‘More than a house for books’
Episode 1: Libraries for young people

Transcript

Presenter:
Jonathan Hart

Discussion panel:
Tracy Ann Oberman - Actress and writer.
Sarah Mears - Library Services Manager, Essex County Council. Former chair of the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians.
Owen Hutchings - Arts and Libraries Officer, St. Helens Council.

Produced, recorded and transcribed by The Podcast Company

Speaker 1: Libraries can be that conduit and that space for young people to engage and be part of something to enable them to be better at things as they get older.

Speaker 2: We can see a correlation between getting families reading and children enjoying stories with them doing better at school and doing better in life.

Speaker 3: She took her child to a Shakespeare event in a local library. She was completely blown away by it.

Speaker 4: You know that when you walk into that library, you feel safe. You're going to see friendly faces and it becomes an incredible resource for just a sense of adventure and belonging.

Speaker 5: Definitely on the look out for more activities like this. It has been really fun for all the family.

Speaker 6: Yes, I really enjoyed it.

Jonathan Hart: Welcome to the first episode of More Than A House For Books. A three part series brought to you with Arts Council England. Highlighting the positive impact libraries have on the community. I'm Jonathan Hart. During this series, we focus on three things: the formative years and the impact libraries have on young people, the library as an enabler and how facilities enhance lives, and digital; examining how technology is benefiting libraries and communities.

Let’s introduce our panel, Sarah Mears is Library Services Manager at Essex County Council and a former chair of the Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians.

Sarah Mears: Hello.

Johnathan: Owen Hutchings, is Arts and Libraries Officer at St. Helens Council.

Owen Hutchings: Hello.

Jonathan: Tracy-Ann Oberman, is an actress and writer. You'll probably know her from Eastenders or Doctor Who, or Radio 4, or the West End Stage. And she's also a huge advocate of libraries.

Tracy-Ann Oberman: Hello.

Jonathan: Sarah what do you think are the key drivers in attracting young people to these spaces?
Sarah: I think firstly, it's about the welcome that children, young people, and their families receive when they come into libraries. I think the space is a secondary of importance, is to how they feel as soon as they walk through the door. Once in the library, I think one of the most important things is that it's an exciting and vibrant space that attracts children. It's light, it's airy, it's colourful. There are lots of things that engage them.

Activities for them to do, interesting technology that they may have not experienced in their own homes. But I think most importantly, it's still the books. Children love reading for pleasure and they love being inspired to read new titles, new authors. I think if libraries can engage children and excite them by the books that they have on their shelves, then that's really important.

Jonathan: Tracy-Ann, you're a big supporter of libraries and the mother of a young daughter who loves books. With so many distractions for young people, a library really should be regarded as an oasis, shouldn't it?

Tracy-Ann: I think libraries are so important, I really advocate them. I remember as a young child, there wasn't a library locally to me but there was a mobile library. And one of the thrills, every two weeks, was being able to go into this little mobile library and pick two books. And being able to escape into the world of those books. Then as I grew older and older libraries just felt like an adventure playground, in a way, of the mind.

And I noticed, even with my young daughter growing up in such a different age where everything is technology and television and iPads, it's got a very special feeling, a library. With a sense of adventure, you don't know what you're getting.

I watch all the little children go in there because I still go into our local library and you see their eyes lighting up at the sight of so many books and so many worlds in which to escape in.

Jonathan: Owen, for many, community is the key in this. Would you agree that if we make a library a more of a community hub, we'll see more young people coming through our library doors?

Owen: Yes, absolutely. The program that I run specifically is called Cultural Hubs and it's based up in St. Helens. That programme is about utilizing the library spaces that we have in our community to turn them into performance spaces, or workshop spaces, or opportunities for children and young people to experience creativity in the arts. In answer to your question, yes. Libraries are so much more than this old fashioned example of books. Drawn to something that a great theatre practitioner says, a guy called Augusto Boal, who says that the first story, the first piece of theatre that young people ever experience is a story being read to them by a mother or a
child. And if you take that to its natural conclusion, that's story telling and libraries go hand in hand, I think.

**Tracy-Ann:** I think that's a really good point. I think whoever reads you your first story: carer, guardian, teacher, a parent, whoever it is, you build up a relationship. And it makes you, as a child, want to be able to read for yourself. But there's something about walking into a library now and seeing a group of young children sitting on the floor being told a story together.

I think you're absolutely right that if we can take this shrine-like aspect of a quiet place of study, and shh, we have to be very respectful of these books, and turn it, particularly for young people, into not only can we hear the books but we can maybe act a bit of that out or we can maybe add some musical instruments. It becomes a very interactive and special place that you look forward to going.

**Jonathan:** The old image of a librarian being merely a person involved in transacting books is really long gone, isn't it? Libraries have particularly good relationships, we hope, with young people. For instance, there are lots of volunteering programs. I think, Sarah, you have some pretty good examples of that.

**Sarah:** I do and I'm really glad that you said that the old image is gone because I think it's long gone and it's just getting people to understand that libraries are really exciting, vibrant places. For us, our young people are probably our most important advocates. We have lots of volunteering programs for young people in libraries. The Reading Hack programme is one of them that's led by the reading agency. It involves young people in taking part in all sorts of exciting activities all year round. Being advocates for the Library Service, acting as consultants, and really being those official enablers of other young people coming into libraries.

We also have Summer Reading Challenge volunteers. I know my own authority, Essex, we have 600 young people between 14 and 25 helping us out in the summer, joining young people to the Summer Reading Challenge, talking to children about what they’re reading, helping them find great books that they want to read. Our young people, I think, are really important. More and more libraries are involving them in things like Takeover Day and Duke of Edinburgh Award. Helping out, volunteering all through the year, helping out with arts activities as well. Really exciting opportunities for younger people beyond just helping out in a library but actually helping customers, children, and adults.

**Jonathan:** Interesting. We'll examine how digital technology is enhancing the library experience in greater depth in a later podcast. But it is worth highlighting that for youngsters, the great news is that many newly built libraries have the sort of digital resources and technology they can relate to.
Owen, I think you agree that libraries need to be one step ahead of what the youngsters might get at home.

**Owen:** I don't necessarily think it's about being one step ahead of what they can get at home. It's about once they have that technology at their disposal, whether that’s Raspberry Pis or Apple Mac computers or whatever, there's some skills or some knowledge within that library space to enable the young people to be able to use that technology. There's a real shortage of digital skills in this country moving forward and looking at the technology and the kind of jobs that are going to be around in the future, they’re probably going to be jobs that are much more Information Technology based. What better place to start to learn and do those things than in a library?

**Sarah:** Exactly.

**Tracy-Ann:** A very good point, isn’t it?

**Sarah:** In a school, they use coding and computers but they do it in classes. Whereas in the library, it's all ages working together. We’ve had experiences of 16, 17 year-olds helping 7 year-olds or vice versa. I think that’s a really lovely opportunity in a library. That it’s very free, it's very intergenerational and actually, young people can support older people.

**Jonathan:** What's really important, I guess, is the fact that libraries will do initiatives and schemes during holiday time, half terms, the major holidays. Because you talk about what sounds like a fantastic idea but they've got to get to the actual library itself and they don’t always have the time in school.

**Sarah:** No, that’s true but libraries are open throughout the year and after school and on weekends and holidays. So it's an opportunity for children to come into a space that's very much in the middle of the community but actually is a safe space for them to come into at times when they're not at school.

**Tracy-Ann:** I think that’s also a really important role. No matter what's going on in your home life or your personal life as a child, you know that when you walk into that library, you feel safe, you're going to see friends, you're going to see friendly faces. It becomes an incredible resource for a sense of adventure and belonging I suppose.

**Jonathan:** Libraries definitely have changed, haven't they? You mentioned when you were a child, not so many years ago.

**Tracy-Ann:** Back in the Jurassic age!

[laughter]

But well, gosh, libraries, I think, for my generation, I would say we’re of the same age, aren’t we, John? About 20s. The library was you went from as a child, you got
your books, there was no other way to do it and that became exciting. Then when you became a student, it was the only place to study. It was quiet. It was --

Jonathan: Perhaps it was too quiet. It was a place where you weren't allowed to talk and I'm sure Sarah and Owen will probably tell us that may have changed. But when it comes to designing new libraries with young people in mind, it's important to include those areas, isn't it? Where noise isn't frowned upon. Otherwise, that approach can put young people off. Tracy first, would you agree with that?

Tracy-Ann: I would. I still think you would have to have areas in libraries that was about silence, concentration, and work. But within that, a cafe, areas which were more sociable --

Sarah: I would agree that there need to be quiet areas because study and that space reflection are really important in libraries. Also, we’ve got a program going on at the moment. It’s about autism friendly libraries and actually, it’s quite good to have quiet spaces where children with autism and Aspergers can just chill out and get away from the noise and those things that stress them.

But having said that, we really don't want quiet libraries with people saying, "Shush" anymore. I hope they've long gone. If you see a rhyme time going on in a library particularly or an arts event, a cultural event in a library, they really aren't quiet. And if you've heard The Wheels on the Bus going on in a library with 60 children and their parents -

Owen: The Grand Old Duke of York's the one's that's going on in our library.

Sarah: - lots of musical instruments going on, it really isn't a quiet space anymore. I would love to dispel that image of a quiet library. But whilst accepting that it is important that their designs have there are quiet spaces as well.

Owen: Coming back to the program that I run in St. Helens, we do a number of performances and they can be performances that are quiet in nature but then we’ve also had bands on in the middle of the space, in the middle of the day time performances, large-scale full rigged events. People, I think, understand that in this new age that we live in, we have to diversify in order to be able to allow those libraries that people appreciate and love so much to survive.

Jonathan: Owen, stay with that thought while we hear about a project that's been happening in Peterborough run by Vivacity who create arts programmes aimed at engaging young people and families in literature and storytelling. The aim is to raise literacy levels in hard-to-reach groups. We went down to Peterborough to hear all about it. [music]

Elaine Wilkinson: My name is Elaine Wilkinson. I'm Reading Development Manager for Vivacity Peterborough libraries. Also helping with the Our Story project
which is a Peterborough based project funded by the Arts Council which aims to use arts and creativity to inspire families around stories and reading to improve literacy in Peterborough. And to get families reading together, more children interested in stories.

And we're doing all this through using puppet workshops and storytellers in schools, getting kids doing creative writing with the aim that it will get them into reading together, get them down to their local library and join up and be regular readers as a family.

**Rebecca Graham:** I'm Rebecca Graham, I'm the Our Stories Project Officer. I was brought on to help deliver this project all around Peterborough. Within this community, now this is Orton community and we're using the children's community centre to put on things that aren't usually within this area that are free for families.

We've got puppet making workshops, illustration workshops where they're doing mask making and drawings with a local illustrator. But it's all about bringing families together to get the Our Story project known. Hopefully, from here, then we can take it through to get them to become members of the libraries. That's what we're hoping.

**Elaine:** We've been asking them this morning as they've come in, "Are you a library member?" And I would say probably more than half of them say no. I think probably a third of people in the area are users of their local library. It's also an area where literacy levels are lower than the national average and we can see a correlation between getting families reading together for pleasure and getting children enjoying stories with them doing better at school and doing better in life.

Then we want to get away from that old-fashioned image of libraries being a place where you have to be quiet and you only go in there to read and to study. The way to get people in is through fun, and reading is fun. Watching the parents here today seeing their children enjoying the show, watching the parents enjoying the storytelling as much as their children.

**Mum:** It really surpassed our expectation. It's brilliant - the stories were all very child-friendly classic stories.

**Performer:** Someone has been sitting on my chair.

**Daughter:** It was *Goldilocks and The Three Bears* and it was really hilarious.

**Performer:** Somebody has been sitting on my chair.

**Daughter:** I do a lot of reading at school and a little bit at home. My favourite books are Jacqueline Wilson books and I've started one of them called *The Worst Thing About my Sister* and it's really good.
Mum: We’ll definitely be on the lookout for more activities like this. It has been really fun for all of the family.

Daughter: I really enjoyed it.

Ellie Sandall: My name is Ellie Sandall. I’m a children’s book author and illustrator. Today, we’ve been doing some workshops based on my book. I’ve been reading the story to the children, getting them to join in with some actions. And we’ve actually been doing a little bit of live illustration. I’ve been showing them how to draw characters from the books and they’ve been drawing along with me.

It’s just been a really nice way to introduce them to the idea of character development and coming up with your own kind of characters in a book. We’ve been making masks as well so children have been actually dressing up as characters from the story so that we can then act out the story. Again, it’s a really good way to immerse the children in the story so they become part of it.

I also work for another Arts Council funded organization called Pop Up. They’re really a similar set up in that they get children to meet authors by authors going into schools to work with different classes to read some of the books that the author’s done and to do work based on it. That’s quite literacy orientated.

What the schools want to get out of it is an increase in literacy in children. I think it’s really important the part that the authors play in that because it’s all about feeding the imagination and giving the children an idea they then want to get down onto paper.

If they’ve got that creative idea ready to go, they’re much more likely to then want to learn the technicalities of writing. When I was growing up I used to visit my local library in Deeping, most weeks actually, with my mum and my brother and sister. I think that played a really important part in learning to love picture books and to love stories. It’s great to see a new generation of children coming in and using the local library.

Elaine: Today has been as much about the parents being inspired as it is about the children having fun and the parents seeing how much their child's enjoyed the storytelling.

Performer: He was not angry! He was furious!

Elaine: What we’re hoping is they’ll go home with their puppets, they’ll go home with their illustrations and the ideas that they come up with today and they’ll carry on making up stories at home. They’ll start reading stories together more and it will just become a part of their everyday life.
We were thrilled that the Arts Council chose our project to fund because we’ve started from the unique point of improving literacy but doing it through engaging with the arts. This area as well as being a lower literacy area is also an area where there aren’t a lot of cultural opportunities to engage with things like theatre professional workshops that we’ve got here today. I think the idea of using the arts as a springboard into also improving literacy was something that the Arts Council liked and we’re really delighted that we were able to go ahead with it. This is just a starting point. We’re passionate about getting out into the community and getting people inspired.

We can’t just sit back anymore and wait for people to come into the library, because if they’ve never been in themselves, they’ll never bring their child in. We can’t be passive about that anymore. We’ve got to be really proactive and go out into the community and inspire and to change people’s lives through literacy and reading.

[Music]

Jonathan: Well, that’s Elaine Wilkinson from Vivacity Peterborough Libraries. Let’s get back to our panel. Owen, that is just one example of how the arts and libraries are coming together within the community. But there are many others.

Owen: There are spaces in libraries and I’m thinking of Birmingham and Manchester in particular where they have built -- and Oldham, where they have built performance spaces within the new build of a library itself and that sort of thing tends to lend itself really well to obvious more mainstream performances. And that is something I think that lots of organizations and lots of local authorities are looking at doing.

Jonathan: And Tracy-Ann, it’s vital that young people experience libraries as both creative and cultural experiences. What do you think is the best way to achieve that?

Tracy-Ann: I noticed in theatres -- I used to work quite a lot in different theatres around different cities and the big debate that was going in the late '90s and the early 2000s was how do you make theatres still relevant for communities? How do you get a different generation, a younger generation, in there? I think it’s the same with libraries. You have to smash the old myths of it being shrine like and a bit elitist and just for the readers. And you have to make them a living, breathing part of a community.

It mustn’t feel intimidating to go into a library. Anything you want should be in that library and it should feel like your friend in the community where you’re going to see regular faces, welcoming, warm, exciting, encouraging. And hopefully, you’ll have a different creative experience when you’re in there.
Owen: Libraries, because they are safer spaces are a really great way to engage young people. A lot of the communities that I tend to work in are more deprived communities. They wouldn’t go to the theatre, they haven’t got the money to go to those spaces. If you can open up your libraries to become spaces that enable great art and great culture, you enable the young people to experience theatre or the arts for the very first time.

Tracy-Ann: Totally, totally. If it’s just for the little ones, it should be the magic fairy garden that’s just down the road. Everything should be possible there. As you say it, if you can engage a child and make it see and experience something different to how it would get it at home, it can change a life.

Jonathan: So there’s absolutely no doubt, Sarah that libraries have to flexible. And looking at design, designers need to take note, don’t they? With particularly children and younger people in mind but there are quite a lot of examples of that already, I’m sure.

Sarah: There are. There are some brilliant new libraries and that’s one of the lovely things about talking about libraries at the moment is that there are new libraries being built and being developed all the time. All we hear about is libraries are actually being closed but actually, the new libraries are something we should be celebrating and being really proud of.

One of my favourites is the new Manchester Library already being mentioned. And that’s an amazing example of how they’re taking a very old building and inside the shell of what is an old beautiful Victorian building, created this amazing modern space. Lovelier for children, it’s very digital, there’s a lovely music area where people can play on digital pianos and digital drum kits and it’s completely soundproofed.

There’s a brilliant reading room that reflects back to its old Victorian heritage. Birmingham is another example that has roof gardens and lovely spaces and there’s an absolutely eye watering escalator in the centre. There’s a new library in Slough, The Curve, which is a fascinating space as well. But there are also small libraries that are being built or refurbished all the time. Looking at how where they can make best use of the space to engage people both with reading and digital skills.

Owen: I just think on that point as well, although Manchester, Birmingham and Oldham and lots of these different libraries are really great examples of how libraries have been developed, actually, the majority of libraries in this country haven’t been developed, don’t have those facilities. Despite that, I think there are things that you could do within the aesthetic of every single library in the country that enables it to become a place for performance, or for exhibition, or for engagement in creativity. You just have to think slightly differently about the aesthetic and the types of performance or events that you program within that space.
Sarah: Well, there is a really great example actually that I had recently. Last year, libraries across the country Shakespeare’s 400th anniversary. One of the things that we did was have a grant of the arts project that enabled us across the country to have performances in libraries. Someone from the South West, a parent, was saying how important it was that she took her child to a Shakespeare event in her local library. She wouldn’t dare take the child to a Shakespeare event in a theatre but actually the child saw a play. It was her first Shakespeare play that she saw in the local library and was completely blown away by it.

Tracy-Ann: Brilliant. It’s exactly what it should be.

Jonathan: What about the role of libraries in supporting children and young people in terms of their health and their well-being?

Sarah: Well, I think that that’s something we’ve done quite a lot of work on over the last year. One of the most brilliant examples of something I’m really excited about is the Reading Well Self Help for Young People programme which again, has been developed with the Reading Agency and the Society of Chief Librarians.

It’s enabled us to have curated collections of books that focus on young people's mental health and well-being. And we’re working with schools, local mental health charities, and services to promote those too young people who may be worried about their own mental health or about their friend’s mental health. And there are fiction or non-fiction which is just around that low-level concerns, first reading about things they don’t quite understand what they’re feeling, and helping them move on to something that -- some way of seeking help and support.

Jonathan: In fact, we are going to cover that in more depth in our next episode, The Library as an Enabler. But if Tracy-Ann, I could get back to you, you mentioned your daughter. How have libraries supported her?

Tracy-Ann: That love of books, that love of stories and being read to and storytelling. I think there’s the sense that we’ve got a particular beautiful library near where we are and then they do lovely workshops. It just feels like -- even when she was little, whenever we used to pass there, she’d go, "Can we go into the library? I want to go into the library. Let’s have a look at the books. Let’s see what’s going on." It just feels like a very important place in the community.

Jonathan: Libraries have a real role in supporting the whole family, don’t they? Reducing isolation, helping parents and children bond.

Owen: Libraries do so much in the core part of their work. Things like read and rhyme times, we hosted the Romeo and Juliet performances, part of Shakespeare’s anniversary last year which enabled people to go and see Shakespeare in a branch library. There so much that can be done. Like I said before, I think it’s really
important that those skills that we're going to need in the future, libraries can be that conduit and that space for young people to engage and be part of something to enable them to be better at things as they get older.

**Sarah:** I think Tracy-Ann hit the nail on the head when he talked about choice. If you go into a library, you'll have a huge choice of books to read and no one is going to say to you, "You have to read this kind of book or that kind of book." You can choose whatever you like. So very young children will choose books -- little boys particularly will choose books about dinosaurs and you think, "How on earth can they read that triceratops?" But they can because they're passionate about it and they've chosen something that reflects their passions.

I think that's the most important thing is not to judge children and let them read what they want to read at their own pace. If they want to reread it, that's fine too. If they want to then go on and read something that's really beyond them, as long as it's their choice, that's fine and they'll make the effort to do that.

We also have a range of activities that actually are about reading for pleasure and the big one is the Summer Reading Challenge that happens every summer, six weeks. Children read the six books of their choice, they collect rewards and stickers for doing it.

And the most important thing about the Summer Reading Challenge is that somebody talks to the child about the book they're reading. And so I think the other way in which libraries really support reading for pleasure is being interested in children. Caring about what they read and talking to them about what they're reading. And helping children really reflect on books, develop that empathy for characters. It's so important and will help them in their lives to come. Libraries are just this wonderful place with children can get the books they need, enjoy them and also experience talking to other people about them.

**Tracy-Ann:** I think there's something also very lovely about non ownership of the book. There is something, the feeling that you are borrowing it, and you're taking it. And if you draw on it or you rip it up, you have to give it back for another child. I thought that's also a very lovely thing that we are part of a community and another child is going to be reading the same book in two weeks' time. And there's something about sharing and passing it on or you could write a little comment. I love that idea of you don't buy from a shop and you own it.

**Jonathan:** We're going to have to leave it there. It's been absolutely fantastic discussion. Sarah, Tracey-Ann, and Owen, thank you for joining us today.

**Sarah:** Thank you.

**Tracy-Ann:** Thank you.
Owen: Thank you.

Jonathan: And our thanks to everyone who's contributed to this podcast. And if you'd like to know more about the work Arts Council England is doing with libraries, visit artscouncil.org.uk/libraries.

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