holidays. Trowbridge Library, like many others, organises volunteers to talk to children about the books they've read.

"Last summer, we listened to 5,654 book reviews in just eight weeks," says Chris. He adds that participants in this year's space-themed Summer Reading Challenge are in for an extra surprise: "This summer the children who take part in 'Space Chase' will also be offered astronaut training!"

One of the most valuable resources of a library is its staff and it's not only during special events like the summer reading challenge that they're available. In Trowbridge, the children's librarian is often on hand to offer advice and assistance. Local mum Caroline recalls her seven-year-old daughter standing in the children's section saying, "I've got nothing left to read. I don't know what to choose." The children's librarian immediately stepped in to help, talking to Emma about her favourite books before producing a list of suggestions for her to try.

Caroline has been taking Emma, and her five-year-old brother Dan,



I found it at a library...

Local libraries offer far more than the printed page, with plenty of resources available to borrow, use on-site or access online:

- Tech services: many libraries including Bath Central, Keynsham and Midsomer Norton offer computers, printers and free WiFi for public use.
- Many ways to tell a story: books and magazines are available in various formats including e-books, e-audio books, digital magazines and bag books of multi-sensory story packs. Digital items can be accessed and downloaded remotely.
- Online resources: users have 24-hour access to newspaper archives, Ancestry's family history databases, community history, academic research, maps and advice on many topics via the 'Information4living' scheme.
- Language skills: as well as books in many different languages, materials to support learning a new language are also available.
- Improve basic skills: some libraries offer help with basic skills such as IT, writing, maths or compiling a CV.
- And more: borrow DVDs, CDs, printed music, guidebooks or maps.

to libraries regularly since they were little, describing them as a safe space to retreat to on a rainy day or when they need some down time. "We choose to visit the library in its own right, not just because we have to get books," she says, explaining that Emma really enjoys being in libraries and spends time reading whenever they go.

Encouraging children to use a library for homework or personal projects can help support their learning and promote independent

thinking. Journalist and author, Caitlin Moran, has talked extensively on the importance of libraries and the joy of discovering something new. She asks, "Why go to a library when you could just Google something instead? Well, that's because a search engine will just show you what is most popular rather than what is best. We are all reading the same 10,000 words, walking the same paths and thinking the same thoughts filtered through the single lens of Google."



Writer profile

Liz Lowe is a freelance writer and mum to five-year-old Isla and three-year-old Charlie. Both love books: Isla is just discovering chapter books and Charlie is currently hooked on anything by Benji Davies.



Jill Carr, Liz Hearn (Chair), Victoria Johnson and Alice Boden, all trustees of Bath's Moorland Road Community Library

Adapting for the future

Although a precious resource, libraries are facing tough times. In a smartphone-obsessed world where information is just a few clicks away and cash-strapped councils are feeling the pinch of austerity, both visitor numbers and budgets are falling. This has seen a greater reliance on voluntary staff as councils are forced to reduce their spending on all 'non-essential' services.

In March this year, Bath and North East Somerset (BANES)

council withdrew funding for many local libraries, leaving just three council-operated sites: Bath, Keynsham and Midsomer Norton. These key hubs all offer free WiFi, children's areas, computers and printers to use, as well as hosting regular weekday and weekend story-time sessions. A new mobile library is also due to be launched this summer. But what happened to the rest?

Communities across BANES were given the opportunity to manage their own libraries, with

the council providing grants and support from professional librarians. The scheme enables volunteers to secure the future of their local library and tailor its services to the needs of the community it serves. Bath's Moorland Road Community Library is one such place: reopening under its new management this July, it has been spruced up with artwork by local children and a professional illustrator.

"We've had an amazing response," says Trustee and local mum-of-two Alice Boden, explaining how a survey of local residents gained more than 200 responses, along with messages of support. "So many people have memories of the library from when they themselves were children, quite a few told us that the library was a place where they came to learn to read, while for others it was a sanctuary to them during a tough childhood," continues Alice.

Many people have fond memories of visiting libraries as children, and their enduring appeal is clear as new generations continue to discover shelves (real and virtual) brimming with incredible facts and adventures. Now is the time to support these precious places so they remain open and available for generations to come. ■

Summer Reading Challenge

This year's Summer Reading Challenge is titled Space Chase. Inspired by the 50th anniversary of the first moon landing, this space-themed adventure pits children against alien book thieves. Solving clues and collecting stickers to complete their mission folder, children will earn a Space Chase wristband after book four, and a medal and certificate on completion. www.summerreadingchallenge.org.uk

How to get involved:

- Sign up at your local library (children need a library card before they can participate – perfect excuse to join if you haven't already!).
- Children need to read six books of their choice over the summer holidays to complete the challenge.
- Join the Summer Reading Challenge website for competitions and book recommendations as well as online badges and rewards.
- Check out your library's Facebook page for events linked to the challenge. These could include themed story times, craft activities or author visits.
- Visit your local library so your child can tell the librarians and volunteers all about the books they've read.

Find out more

Most libraries have their own Facebook page where upcoming events and new resources are advertised.

Discover more about the library services in your local area at:

BANES: www.bathnes.gov.uk/services/libraries-and-archives

Wiltshire: www.wiltshire.gov.uk/libraries-home

Moorland Road Community Library: www.moorlandroadcommunitylibrary.com or Facebook @mrclbath