

Executive Summary

Overview



Public libraries are a vital form of social infrastructure: open, trusted and inclusive civic spaces that support connection, learning and wellbeing across communities. Free at the point of use, they provide accessible environments where individuals can access information, develop skills, engage with culture and participate in community life.

Yet much of this contribution remains difficult to evidence. Conventional metrics, such as footfall, book loans or computer use, capture levels of activity and service reach but fail to reflect the relational, cumulative and often intangible ways in which libraries create value over time. Experiences such as confidence, belonging, trust and informal support are central to what libraries provide, but are rarely captured within existing frameworks.

This project responds to that challenge by developing a richer, practice-based understanding of how public libraries generate social value, and by identifying practical ways to evidence that value in ways that are credible, proportionate and meaningful for library services.

Social value was mapped across four key areas: how the library helps people connect with others and feel part of a community (social capital); how it supports learning, reading, creativity and shared experiences (cultural enrichment); how it helps people save money, access resources and get practical support (economic value); and how it contributes to wellbeing by reducing isolation and providing routine, purpose and comfort (health & wellbeing).

The research combines a mixed-methods case study with the development of an accompanying Social Value Toolkit. This report presents the findings and outlines a five-step approach to evidencing social value.

The Case Study: St Ninians Library

The research centres on St Ninians Library in Stirling, selected as a representative example of a local community branch library. Located within the Mayfield Centre in the St Ninians area of the city, regular activities include Bookbug sessions for young children and their carers and Reminiscence and Craft groups for older adults, alongside everyday use such as borrowing, studying, playing, accessing digital resources and seeking support.

Research Approach

The project adopted a mixed-methods approach combining routine data, structured sampling which took place over a week-long period and 31 short interviews with St Ninians Library users and the Community Library Officer. Together, these methods captured both the scale of library use and activities and the often unseen interactions, such as informal support and everyday engagement, that underpin social value. This enabled the study to move beyond standard metrics to evidence the relational, cumulative and place-based nature of library impact.

Findings

Routine data demonstrate a busy, well-used and accessible service, with high levels of membership, visits, borrowing and participation in events. The library also plays a significant role in digital inclusion, with sustained demand for computer access, WiFi and staff-supported assistance. These indicators demonstrated scale and reach, but did not fully capture how value is created in practice.

Findings from the week-long sampling process (based on enquiry count transaction sampling originally done for CIPFA) provided detailed insight into everyday library use. This included evidencing high levels of school and nursery engagement, frequent information and support requests and ongoing demand for digital and administrative assistance. Importantly, the sampling revealed the prominence of extended conversations and informal support between staff and users.

The findings from the 31 interviews were mapped over four areas of social value how the library helps people connect with others and feel part of a community (social capital); how it supports learning, reading, creativity and shared experiences (cultural enrichment); how it helps people save money, access resources and get practical support (economic value); and how it contributes to wellbeing by reducing isolation and providing routine, purpose and comfort (health & wellbeing).

Social Capital: Connection, Trust and Belonging

Participants consistently described the library as a welcoming, low-pressure space where they felt recognised and able to connect with others. Informal interactions, group participation and shared activities supported the development of relationships and community ties.

“Look around, there are so many kids playing around and people just come here. It is a place for community.”

(Interviewee 11, Bookbug)

For many users, the library played an important role in reducing isolation and enabling connection, particularly for those new to the area or experiencing change. Trust and familiarity developed gradually, through repeated visits and ongoing interaction.

Cultural Enrichment: Learning and Shared Experience

Routine data and sampling highlight strong engagement with reading, events and educational activity. Interviews show how this is experienced as meaningful cultural participation, supporting learning, creativity and confidence.

“It can open up your world”

(Interviewee 3, Reminiscence Group).

The library provides opportunities for both individual and shared learning, often through group settings that combine reading, discussion and social interaction.

Economic Value: Access and Practical Support

The library supports users through cost savings, access to free resources, and practical help with everyday tasks. Sampling highlights frequent assistance with digital access, printing and navigating services.

“It’s a fun activity... Because you know all this is free... Meeting new people... Mutual support.”

(Interviewee 7, Bookbug)

This reflects the library’s role as local economic infrastructure, helping users access resources and services they may not otherwise be able to afford.

Health and Wellbeing: Routine and Purpose

Participants described improved wellbeing through reduced isolation, increased confidence and a sense of routine. The library provides a welcoming environment where users can spend time safely and engage at their own pace.

“It gives my life a purpose... it’s just something that is very important.”

(Interviewee 22, General Use)

These outcomes emerge gradually, through ongoing participation rather than targeted interventions.

Cross-Cutting Conclusions

Across all these areas, value developed cumulatively rather than through single interactions. It grew over time as users became familiar with the space, built relationships and increased participation. Our research found that this value was inseparable from the everyday work of staff. The careful labour of staff, through conversation, encouragement, recognition and emotional support, activated the benefits of the space and resources and made their value tangible. The project also highlighted the importance of incorporating staff knowledge into evaluation. At St Ninians, this was aided by a physical scrapbook created and maintained by the CLO which documented activities, relationships, and patterns of participation over time, offering a rich insight into the everyday life of the Library and supporting interview discussions.

Towards a Social Value Toolkit

Taken together, these findings point towards the potential value of a more practical and flexible approach to evidencing library impact - one that brings together existing quantitative data with qualitative insight and context-rich narrative. In response, the following Social Value Toolkit (presented as an accompanying insert to this report) offers initial suggestions of a framework for doing so based on our research at St Ninians. Rather than a fixed model, it is intended as a provisional and adaptable set of tools that can be refined over time, supporting library services to experiment with ways of capturing and communicating their social value in forms that remain grounded in everyday practice and staff capacity. Libraries can tailor it to explore specific priorities, such as environmental sustainability, trusted information provision, reducing social isolation, civic engagement, or health and wellbeing. These examples illustrate the toolkit's wider potential and can be adapted to suit local needs and objectives.

It suggests the following five step approach:

1. Gather routine data to demonstrate scale and reach
2. Undertake structured sampling to capture interactions
3. Conduct short interviews to understand lived experience
4. Capture staff reflections
5. Develop a 'story of change'

Conclusion

Public libraries are vital social infrastructure, where everyday interactions quietly generate lasting benefits. Because this value unfolds over time and through relationships, it is best captured through qualitative insights, staff reflections, user stories and observation, rather than metrics alone. By combining routine data with lived experience, this research shows how libraries create significant social value across multiple domains, offering a stronger, more credible foundation for demonstrating their contribution to individuals, communities and wider policy goals.