



# **Petition PE1581 School Libraries**

The UNISON Scotland submission to the Public Petitions Committee

**December 2015**

## **Introduction**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing over 150,000 people delivering services across Scotland. UNISON members deliver a wide range of services in schools. Members include: librarians and library assistants, technicians, school administrative staff and classroom assistants. UNISON Scotland is able to collate and analyse member's experience to provide evidence to inform the policy process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee on school libraries.

## **Evidence**

### **School Library Cuts**

Local government has borne the brunt of public sector cuts in Scotland. Over 40,000 jobs have been lost and the information we have gathered from local authorities indicate they expect the next budget allocations to be equally difficult to manage. Local authorities have so far been salami slicing services, relying on non replacement of leavers and voluntary redundancy to meet the cuts. This is no longer going to be enough and so the next round of budget setting is laying out more radical changes in service delivery and design.

The picture across Scotland varies but there is a consistent pattern of local authorities using the school libraries service as a soft target to meet budget cuts: For example:

Argyll and Bute are planning to remove 10 FTE posts secondary schools  
3 in Mid Argyll and Campbeltown (Lochgilphead, Campbeltown and Islay  
3 In Oban Lorn and the Isle (Oban, Tiree and Mull)  
2 in Bute and Cowal (Rothesay and Dunoon)  
2 in Helensburgh and Lomond (Helensburgh Academy)

South Lanarkshire proposals include reducing school library staffing by 15%

North Lanarkshire is now proposing to review the school librarian service for a second time with the reduction of 2 FTE School Library Resource Manager posts. The last review saw all schools with pupil roll under 700 reduce librarian numbers to 0.7 FTE librarian. All new staff now are only employed term time. The Council has also removed the need for library staff to have professional library qualifications.

East Renfrewshire Council is proposing moving from 1 fully qualified librarian from each of its high schools (7) to the FTE of 3.5. The original plans to use senior pupils to staff the library appear to have been dropped due to public opposition.

Glasgow has reduced the school librarian service to 0.5 posts per school.

Renfrewshire now has only 7 librarians across 11 schools.

East Ayrshire has replaced 3 librarians with 3 library assistants. Meaning 9 secondary schools are now covered by 5 librarians and 4 library assistants.

South Ayrshire has, like East Ayrshire, replaced a number of librarians with library assistants.

In Dumfries and Galloway when the librarian retired from Dumfries Academy responsibility for the library was given to the Head of English. Lockerbie Academy also currently without a librarian and Annan Academy have reduced the hours to 20 per week

Fife Council - school librarians who have retired have been replaced with library assistants

In Shetland, where the school library service has always been integrated with the public library service, there have been cuts to school library book budgets of 20-30% over the last four years. While staff numbers have remained the same the working hours of staff have been cut from 8 FTE to 5.93 FTE.

Local Government budget cuts coupled with the council tax freeze mean that services are being cut. It is also clear that with-in the education budget the ring-fencing of teachers posts means that it is the jobs of other staff working in schools that are disproportionately at risk. Education is delivered by a whole team not just a teacher. Not only does cutting posts like librarians, educational psychologists and classroom assistant deny pupils specialist help it also adds more work on to teachers preventing them from doing the job they do best.

Librarians have professional skills that support a range of learning. This is not just about an interest in literature it's about research skills and understanding and organising information. The example given of replacing a librarian with the Head of English demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of the role of librarian. The petitioners have provided extensive and compelling information on the value of librarians in schools including their important role supporting literacy which we will not repeat here. Instead we will focus on both the role of professional librarians in supporting research and information analysis and in reducing inequality of educational attainment.

The role of librarians has been transformed by the internet. Search engines like Google mean that most school pupils have no shortage of sources of information. A much more important skill now is understanding and evaluating the sources and the information contained in them. School librarians are therefore needed more than ever to teach pupils how to do this.

*“the amount of information available to us at the click of a mouse... can be both liberating and asphyxiating”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Truths lies and the internet a report into young people's digital fluency Bartlett J and Miller C Demos 2011page 3

While there are more accessible sources of information available than ever before, the internet is also a source of propaganda, half truths, lies disinformation and genuine mistakes.

“making sense of all of this- knowing how to discriminate the good, the reliable, trustworthy or useful information from the bad- is therefore of tremendous importance”<sup>2</sup>

Supporting young people to understand and undertake information gathering and research is a considerable and growing part of a librarian role. Young people spend a great deal of time on the internet. It is a vital tool for research and revision. The Demos report quoted above found that young people are not “internet savvy”. They are unable to find the information they start to search for, they often trust the first thing they find. They are not fact checking or looking for alternative sources. They struggle to recognise bias or propaganda. At its most dangerous this type of behaviour makes young people vulnerable to extremists and predators. It impacts on their general understanding of the world, their education and ability to achieve.

The Demos research key finding<sup>3</sup>

- Around one in four 12-15 year olds make no checks at all when visiting a new website
- Decisions about quality are based on site design; about one in three believe that if a search engine lists information it must be true
- Only one third of 9-19year olds have been taught how to judge reliability of online information

School librarians are best placed to lead on supporting young people and teachers to better use the internet to find information. It is vital that we invest more not less in this service.

The Scottish Government has set targets to reduce inequality particularly round educational outcomes for young people. Sadly it is young people from the most deprived backgrounds that need school libraries and librarians the most. They are least likely to have access to computers, printers and quiet warm places to do homework, research and general studying. If school libraries have limited opening hours and do not have qualified staff then young people will have less access to information when it's closed and less support to find the information even when it's open. Opening libraries but leaving them unsupervised is also no guarantee that they will be quiet places where work can be done. Children from less well-off backgrounds are also less likely to be able to get support in information gathering and filtering at home. Their parents are also less likely to be able to afford private tutors. People from less well-off backgrounds will be more disadvantaged by the cuts than their better-off peers even in the same school.

UNISON was disappointed that the recent National Libraries Strategy did not cover school libraries and would support the development of a school libraries

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<sup>2</sup> Truths lies and the internet a report into young people's digital fluency Bartlett J and Miller C Demos 2011 page 3

<sup>3</sup> Truths lies and the internet a report into young people's digital fluency Bartlett J and Miller C Demos 2011 page 5

strategy. For it to be effective, like the libraries strategy, it needs to be supported with adequate funding for local government to deliver the service. Otherwise it's just warm words.

**Conclusion**

UNISON Scotland represents a UNISON members working in schools and libraries across Scotland. Members are increasingly concerned about the impact of cuts to local government budgets on library services both school and public. UNISON is therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee regarding Petition PE1581: Public Libraries.

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