

Libraries on the European Agenda

How can the EU leverage the potential of public libraries to tackle European challenges?

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Disclaimer

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1 Introduction

This report has been produced in the framework of the *Culture and Cultural Heritage* Partnership of the Urban Agenda for the EU. Its objective is to support efforts to “raise awareness for public libraries and their new tasks on a European and national level”. As local institutions, libraries in Europe are, for the most part, funded by local governments. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, libraries are not a competence of the EU, but while the EU has no legislative power regarding libraries, it has an important role to play in coordinating, supporting and supplementing actions of the Member States ([Article 6 TFEU](#)).

The report begins by considering European societal challenges, which public libraries can help to tackle. Within the context of these challenges, the report goes on to provide an overview of relevant EU programmes, policies and initiatives in the European Commission, European Parliament and Council of the EU. Finally, it presents an analysis of where public libraries make important contributions, where their potential is neglected, and how the EU can better integrate this potential in the future. An accompanying one-page set of recommendations is included in the Annex, to be used in support of advocacy work with EU policymakers.

2 Background

There are over 65,000 public libraries¹ in the EU and over 100 million people visit them every year². Libraries have a long tradition of offering access to information, be it in the form of books or, in response to technological developments, digital resources. While libraries are united in this common mission, they are inherently local institutions, adapting their offer to the needs of the communities they serve. This means that libraries' specific offer varies both within a country - reflecting population density, income levels, minority groups, urban/rural - but also across borders within the EU - reflecting cultural heritage, infrastructure and government investment.

And yet, the contribution libraries make on a local level is an indication of shared societal challenges, experienced across the continent. These challenges include (but are not limited to):

2.1 Education

1 in 5 Europeans is functionally illiterate³. Without basic reading and writing skills, people are not only educationally challenged but struggle to get by socially. By providing free access to books and other reading materials, and by hosting informal educational activities such as language classes, book clubs and skills-based workshops, libraries promote literacy and lifelong learning.

2.2 Social inclusion

Inequality of opportunity remains a huge problem in Europe⁴, with many people risking being left behind. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit people who are already disadvantaged (low income, educational difficulties, unemployed, migrants) the hardest⁵. Many of these groups were already struggling especially with technological developments, which risk deepening the divide. Libraries are ideally placed, as open, trusted, welcoming spaces, to reach these people - and by offering access to computers, running educational courses and partnering with other specialised local services, they are able to combat inequality.

2.3 Digital inclusion

Ensuring people have the necessary digital skills to keep up with technological developments is a key European priority⁶. Digital skills are increasingly in demand both at work and at school, as well as in order to navigate everyday tasks such as banking, healthcare and administration. Recent events have also highlighted the importance of media literacy and being able to discern trustworthy information from fake news. Libraries' reputation as trusted information specialists mean they are well placed to support people in adapting to a digital world.

¹ This report focuses on public libraries, though many of the issues discussed also apply to other sorts of libraries (academic libraries, school libraries, national libraries etc.), though they are not specifically considered here.

² Source: [Susannah Quick, Gillian Prior, Ben Toombs, Luke Taylor, Rosanna Currenti, 2013](#)

³ Source: [EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy, 2012](#)

⁴ Source: [European Investment Bank, 2018](#)

⁵ Source: [International Monetary Fund, 2020](#)

⁶ Source: [European Commission, 2021](#)

2.4 Democracy

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown long-standing societal issues into sharp relief. In recent years, we have witnessed an assault on democracy, manifested in the rise of populism, the spread of misinformation and a deterioration in personal wellbeing. Libraries have proven themselves to be lifelines to many during the pandemic; even when the physical buildings have had to close, the library services have remained open, creatively re-thinking how to offer books, classes and resources online, and proactively reaching out to vulnerable members of their communities⁷. More than ever, libraries are realising the potential of their role as a fundamental building block in a democratic society.

These four issues - education, social inclusion, digital inclusion and democracy - are all EU priorities. They are also areas in which libraries are already working, and which many library services have the potential to take further, given the right support and investment.

⁷ Source: [International Federation of Library Associations, 2020](#)

3 Overview

With 2021 marking the formal adoption of various European programmes, this section provides an overview of where public libraries are included both directly and indirectly in European policies, programmes, and initiatives. The focus is on the EU institutions that are key to the legislative process: the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament. As the intention of this report is to look forward, this section will dive into upcoming programmes and policies that are being put in place for the coming years.

As mentioned in the Introduction, while the EU has no legislative power regarding libraries, it has an important role to play in coordinating, supporting and supplementing actions of the Member States ([Article 6 TFEU](#)). There is, however, ample scope for priorities in programming that specifically targets libraries and the services that they offer, or that specifically encourage libraries to play a bigger role in supporting EU objectives.

3.1 European Commission

3.1.1 Priorities

Following the European Parliament elections in 2019, newly elected European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen submitted her policy priorities for her mandate until 2024. These are reflected in the [2021 Commission Work Plan](#) and have been updated in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. At its core, this document outlines the Commission's ambition to deliver on six 'headline ambitions', which each cover various programmes and policies:

1. The European Green Deal
2. A Europe fit for the digital age
3. An economy that works for people
4. A stronger Europe in the world
5. Promoting our European way of life
6. A new push for European democracy

Europe's public libraries can contribute in some way to all of these ambitions - especially through development of digital skills and access (2) and promoting citizen engagement with democratic processes (6). As multi-faceted, user-driven organisations, libraries in fact could have a role to play in any and all EU policies - by connecting citizens with cross-cutting issues such as public health, sustainability, climate, agriculture and so on. However, for the purposes of this report, the following section briefly lays out some specific recent policies, programmes and initiatives which are of most direct relevance to libraries.

3.1.2 Policies and Programmes

1. EU Digital Policy

Part of the European Commission's ambition in this mandate is the challenge of digital transformation in society and various strategies have been developed to that effect. These are covered by the [Digital Compass](#) initiative and set out the EU's digital ambitions for 2030. This

covers a multitude of policy areas: digital sovereignty, digital services, data economy, artificial intelligence (AI), enabling technologies, connectivity, cybersecurity, European digital identification (e-ID), eHealth, digital skills and education, and digitalisation of justice.

Under the [Connecting Europe Facility Digital Programme](#) (2021 - 2027), schools, universities, hospitals, transport hubs and public administrations will be able to benefit from support and investments in digital connectivity infrastructures of common interest. It is foreseen that the programme will have actions around the provision of high-quality local wireless connectivity in local communities that is free of charge and without discriminatory conditions. This builds on the [WIFI4EU](#) voucher programme (2018-2020) wherein libraries could apply for this via their municipality.

2. (Digital) Education

The [Digital Education Action Plan](#) (DEAP) comes under the second action of the 2021 European Commission Work Plan and the Digital Compass. This updated plan is part of the blueprint for the [European Education Area](#) by 2025 and follows on from the [ET2020 Strategic Framework](#). It is important to note that this plan outlines mainly the role of schools and teachers in equipping European citizens with digital skills. While there may be a focus on schools and teachers, computing education in a non-formal educational setting such as libraries, Makerspaces, and Fablabs is part of the Action Plan. Furthermore, this Action Plan can benefit from the Erasmus+ programme, the European Social Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and smart specialisation policies, the Connecting Europe Facility, the Digital Europe Programme, and Horizon Europe. As such, libraries can apply to calls published under these programmes as part of the DEAP.

Additionally, the DEAP lays out plans for:

- Strategic dialogue with member states to prepare for Council Recommendations on digital education by 2022
- A European Digital Education Content Framework
- Ethical guidelines on Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- Update the Digital Competence Framework and guidelines to foster digital literacy and basic AI knowledge and skills
- A new European Digital Education Hub

3. A new push for Democracy

Following the 2019 European Parliament elections, the European Commission has committed the EU to a “new push for European democracy”. This move includes the creation of a new Commissioner portfolio, European Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, assumed by Dubravka Suica. The inter-institutional flagship initiative will be the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), which “will allow for an open, inclusive, transparent and structured debate with citizens of diverse backgrounds and from all walks of life”. It is a citizen-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to voice their expectations of the European Union and shape the Union’s future policies and ambitions. This will be achieved through European, national, transnational, and regional level events involving civil society and stakeholders as well as a multilingual digital platform Initially set to be launched in 2020 but had to be postponed due to the COVID19 pandemic. It will be presided over by the three EU institutions (European Parliament, European Commission, and the Council of the EU) and an executive board.

The [European Democracy Action Plan](#) has three priorities: promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom, and countering disinformation. Active participation, especially of young people, is encouraged under this Action Plan and the use of EU structural funds and the funding available under the Creative Europe Programme (2021 - 2027) and the new Rights and Values programme is strongly encouraged. This Action Plan will be reviewed in 2023 ahead of the European Parliament elections.

The recently adopted [Erasmus+ Programme Guide](#) has developed a priority around adult education with libraries as “forward looking learning centres” that can help adults acquire the skills needed to be resilient in uncertain times. This builds on the previous Erasmus+ programme, which included libraries in various action strands.

The [New European Bauhaus](#) is a new EU platform bringing together citizens to explore the European Green Deal and collectively build a sustainable future. This platform presents a great opportunity for public libraries to bring together their community and explore and collect the ideas, problems, and solutions to the complex issues put forward on the New European Bauhaus.

4. The European Skills Agenda

The [European Skills Agenda](#) commits to providing people access to quality and inclusive education throughout their life that enables them to participate fully in society and successfully manage transitions in the labour market. As part of the new European Skills Agenda, the European Commission is exploring Individual Learning Accounts and a system of micro-credentials that could certify knowledge acquired through short courses and work experience. The European Commission's [Pact for Skills](#) offers companies, workers, national, regional, and local authorities, social partners, cross-industry and sectoral organisations, education and training providers, chambers of commerce and employment services a networking hub, a knowledge hub, and a guidance and resources hubs to help support a culture of lifelong learning. Joining the Pact for Skills can be done by libraries to access the resources proposed.

5. The European Green Deal

The [European Green Deal](#) is an action plan to become a climate-neutral continent and is a wide reaching initiative covering nine policy areas. It is important to note that technical programmes focused on carbon reduction etc. are a focus of the European Green Deal. Several measures stand out where libraries are concerned:

- The “[Eliminating pollution](#)” policy area provides support to local authorities to ensure clean air for citizens
- The [European Climate Pact](#) launched in December 2020 is an “open and inclusive” initiative to get citizens to connect, learn and come up with solutions on climate action
- The Horizon 2020-funded [European Green Deal call](#) will provide €1 billion in aiding the European green and digital transition. As such, this now closed call had a strand of funding open to participatory processes that would bring citizens together. This call was open to public libraries.

6. European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)

The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) encompass the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund, the European

Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). The following policy objectives have been set out for the 2021 - 2027 period:

- *A smarter Europe*, through innovation, digitisation, economic transformation and support to small and medium-sized businesses
- *A greener, carbon free Europe*, implementing the Paris Agreement and investing in energy transition, renewables and the fight against climate change
- *A more connected Europe*, with strategic transport and digital networks
- *A more social Europe*, delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights and supporting quality employment, education, skills, social inclusion and equal access to healthcare
- *A Europe closer to citizens*, by supporting locally led development strategies and sustainable urban development across the EU

To achieve these policy objectives, the funds will cover the following areas of investment:

- Jobs, growth and investment
- Digital single market
- Energy union and climate
- Internal market
- Economic and monetary union
- Justice and fundamental rights
- Migration

Public libraries can also play a role in entrepreneurship and innovation. By offering a space for people to experiment, find information, exchange with others, public libraries play a tremendous role in supporting entrepreneurship and innovation.

When we consider the European Commission, we note that they support social innovation with networking opportunities, funding, competitions and more. The European Commission [defines](#) social innovation as “new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships and form new collaborations”. The main policies for promoting innovation, growth, and employment is the EU’s Cohesion policy through the ERDF, ESF, EAFRD and Cohesion Fund instruments. Libraries can access these funds via national or regional strategies and should consider how they can support these.

3.2 European Parliament

3.2.1 Priorities

The European Parliament’s [priorities](#) align to the European Commission’s priorities:

- Recovery plan & long-term budget
- Climate change
- Digital services (platforms)
- Artificial Intelligence
- Migration
- Conference on the Future of Europe
- Agriculture
- EU4Health
- EU-UK relations

3.2.2 Policies and Programmes

The Culture and Education (CULT) Committee and the Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) Committee have been considered in this report due to the nature of their work and the potential impact on libraries.

The CULT committee has [called](#) for the involvement of adults in shaping the EU's digital education policy to ensure that lifelong learning is part of the DEAP. This call came after the [identification](#) of the digital divide as a key issue leading to discrepancies in learning which would impact productivity and income levels in the long term. The CULT committee will focus on equal opportunities for digital education for adults and how to incentivise this with national and local authorities. They have recommended increased support for non-formal education providers in providing quality digital education and training. Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, awareness raising of libraries has been achieved through reports such as the 2016 report "[Research for CULT Committee: Public Libraries - their new role](#)" which outlined the impact of public libraries on intellectual and cultural development of citizens and their function as an open space for learning, culture and social communication.

The EMPL committee will focus on concrete measures to protect workers and support the COVID19 recovery. As of April 2020, this means that part of their [focus](#) will be on: the SURE initiative, the European Unemployment Reinsurance Initiatives, the European Social Fund, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived amongst others. As of February 2021, the EMPL committee adopted a [resolution](#) on the [European Skills Agenda](#) calling for significant investment in digital skills for the workforce.

3.3 Council of the European Union

The current Presidency is led by Portugal (Jan-June 2021) and sets out the following priorities: European recovery, delivering the EU's Social Pillar, and strengthening the strategic autonomy of Europe. These priorities are framed by the digital and green transitions that are encompassed in the Commission's Work Plan and priorities. As such, libraries are implicitly considered within the Portugal Presidency's digital priorities. It is expected that the upcoming Slovenian Presidency from July 2021 will focus on the digital and green transitions as well as recovery.

Within the Council, there are also OMC (open method of coordination) working groups, in which civil society and industry organisations are invited to participate alongside member states. The ET2020 working groups (including the [working group on adult learning](#), and the [working group on promoting common values and inclusive education](#), both of relevance to libraries) came to an end in 2020 and any successive groups have yet to be confirmed.

Furthermore, based on the 2015-2018 and the 2019-2022 Council Conclusions on a work plan on culture there is no explicit mention of libraries. While libraries may be considered part of the creative and cultural sector through their activities, it is important that they are actively considered in these documents and as potential alliance partners when formulating conclusions.

4 Analysis

Generally speaking, there is plenty of scope within EU programmes, policies and initiatives for libraries to make a contribution. The themes identified as EU priorities have a clear overlap with the challenges that public libraries are working on across Europe. However, while the potential of libraries is clear from a sectoral standpoint, the lack of direct references to libraries in EU policies indicates that EU policymakers do not fully realise libraries' potential role.

For instance, whereas libraries are well positioned to make an important contribution to digital skills development, the focus of the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan lies heavily on formal educational institutions such as schools and universities. Recognition of non-formal learning spaces such as libraries is limited, and it is unclear what kind of support informal and non-formal educational institutions could benefit from under these initiatives. This is especially important for adults who do not have access to digital resources at home or at work, or who might not feel comfortable or capable undertaking formal training. The European Parliament has done important work in pushing the Commission to increase support of lifelong learning and adult education, and to invest in education more broadly in the EU recovery plan, for example via the [European Education Alliance](#).

Explicit mention of libraries is also missing in the EU Skills Agenda and its flagship Pact for Skills, despite the first key principle being “promoting a culture of lifelong learning for all”. While the pact is open to public organisations (making public libraries eligible), targeting libraries directly would encourage their participation and, in turn, provide the Skills Agenda with a ready-made network of learning spaces across Europe. Specifically mentioning libraries and opening up initiatives so that libraries can apply directly could also reap benefits in other areas; for example, allowing libraries to apply directly for Wi-Fi vouchers under the new Connecting Europe Facility could increase uptake compared to the previous WiFi4EU scheme, which was only open to local authorities, adding a layer of administration for libraries who would be well placed to benefit from and to promote the initiative.

This network of existing physical spaces also risks being overlooked by plans for the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Democracy Action Plan. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; any initiative seeking to engage citizens via a bottom-up process across Europe would do well to leverage the 65,000 trusted community spaces in order to reach those citizens. Many Europe Direct Information Centres are already hosted in public libraries, and this could be a good place to begin outreach as part of the Conference. Engaging with people in person (where possible under COVID-19 measures) is a crucial complement to any online platform, which is unlikely to be able to reach a real cross-section of society. Funding could be demarcated for libraries to support the Conference under the upcoming Rights and Values programme (formerly Europe for Citizens programme), Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ or pilot projects and preparatory actions.

One area of promise is the EU Biodiversity Strategy: while the link to libraries might not be obvious, by selecting libraries to participate in the BiodiverCities project, the EU is leveraging their potential to engage their communities on important sustainability issues and to promote citizen science. The inclusion of horizontal priorities of strengthening knowledge and empowering citizens in the Horizon

2020 European Green Deal call is another promising move towards empowering libraries to play the role of engaging local communities with European issues, in particular issues around climate and sustainability, which affect us all. Inclusion of libraries in projects tackling cross-cutting issues should be promoted across other policy areas and programmes, including the European Social Funds. The European Social Funds have proved notoriously difficult to access for cultural institutions such as public libraries. Whilst organisations such as EBLIDA (the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations) are doing important work to help decipher the various programmes⁸, more support and clarity on this area would be hugely beneficial.

In summary, Europe's 65,000 public libraries have huge potential to contribute to EU objectives. As trusted spaces offering free access to information, libraries are well placed to lead on connecting citizens to each other, and to the cross-cutting European issues that matter to them. This report has outlined some of the specific European policies in which libraries can contribute, notably in the fields of education, digitisation, social inclusion and democratic engagement. Despite the fact that libraries are not a competence of the EU, this report has demonstrated that there are many policies, programmes and initiatives, which are relevant to libraries, and, in turn, where libraries are an often-untapped resource in tackling European societal challenges.

⁸ See report [The European and Structural Investment Funds 2021-2027](#)

5 Annex: Recommendations

How libraries are tackling European societal challenges

There are over 65,000 public libraries in the EU and 100 million people visit them every year. Libraries have a long tradition of offering access to information, be it in the form of books or, in response to technological developments, digital resources. Despite public libraries' inherently local character, the contribution libraries make on a local level is an indication of shared societal challenges, experienced across the continent. Libraries contribute by:

- Supporting the 1 in 5 Europeans who struggle to read and write
- Providing free access to internet and technological devices
- Welcoming people suffering from loneliness and isolation
- Signposting people to local support services and connecting them to their community
- Innovating through Fab Labs, Makerspaces and environmental projects

How the EU can better support libraries in their mission

Public libraries in Europe are an existing network of trusted community spaces. They already provide so many services, from access to internet and educational courses to public debates and Europe Direct Information Centres. In order to effectively leverage this rich resource in pursuit of EU objectives, the EU should:

- Reach out to public libraries as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe, in order to **complement online participation with grassroots, local conversations**, especially with hard-to-reach groups that libraries are connected with.
- Work with libraries to push for increased uptake in adult education and lifelong learning, by ensuring that initiatives such as the Digital Education Action Plan **focus on non-formal learning institutions and their staff**, not just schools and universities.
- **Invest in digital infrastructure for local public spaces** such as libraries, for example with special WiFi4EU vouchers for libraries under the Connecting Europe Facility.
- Undertake **comprehensive data collection and mapping of educational activities taking place in non-formal learning institutions** to allow policy makers to better understand how to leverage their potential, for example as part of the Adult Education survey.
- Make it easier for **libraries to apply for funding under the ESIF** (especially the ESF and the ERDF), for example with simplified funding streams and a more transparent process.
- **Integrate citizen participation** (including using libraries as a space for engagement) across all EU programmes, inspired by recent priorities in Horizon 2020.