

Cuts lead to closure of hundreds of public libraries across UK

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Hundreds of the UK's public libraries have been closed since 2010, as revealed by a BBC News Freedom of Information request.

A report compiled by the BBC's data team shows that 343 libraries across the country have been forced to close due to drastic cuts to local government spending. In the same period, almost 8,000 library workers lost their jobs—about a quarter of the overall total. A further 111 libraries are expected to be closed in the coming year as part of the government's relentless, draconian attacks on public services.

Particularly badly hit have been the local areas under the Labour-dominated councils of Sefton in Merseyside, Brent in North London, and Sunderland, where more than half their libraries have been closed since 2010. Libraries in Stoke-on-Trent, with its Conservative/UK Independence Party/independent coalition, have been closed at a similar rate.

Sheffield suffered from the worst job cuts, with the number of paid library employees across the city sharply declining from 420 workers in 2010 to a mere 165 in 2015. The largest percentage drop in library workers was in Harrow in northwest London. In 2010 the council paid 164 people, but now there are just 60 employees. These are employed by an external provider, which now runs the service.

Many other libraries that have managed to withstand closure have had their opening hours dramatically reduced.

A further 50 libraries have been handed to external organisations to run, while 174 libraries have been transferred to community groups to be managed by unpaid and largely untrained volunteers. More than 15,000 volunteers have had to be drafted in to plug the huge staffing deficit left by the funding cutbacks. The number of unpaid volunteers has risen from 15,861 in

2010, to 31,403 as of the March report.

Volunteers are not a viable substitute for professional library staff. Nick Poole, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), stated, "Volunteers have always been a vibrant part of our library service, but they cannot replace the expertise, ethics and professional skills of qualified staff who are fundamental to providing the quality library services that we are entitled to by law."

Under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, the government and its local authorities have a legal obligation to provide public library services.

Local residents and librarians all over the country have protested these cuts to their public services, with many protests attracting the support of high-profile names such as classicist Mary Beard and actor Brian Blessed. Demonstrations have been held in many towns and cities and residents have signed petitions and staged sit-ins.

Legal challenges have been brought by CILIP and local residents against the Department of Culture, Media and Sport over its failure to fulfil its legal duty to keep branches open and to provide quality library services.

In Lambeth, South London, hundreds of residents turned out in protest at the proposed closure to their local libraries, while in November of last year librarians and other staff at the London borough's 10 public libraries walked out in an unofficial strike against the conversion of three libraries into "healthy living centres."

On March 31, dozens of local residents occupied Carnegie Library in south London in an attempt to prevent its closure. The library was to close for the last time at 6 p.m. that evening, with around 80 people

remaining in the building. Labour-run Lambeth Council is closing the library, which is due to reopen in a year as a “healthy living centre,” including a vaguely defined “neighbourhood library service,” as part of its cost-cutting programme.

On February 9, bestselling authors Cathy Cassidy, Alan Gibbons and Philip Ardagh addressed a packed hall in Westminster, London as librarians, students and other supporters from across the UK rallied to petition Parliament against the cuts. Labelling the closure of hundreds of libraries as a “national scandal” in her speech to protesters, Cassidy said, “Libraries build communities, weave those communities together and help people climb the ladder towards their own potential, one book at a time. It is beyond shameful that Britain can even think of closing libraries, slamming the door on culture and opportunity for young and old alike.”

In Birmingham, police were called to the city’s main library after around 30 students staged a sit-in, refusing to leave the library for many hours after its official closing time to protest against reduced opening hours and staff redundancies.

Birmingham Library, which cost approximately £189 million to construct, is Europe’s largest public library. It houses over 1 million books, as well as theatres, music rooms and a gallery and has been named one of the UK’s most visited attractions.

However, in 2015, less than two years after it first opened, the library’s budget was slashed by £1.3 million. Its opening hours were reduced by 50 percent, with 100 staff expected to be made redundant as part of Birmingham City Council’s wider plans to cut 6,000 jobs and to make £300 million in savings. As with the vast majority of councils in the UK’s main urban centres, the council is run by the Labour Party.

Birmingham Library was forced to request extra voluntary assistance and to plead for donations of recently published books from the public, after their book-buying fund was “paused.”

Figures from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) revealed that UK library expenditure on books, newspapers, periodicals and magazines fell by 10.6 percent within a year, from £72 million in 2013/14 to £64 million in 2014/15.

According to the data, funding to local libraries was slashed by £180 million in the same period and the

number of visits to public libraries has fallen by 14 percent since the election of Prime Minister David Cameron’s government in 2010. Book borrowing has steadily declined in every year since 2010.

In a comment during an interview with the BBC, children’s author Alan Gibbons stated, “Councils learnt early on how unpopular simply closing libraries is so they have had to cut the vital service in other, less obvious ways. It can come across in many forms: reduced opening hours, reduced book fund, reduced maintenance and reduced staffing. ... It is harmful to the service, creating the risk that once-loyal users of libraries will come away disappointed and stop using them. Our public library system used to be envy of the world. Now it is used as a cautionary tale that librarians use worldwide to scare their colleagues.”

At a time of growing poverty, unemployment and homelessness, public libraries are one of the few free services used by millions of working class people in Britain.



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