

Full project summary

Context

Between 2010 and 2020, the number of service providers which have reportedly ceased the statutory provision of library services in their area has tripled, largely due to local authority funding cuts. This dramatic change in the landscape of English libraries, further highlighted by recent news headlines, involved the closure of numerous local authority libraries and the emergence of new subjects aiming to deliver library services, like community-run libraries. Nonetheless, recent evidence shows a sustained engagement with libraries across England, somehow in contrast with evidence from previous years. Few existing studies have variously highlighted the role of libraries in promoting individual and community empowerment, alongside investigating the diversity of services provided. However, we lack a systemic perspective on the contribution that libraries make to their local communities, as well as nuanced nationwide answers to the changes that have taken place in the sector and their impact. A major limitation comes from the lack (or fragmented availability) of high-quality data mapping library presence with individual and area-level outcomes.

We aim to fill this knowledge gap by providing novel evidence that will benefit from the collaboration established with the Arts Council England (ACE), alongside connected partner associations.

Project aims

A1. Provide an updated picture of library services provision (LSP) in England, mapping changes over time across geography (i.e., closures, openings), including the changed composition of LSP subjects (i.e., local authority run, community run, etc) in connection to funding, and any implication for service delivery (e.g., opening days/times).

A2. Understand the variety of delivery models across the range of LSPs, as also shaped by area specificities, local authority funding and the interactions among the subjects operating within each service provision area.

A3. Investigate the effect of changes in the provision of library services, across both time and space, on their surrounding socio-economic context (including, but not limited to, multidimensional measures of deprivation). This part of the project will specifically address the public policy dimensions concerning the institutional role of libraries in relation to existing societal imbalances.

Proposed methodology and Timescale

The project will take a mixed-method approach, combining various social science methods. Specifically, the PhD student will use quantitative methods concerning A1 and A3, while combining qualitative and quantitative research in A2. In year 1, the student will review the literature and policies relevant to the three main research aims, available data on LSP in England and socio-economic indicators. This will also include

collecting and mapping available datasets (from ACE and other institutions), allowing the student to produce quantitative evidence (including GIS representation) showing the spatial distribution of LSP and changes over time (from the end of year 1).

The research will then identify relevant delivery models within and across the range of LSPs to establish a taxonomy, which will form the basis to investigate organisational, resource-procurement and user-engagement modes across the range of LSPs identified. This investigation will focus on case studies (5 to 10) from service areas identifiable from the mapping developed in A1 (aiming to provide a representative sample of the different environments where LPS takes place). This area of investigation will use in-depth qualitative research, with the supplement of quantitative information, as needed and available.

From the end of year 2, the student will build up on A1 and A2 to investigate the connections between spatio-temporal changes in library provision and socio-economic outcomes, employing established multivariate econometric approaches (e.g., panel data methods) to provide robust quantitative descriptive evidence. They will also explore providing causal evidence on the above-mentioned nexus through observational evidence of plausibly exogenous context-specific variations (e.g., legislative, geographic), drawing from state-of-the-art empirical approaches and applications (e.g., [9]-[12]).

Timescales summary (Oct 2025–Sept 2028)

Year 1: Literature review and database mapping, completion of 1st study (A1), set up of 2nd study (A2)

Year 2: Internship at partner institution, completion of 2nd study, set up and development of 3rd study (A3)

Year 3: Completion of 3rd study, thesis write-up

Dissemination

The student will be supported in the publication of the PhD thesis and to publish in leading, high-impact journals. With support from Arts Council England, opportunities will be identified to share findings with the English Public Library Strategic Working Group (chaired by ACE), policymakers and other relevant stakeholders.

Developmental/training opportunities with ACE (Non-HEI partner)

As development agency for libraries in England, ACE has been working towards establishing data-based evidence for the sector, including through data collection concerning the population of library services providers (LSPs) across England.

The student will benefit from partnering with ACE in the following ways:

1. Support and advice in navigating the library datasets, the collection process, quality standards.

2. 3-month placement either within ACE or connected partners
3. Access to meeting facilities across England to conduct fieldwork.
4. Support in the organisation of policy roundtables and events to disseminate research findings.
5. Mentoring and advice to make sure the research engages with relevant policy stakeholders

Further information about the supervisors

Dr Salvatore Di Novo is an economist and Lecturer in Culture, Media & Creative Industries at CMCI, where he teaches in the areas of Cultural Economics and Cultural Policy. Previously, he was a postdoctoral researcher at Newcastle University Business School and the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC). He has expertise in public and industrial economics, and quantitative methods, currently researching on topics related to funding and digitalisation in the creative and cultural industries. He is a Co-Investigator in the ESRC funded “Sustainable Cultural Futures: COVID-19 and Resetting Cultural Policy (SCF)” project. He has co-authored various papers and been published in leading field journals, like the Journal of Cultural Economics.

Prof. Roberta Comunian is Professor of Creative Economies at CMCI. She has supervised 5 PhD to completion (first supervisor) and is currently supervising 2 PhD students. She has research expertise stretching from complexity theory and network analysis to cultural policy and cultural-led urban regeneration. Overall, she has published one co-authored monograph, seven edited books, 41 peer-reviewed journal articles, 9 journal guest editorials and curated special issues, 36 book chapters, 6 policy/impact reports, and five co-authored H2020 Delivery reports. She has worked with various external cultural organisations and is strongly committed to supporting collaborations in academic research. Prof. Comunian has recently volunteered for her local community-managed library (Cobbett Road Library) and written a report on UK Community-managed libraries in collaboration with the University of Southampton and Community Managed Libraries Network.

Training requirements

+3.5 Studentship

If this studentship is to be awarded as a +3.5 (PhD only), the candidate must have undertaken at least two of the following three major [ESRC core research methods areas](#) - social theory, qualitative methods and quantitative methods – during their master programme or have a significant professional experience in at least two of these general areas.

1+3.5 Studentship

If this studentship is to be awarded as a 1+3.5 (Master's and PhD) then the student should select a Masters programme from one of the three LISS institutions meeting the ESRC's core training requirements for the relevant [pathway](#).

Selected further readings

Cudworth, K. and Fortnum, J. (2017) Evidencing Libraries Audience Reach. Research findings and analysis. Arts Council England & the Audience Agency, London, England.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2024). Participation Survey 2023-24 Annual Publication. Web.

O'Bryan, J. (2018). "Analysing data: CIPFA statistics and the future of England's libraries" (research report). London, England: Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport.

Refuturing Community-Managed Libraries, Centre for the South, September 2024, DOI:10.5258/SOTON/PP0206