



**Youth**

**Engagement**

**Network**

# **Norfolk Library & Information Service**

# Introduction

**“Something new I didn’t know before... how fun the library is!”**

**“(I now know) there are other people like me. I enjoyed the freeness  
- I could do what I wanted to.”**

*Young people at Watton Library, Norfolk*

**Norfolk Library & Information Service (NLIS)** is a network of 47 libraries and 5 mobile libraries. They believe in the unlimited potential for libraries to make a positive difference to people’s lives and communities, and welcome thousands of visitors to their libraries and online services every day.

**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

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## 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 Watton Library, Norfolk



**Watton Library** serves a small market town with a community of around 9,000 people. The Library Manager has experience working with adults with autism and wanted to use these skills to engage with neurodivergent young people. In addition to the defined aims of the Youth Engagement Network programme, the library wanted to support the young people with developing their social skills, and to challenge perceptions around libraries being ‘old buildings that you need to be silent in.’

- **Identifying partners:** Watton Library contacted the local secondary school and sports centre to find existing youth groups they could collaborate with. No groups existed, which highlighted the need for this work in the area.
- **Team involvement:** The Library Manager ensured her team were involved from the start. However, as the library is single-staffed, she took the lead to organise and deliver the co-created activities.
- **Making contact:** Watton Library invited young people to the library in January 2024. Social media was an effective way to inspire initial interest. The library also successfully recruited a volunteer to support the work. To begin with, the sessions were ‘drop-in’ to build interest organically. The library contacted the local secondary school, sports centre and community hall, and distributed posters at other local organisations.

➤➤➤ **Co-creating activities:** The first drop-in session was attended by one young person. The following session was attended by four, then a further young person joined at a later session. Activities initially focused on playing games and getting to know each other in a relaxed, informal setting.

Once trust was established, the library team told the young people about the Youth Engagement Network and began co-creating more structured activities together.

➤➤➤ **Letting young people lead the way:** The young people wanted to create a scrapbook, not just as a diary but as a way of capturing their thoughts and feelings. They co-planned the timing and duration of the sessions to avoid 'overwhelm'. The library manager supported them by sharing ideas and facilitating when the young people needed her to. Sessions also included chances to play games, which again, was led by the young peoples' needs.



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

- Listened to their feelings, thoughts and feedback throughout
- Invited parents to be present in the library (in a different area) to provide reassurance for the young people
- Ensured the space was quiet and removed from the main library
- Made sure the timings fitted with the young people's other commitments (e.g., school, dinner, changing out of uniform)

# Impact

**“This was such a rewarding project to be involved with as I could see first-hand the connections the group had made with one another.”**

***Library Manager, Norfolk Library & Information Service***

## Successes

- 17 weekly sessions with the group
- Young peoples' social skills and confidence greatly improved
- Young people felt more ownership of their library
- All young people said they felt listened to and welcomed at the library
- All young people said they had a good time and would return to the library
- All young people said they felt included in the co-creative process
- The in-house experience and expertise will support the library service with broadening the reach of this work across other libraries
- Library team feel they've made a difference in young people's lives

## Challenges

- Connecting with partners in the local area, e.g., the local school
- Finding volunteers to support the activities
- Communication with the group could be challenging at times

# Recommendations



## **Be consistent and persistent**

It takes time to build relationships with young people who don't often come to the library.



## **Be prepared with conversation-starters**

Neurodivergent young people might find aspects of the co-creative process overwhelming. Support them with some 'starter ideas' that they can consider.



## **Quality not quantity**

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.



## **Plan ahead**

Book out the time and commit to this early on. Blocking out sessions in your diary means it's less likely you'll encounter clashes with other meetings. It also means you can consistently give the young people that time, which is an important aspect of building trust.

**“It was clear the young people felt at ease within the space created for them, and when prompted, a few of the group were particularly keen to offer up suggestions for things we should stock book-wise in the branch.”**

**Community Librarian for Children & Young People, *Norfolk Library & Information Service***

*Study written and published by ASCEL / Norfolk Library & Information Service*