



Youth

Engagement

Network

Libraries Unlimited - Barnstaple Library

Introduction

“It gave us a deeper understanding of how young people want to use the space and what they expect from it.”

Senior Supervisor at Barnstaple Library, Libraries Unlimited

Created in 2016, **Libraries Unlimited** is the charity that runs the public library service in Devon and Torbay. They manage 54 libraries and through their services and spaces, bring ideas, imagination, creativity and knowledge to enrich people’s lives and build thriving communities.

ASCEL’s Youth Engagement Network supports the voices of all children and young people including from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who identify as LGBTQIA+ and disabled and D/deaf children and young people, ensuring they are represented in libraries across England.

In this pilot phase, 7 library services tested co-creative approaches with young people aged 11-13, to engage them with the library and give them the opportunity for their thoughts and ideas to be heard.



Aims

The Youth Engagement Network pilot programme:



Ensures young people have power in libraries

By giving young people a genuine opportunity to influence their local library's services, they build confidence, self-esteem and have fun. Libraries benefit from their insight and ideas.



Makes opportunities to co-create

Young people co-create activities and shape the services on offer at their local library. They have the opportunity to co-create the national network and influence sector policy and decision-making across the country.



Gives chances to learn something new

Young people have the opportunity to learn new skills and gain understanding about working in a library. Library teams learn new skills in co-creation and youth engagement, and how to tailor their services to meet the needs of the young people in their community.



Supports libraries across the country

The national network builds positive relationships between libraries and young people across the country, where open dialogue, continual cyclic feedback and a genuinely inclusive approach are embedded. The libraries taking part were also part of a pilot network, which offered support, ideas-exchange and opportunity to reflect.

Youth Engagement at Barnstaple Library, Devon



Barnstaple Library is a river-port town with a population of around 21,000 people. The library team are passionate about supporting young people in the community and were particularly keen to work with young people who were neurodiverse. They also wanted to introduce young people to the library and invite them to have more ownership of the space.

- ▶▶▶ **Contacting partners:** Barnstaple Library initially contacted the local secondary school, then a local youth services organisation. Neither had capacity to work in partnership with the library. However, a local organisation supporting young people not in mainstream education were keen to be involved.
- ▶▶▶ **Starting conversations:** The meetings with the young people were supported by a teacher and facilitated by various members of Barnstaple Library team, including the Senior Supervisor, Centre Manager and Customer Service Assistant. A maximum of three young people attended each meeting.
- ▶▶▶ **Familiarisation:** To make the experience feel as comfortable as possible for the young people, the library team provided them with a brief before they visited the library, to give them a chance to consider options and discuss as a group.

➤➤➤ **Young people taking the lead:** A key aspect of this work was to ensure the young people had the opportunity to co-create activities within the library. Rather than planning activities, the young people wanted to suggest changes that could be made in the space, to better accommodate their needs. The team agreed, with the understanding that there may be some logistical constraints.

➤➤➤ **Range of suggestions:** The young people explored the library space and suggested a range of actions that the library team could undertake. This included: purchasing new Pride flags as the ones in use in the library were out of date, rearranging areas that were overstimulating, updating the graphic novel stock and introducing more comfortable seating. The library team acted on many of these suggestions.



➤➤➤ **Considerations:** To ensure the young people felt safe and supported the library team:

- Listened to their feelings, thoughts and feedback throughout
- Provided information before the first meeting to ensure the process didn't feel too overwhelming or unfamiliar, and to give the young people a chance to reflect beforehand
- Were responsive to the young people's needs; changing their approach when the young people seemed uncomfortable (e.g. in busy environments)
- Worked in partnership with the teacher to ensure a familiar supportive presence at each meeting

Impact

“I think it was a valuable project for everyone involved and has certainly given us plenty to think about and a greater awareness of the needs of young people in relations to library use.”

Senior Supervisor, Barnstaple Library, Libraries Unlimited

Successes

- ▶▶▶ The sessions were generally well attended by the group
- ▶▶▶ The library team gained greater understanding of what the young people wanted in their library space
- ▶▶▶ The suggestions made by the young people had positive impact for a wider audience (for example, extending the graphic novel collection and ensuring the correct Pride flag was on display)
- ▶▶▶ The sessions gave the library an opportunity to strengthen the relationship with a local partner
- ▶▶▶ The in-house experience and expertise will support the library service with broadening the reach of this work across other libraries
- ▶▶▶ The library team will continue to engage with the young people, whose art will be exhibited in the library foyer

Challenges

- ▶▶▶ Connecting with partners in the local area, e.g., the local school
- ▶▶▶ The young people's needs meant that the group remained small
- ▶▶▶ Communication with the group could be challenging at times

Recommendations



Listen and be receptive

Neurodivergent young people may feel uncomfortable in certain environments and it's important to listen to their needs. Be aware that sometimes, communication can be challenging for these young people and that you'll need to be sensitive to visual clues (i.e. body language that suggests they're not comfortable).



Work with specialist partners

You might not have expertise or experience working with neurodivergent young people, but this shouldn't be seen as a barrier. Specialist partners can support you with this work and help you to build a safer, more familiar environment for the young people in your library.



Focus on individuals, not numbers

The focus is on engaging young people who might not feel comfortable in the library, or who aren't regular library users. As such, you'll be working in a much more focused way, giving smaller numbers of young people space and time to develop their skills and confidence and to feel ownership of their library space.



Be flexible

The co-creative process is designed to accommodate different ways of working. For example, if the young people prefer taking information away and reviewing in a more familiar location, that shouldn't be seen as an obstacle.

“Our involvement in this project gave an interesting and positive insight into the perception of the library by young people. Overall, they were very positive about the space.

Senior Supervisor, Barnstaple Library, Libraries Unlimited

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