

Leading innovation in Scotland's school libraries: How a national strategy is driving progress in Scotland's schools

By Pamela Tulloch

Snapshot

Pamela Tulloch, is the chief executive of the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC), reflects on the importance of effective school library advocacy and provides an overview of the support available and campaigns underway in Scotland with a particular focus on –

- Scotland's school library strategy, 'Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools'
- The annual School Library Improvement Fund
- Every Child a Library Member

The building blocks for children and young people

Children develop more rapidly during the first five years of their lives than at any other time. This crucial period is known as 'the foundation years', where they nurture and develop key skills to create a solid foundation to build on for the rest of their lives.

From here, school libraries play a central role in helping children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for learning, life and work. They provide access for all, increasing social inclusion and wellbeing, and reducing the digital divide. They ensure every young person has the chance to fulfil their full potential.

While boosting literacy and continuing to improve attainment, they are also places where positive values can be developed. This is something recognised and celebrated in Scotland, with a commitment from Scottish Government to support innovation across our school library services. But more work is still to be done as while reading attainment rises in schools year on year, reading for pleasure within this age group continues its sharp decline.



The current situation in Scotland

The 2023 Annual Literacy Survey report, co-authored by Christina Clark and Irene Picton from the National Literacy Trust and Katherine Wilkinson from Scottish Book Trust, focused on Scottish children and young people's reading and writing enjoyment, frequency and attitudes.

Based on 1,141 responses from children and young people aged 8 to 18 in schools in Scotland, it revealed just over 2 in 5 (41.5%) said they enjoyed reading in their free time. This means that nearly 3 in 5 (58.5%) did not enjoy reading. Slightly more children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time (41.4%) rather than reading at school (39.7%); and more than 1 in 4 (27.1%) said they read daily or almost daily in their free time.

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Levels of reading enjoyment were found to be weakest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with over 60% of children on Free School Meals saying they don't enjoy reading in their free time.

We know from recent exam data (2022 KS2 attainment data, gov.uk) that over a third of children on Free School Meals are leaving primary school without reaching the expected level of reading, and with poverty rates rising, this number is in danger of increasing.

Economic studies have shown that reading for pleasure can result in children getting better GCSEs, in turn boosting their lifetime earnings and raising the UK's GDP - so a widening attainment gap means that even more children could fall behind their more affluent peers in their education and literacy skills, which can go on to have a lifetime impact.

When asked what would make them want to read, most (40.7%, or 2 in 5) said that having books recommended to them would do this. 1 in 3 said that having books that represent them (33.8%) or being given books (33.1%) would make them want to read.

Reading for pleasure can have a wealth of positive effects, supporting mental wellbeing, attainment, self-expression and creativity. But it's not just a 'nice to have', it is the single biggest indicator of a child's future success – more than their family circumstances, their parents' educational background or their income (statistics from OECD).



Children who are the most engaged with literacy are three times more likely to have higher levels of mental wellbeing than those who are the least engaged (39.4% vs 11.8%, statistics from the National Literacy Trust Mental Wellbeing, Reading and Writing report). This relationship between reading and mental wellbeing is more deeply explored in large-scale data and comments from the Annual Literacy Survey in 2023 where 3 in 5 (59.4%) children and young people said

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reading helped them relax, and nearly 1 in 2 (46.0%) said reading made them feel happy. 3 in 10 said reading made them feel more confident (29.8%) or helped them deal with problems (27.3%). These comments from children and young people provide valuable insight into how reading helped them with mental health and wellbeing. Positive reflections on the benefits of reading extended into some children's perceptions of reading environments, with school and public libraries described as 'happy', 'warm' and 'peaceful' places.

At a time when the value of mental wellbeing is increasingly recognised, these findings indicate the powerful and ongoing role of reading – and nurturing reading environments – in supporting children and young people's mental wellbeing. But with reading for pleasure at its lowest levels in 19 years (it's the lowest level since 2005), it is imperative that we continue to lead innovation in the school library sector so that more children and young people develop the love of reading and writing that will support them in accessing these vital benefits.

SLIC's role

The Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) is the independent advisory to the Scottish Government on library and information related matters. Its role is to support and promote the social and economic development of Scotland's communities and offers leadership focus and support to libraries and information services countrywide, leading development, promoting innovation and monitoring standards of provision.

SLIC administers funding on behalf of the Scottish Government to school libraries, public libraries, and the wider library and information sector in Scotland; as well as coordinating and promoting library service developments to benefit Scotland's people and enrich our cultural, educational and economic landscape.



SLIC is continuing its mission to create a strong reading culture in schools, communities and homes to support children's success - in school and beyond. And SLIC calls on teachers, carers and parents to ensure that reading for pleasure is encouraged as much as reading attainment, in and outside of schools.

Scotland's School Library Strategy

In September 2018, SLIC released 'Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools' - the national strategy for the development of school libraries in Scotland. The first of its kind in the UK, this strategic document highlights the essential role that school libraries and school librarians play in facilitating Curriculum for Excellence from ages 3-18. School libraries empower pupils, school staff



and the wider community in their learning, provide a service to improve school-leaver destinations, promote all forms of literacy, and support the role for lifelong learning in children and young people.

The scope of the strategy is to highlight to decision makers the intrinsic value of a good school library service and the impact this can have on children and young people's wider school experience. It advises decision makers of the central role school library services play in the education sector and

advocates for appropriately resourced services for each child in Scotland. It is vital decision makers recognise the influence school library services and school librarians have in helping to provide children with an equal start in life and supporting young people in their lifelong learning.

In addition to stressing the importance of the school library to students and the community at large, it also informs head teachers, school librarians, education practitioners and parents on how to utilise their school library services.

Developed jointly by the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), a School Library National Advisory Group was created to help steer the direction of the 2018-2023 strategy, made up of representatives from organisations across the education sector who met regularly throughout the development process. Extensive desk research, a national survey and site visits were also vital in the creation of the strategy, with hundreds of young people informing its development to ensure every child in Scotland has access to a dynamic school library.

It was a shared journey, a time of collaboration, of mutual discovery and, dare I say it, transformation. I witnessed four young people growing as learners in front of me.

School library provision in Scotland varies across schools and local authorities. In Early Learning and Childcare settings as well as primary schools there



are differing levels of service. Many secondary schools have a dedicated school library and professionally trained librarian managing the service. This means pupils and teachers receive varying standards of provision and this has an impact on the learning outcomes of children and young people. The strategy aims to ensure that every child and young person has access to an excellent school library service which is tailored to their learning needs.

There are many examples of excellent practice across the

country, demonstrating the critical role school libraries play in education, however, there are also instances where the school library could play a stronger role and the strategy recommendations are designed to help achieve that.

Site visits throughout Scotland have shown the vital role school libraries can have in improving attainment, supporting equity, and preparing children and young people for the future.

The strategy outlines the ways appropriately resourced school library services contribute to achieving the Scottish Government's ambition of excellence and equity in Scottish education. It has also helped education leaders and decision makers in making effective choices regarding

school library provision - ensuring all pupils, staff and the wider community have access to quality resources, inclusive of staff and activities, within a well-supported library service.

The strategy includes 20 action points to support the improvement of literacy and numeracy, boost attainment across the curriculum, and enable opportunities for family learning.

Throughout its lifetime, 'Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools' has seen the acceleration of creativity and innovation throughout the sector – despite the hold and lasting effects of a global pandemic which created a gear shift in priorities in many areas of public life. As we come to the end of the strategy, its legacy is already clear through the number of pioneering projects which are enriching school communities across Scotland – with a commitment to creating long-term impact.

We strongly believe that involving children and young people, and their families, in defining the school library service creates a flexible space for reflection and conversation where learning and creativity are encouraged in a nurturing environment.

Scotland's School Library Improvement Fund

The annual School Library Improvement Fund (SLIF) was set up by the Scottish Government in 2017 to support creativity and innovation within the school library sector in Scotland. The fund is available to all state-run nurseries, primary schools and secondary schools and is part of a range of measures put in place to improve and invest in Scotland's school libraries. To enable nurseries and schools to make a real difference, the SLIF is open for education authorities to apply for funding on behalf of school libraries in their area.

Administered by SLIC, the fund is awarded to projects designed to enhance school library provision in four priority areas – reader development, digital creativity, information literacy and health and social wellbeing; in turn, playing an important role in helping school library services achieve the key aims of 'Vibrant Libraries, Thriving Schools: A National Strategy for School Libraries in Scotland 2018-2023'.

The £200,000 2023-24 SLIF brought the total investment from the Scottish Government to £1.7 million over the lifetime of the School Library Strategy, with this year's priority given to project applications which support diversity and inclusion.

Funding is considered for a range of activities, including shared reading projects, mental health and wellbeing support, digital creativity, developing skills and knowledge, supporting teaching and learning, and improving literacy skills. From physical and digital resources to collaborative workshops and initiatives, SLIF grants can help school libraries improve and expand the services they offer for their pupils, staff and the community around them.



21 projects across Scotland were awarded a share of this year's SLIF, with projects set to take shape over the next 12-months including:

- the creation of a 'Holistic Inclusion Hub' to support parents and pupils from diverse backgrounds to feel more included in the school community in Edinburgh;
- the development of an 'Inclusive Wellbeing, Creation and Stories' space in Aberdeenshire to promote positive mental health and wellbeing through a range of activities.
- changes to the curriculum to teach pupils Black, Asian and minority ethnic history as part of learning on historical links to slavery in Inverclyde; and
- a new 'Lending Library' scheme to improve staff and pupils' knowledge of racial inequality, diversity and inclusion by supporting reading that reflects the religion, race, ethnicity, social groups, diversity and abilities of the people within the school community and beyond, including families who have recently arrived in East Ayrshire from Ukraine, Poland and Russia.



A series of initiatives specifically aimed at English as an Additional Language (EAL) school communities have also been awarded grants, including the 'Traditional Tales – Story Gathering with Roma Communities' project in Glasgow. Created in partnership with local community organisation Romano Lav, the project aims to improve the literacy skills of children from the Roma community. Collecting traditional tales familiar to the Roma children and families, the project will celebrate the vibrant oral storytelling tradition of Scottish and European traveller families with a multilingual book of traditional tales produced at the end of the project.

The 'Seaton Reads' project in Aberdeen aims to support EAL pupils, as well as hosting a variety of events aimed at developing a clearer understanding of the issues faced by the school's multicultural community and their families; while the 'Spiders @KPPS: Weaving Connections' project, in partnership with the local Queen's Park Football Club, will introduce children to diverse and inspiring authors and illustrators, providing the opportunity to see themselves mirrored in the books they read. The project will support the development of children's English language acquisition and enhance literacy skills, with a special focus on EAL families.

Each child, school and local authority is different, with differing priorities, and therefore funding programmes like SLIF help to improve and expand the tailored services school libraries can provide. That's why it's great to see Scotland's school library services being proactive with their approaches with strong SLIF applications coming in each year from schools eager to further develop these resources.

We're particularly proud to award support to those advocating for anti-racism and anti-discrimination, with many projects aiming to increase access and support for pupils who may experience barriers to learning, including those with Additional Support Needs (ASN) and EAL pupils.

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Every Child a Library Member

There are few things as powerful as reading regularly with young children to help their development - from the wellbeing benefits of relaxation and time together, to the building blocks of their confidence, vocabulary and communications skills. And yet, many parents and carers aren't taking advantage of the free library services in Scotland.

That's why in 2022, SLIC introduced a new drive to encourage parents across Scotland to introduce children to reading and library use from an early age with Every Child a Library Member (ECALM). Supporting improved language, literacy and social skills across the country, the campaign promotes the benefits of library membership at key stages from birth through to primary school. Led by SLIC, with backing from the Scottish Government, ECALM focuses on the fact that the building blocks for learning to read start early, with the aim of building a love of reading for life.

Developed through an extensive literature review, as well as consultation with library staff and key delivery partners across Scotland, ECALM offers a simple, consistent, and nationally branded approach to children's library membership in Scotland's public libraries. Simplifying the joining processes at birth registration, nursery, and primary school enrolment, ECALM ensures that every child in Scotland has access to the valuable learning resources available in public libraries.

ECALM helps to break down barriers to library membership and encourages active participation amongst children and families. It offers support to get children started with their free library membership. And every Scottish public library service (across all 32 local authorities) has now committed to delivering ECALM to ensure high levels of childhood library membership across the country.

The future of Scotland's school libraries



Scotland's school libraries are a vital resource which play a key role in accelerating education and learning, and ensuring every young person has the chance to fulfil their full potential. And all children should have access to the opportunities they provide.

While our services are leading the way, building on their offering to further transform and thrive in line with school community needs, we must continue to advocate for our services – not only reminding decision makers of the vast benefits a thriving school library service can provide, but to highlight what we stand to lose if these opportunities to accelerate progress are cut. School libraries must remain a priority in the Scottish Government's budget.

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Every Child a Library Member - <https://www.everychild.scot/>

Pamela Tulloch is the chief executive of the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) - the organisation charged with providing strategic direction to support and develop library and information services in Scotland.

An enthusiastic supporter of the literary and arts scene, Ms Tulloch has worked in the libraries sector for over 40 years, holding a number of strategic, managerial and voluntary posts in library and information establishments throughout her career.

A powerful and articulate advocate for libraries, over the last eight years as SLIC chief executive she has grown and cemented the role that libraries play in all areas of social, cultural and political life, with successful and robust community initiatives which have had an impact on both the provision of funding and clear strategic lead.

Pamela is also a member of Scottish Government's Creative Industries Leadership Group, the Designing Libraries Board, the British Library Advisory Council, the Board of the Culture & Business Scotland, the Digital Inclusion Alliance Board and a number of other library and information related alliances.

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