Barriers to library use

Qualitative research report

October 2024

Department for Culture Media & Sport

Ipsos

Contents

1 Executive summary

1.1 Why we carried out the research

Use of public library services in England has declined over recent years[1]. This research was carried out on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to understand barriers and factors that could support engagement in using public library services in England. An independent review of English public libraries led by Baroness Sanderson and response from The Minister for Arts and Heritage, Lord Parkinson[2] (both published in January 2024[3]) set out recommendations for what DCMS may include in a new Government Strategy for public libraries. These also set out the need for research to help inform the development of the new Government strategy for public libraries.

1.2 How we carried out the research

The research took an exploratory qualitative approach including 22 focus groups, 20 depth interviews and an online journal task during which 12 participants took part in depth interviews and completed activities via a mobile app (Ipsos AppLife) to familiarise themselves with a local library. Tasks included looking for online information about a local library and visiting a local library.

Participants included people from a mix of demographic backgrounds across regions and urban and rural locations in England. None had used a public library service (physical or online) in the last 12 months.

Research design and analysis was underpinned by the behavioural framework COM-B[4] which provides a structure for understanding how factors within the following three components influence an individual's behaviour: capability (having the knowledge and skills to carry out a behaviour), opportunity (having the time and resources to carry out the behaviour and identifying as a person who does this behaviour), and motivation (feeling the need or desire to carry out a behaviour more than other competing behaviours). This framework was applied to explore the different factors influencing library engagement.

1.3 Existing barriers and enablers to library engagement

The research uncovered a range of capability, opportunity, and motivation components to behaviour change and engagement with library services (physical or online). These are synthesised in the report as barriers and enablers to library engagement.

1.3.1 Barriers

Capability barriers included limited awareness of the range of services and activities offered by libraries. Participant awareness focused on 'core library services' such as borrowing physical books, activities for children and access to digital services such as computers, printers and Wi-Fi. This awareness created a frame of reference for participants shaping what they understood libraries to offer and who libraries were for. Lack of time to engage with library services was also identified as a concern.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/annual-report-to-parliament-on-public-libraries-activities-from-april-2022-to-march-2023/report-under-the-public-libraries-and-museums-act-1964-for-202223
[2] Previously the Minister for Arts and Heritage, Lord Parkinson's role changed to Minister for Arts, Heritage and Libraries on 27 March 2024.
[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-independent-review-of-english-public-libraries-report-and-government-reponse
Michie S, van Stralen MM, West R. The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. Implement Sci. 2011 Apr 23;6:42. doi: 10.1186/1748-5908-6-42. PMID: 21513547; PMCID: PMC3096582.

Opportunity barriers included physical or practical barriers such as concern that opening hours clashed with work or childcare commitments. Queries were voiced around lack of, and cost of parking and the accessibility of the library space was raised amongst participants with a disability or health condition. Additionally, participants voiced expectations that the library would be too noisy (e.g., for study) or too quiet (e.g., for social activities) and reflected that the types of services and activities offered were likely to be particularly beneficial for "other people" but not something that they or their peers would use.

Motivation barriers focused on lack of personal appeal of library services and activities with participants often noting that services and activities offered by libraries could be conveniently accessed elsewhere. There were also perceptions of the library as "old" and "dated" which could lead to participants feeling uncertain about the library as a space that they would personally use.

1.3.2 Enablers

Capability enablers focused on awareness of physical library locations with participants being typically aware of the location of their library should they decide to visit in the future.

Opportunity enablers included the free or low-cost nature of services and activities. Whilst considered a benefit of using library services this was often felt to be most beneficial for "others" or tempered with concerns about the convenience of using the library services. Previous positive experiences of staff interactions could also shape the appeal of visiting the library as an opportunity to speak to friendly staff members with extensive literary knowledge.

Motivational enablers included a strong positive association with libraries as an important community resource with some interest in the library as a 'hub' for community activities and events. It was also considered an important educational resource for children.

1.4   Reaction to the library offer

To explore existing awareness, and understand the appeal of different library offerings, during the research, participants were either given information[5] about the range of services available across public libraries in England, or if completing the online journal, set tasks to familiarise themselves with their own local public library.

Participants were surprised about the diversity of the library offer. They felt it demonstrated that libraries were becoming more modern, offering a wider range of services to engage different people within society, and reflecting changes in technology. They also felt that the library was becoming more of a community space providing a range of resources under one roof and a social space for convening people. However, there were concerns around competitive sources (e.g., online retailers) for services such as audio or printed books and some queries around whether the diverse offer was stretching libraries too far.

The appeal of the library offer was shaped by personal relevance of specific services and activities, as well as familiarity with accessing similar services and activities elsewhere. Views on library convenience e.g., accessibility and opening hours were also important.

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[5] This information was developed using information on the DCMS Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021 strategy (Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)) and the Universal Libraries Offer (Universal Library Offers | Libraries Connected).

1.4.1 Personal appeal of the library offer

Personal appeal of the library was influenced by the extent to which library services/activities chimed with an area of personal interest, a personal learning/development goal or personal circumstances. This could include appeal of a particular topic covered by services/activities, new ways to access resources (e.g., e-books or technology loans) and desire for social or cultural engagement (e.g., local events and opportunities to meet like-minded people).

Amongst participants with children, the strongest appeal came from those who felt that during the research they had become aware of or were reminded (having not used the library for some time) that the library may offer a service/activity that their child would likely be interested in. However, there was a perception that library services had few activities likely to appeal to tweens or teens. It was also noted that children were able to access books in other ways e.g., via school libraries, online, or as gifts.

Whilst services/activities often lacked personal relevance, participants reflected that it was useful to know about them as they may be something of use in the future or something of potential interest for family and friends. Regardless of whether participants felt that there was something personally relevant at libraries, they were keen to note that they saw the value of libraries and these social spaces for the local community. This was considered to be particularly beneficial for people financially struggling, who may lack digital access or skills, who may feel lonely, with specific health conditions, and people who would likely benefit from the home delivery service.

1.4.2 Familiarity with accessing similar services and activities elsewhere

Participants reflected that many of the services provided by libraries could be conveniently accessed elsewhere. However, four points of differentiation for accessing services/activities at libraries emerged.

- Accessing services in a face-to-face setting, particularly where participants valued the idea of asking questions in a learning environment, or as a way for people without internet connectivity to access services and activities.

- The library as an experience where an enjoyable library atmosphere and staff interactions played a key role in creating a welcoming and informative space.

- Accessing services that might otherwise be difficult to access locally. Views on this varied but included speaking to someone for health advice (e.g., via the GP), speaking to someone at Citizens Advice and specific health-related groups (e.g., Dementia group).

- Free/low-cost services/activities that are difficult to find elsewhere for example: free or low-cost activities for children and access to expensive technology such as 3D printers.

1.4.3 Library convenience and accessibility

The anticipated convenience of accessing services and activities at a library heavily influenced how appealing they were to participants who also considered:

- Whether the service or activity was something they could already conveniently access elsewhere even if this involved a small cost.

- How easy it would be to access the library, including concerns around opening hours, accessibility of library spaces and parking availability and costs.

- Which types of services and activities would be available at different libraries and how activities would work in practice e.g., who would deliver these.

1.5 Encouraging library use

Lack of awareness of the library offer was considered a key barrier to use and participants suggested increasing awareness both online (social media and library specific webpages) and offline (physical leaflets, posters and flyers in the post and in local places e.g., supermarkets). It was also noted that word of mouth recommendation from 'respected' people in the community or amongst those with positive experiences to share would be useful. Information on library noticeboards and from library staff were also considered important in highlighting what was being offered.

Participants spoke of the need to create a new narrative around a vibrant and dynamic library and its services, making clear how relevant it is to modern day life. They suggested that building awareness of the range of services/activities including the online offer could help challenge dated perceptions of the library. There also was a suggestion for targeting specific groups in society, with relevant benefits (e.g., study spaces for students, careers advice to those leaving education or children's activities for young families).

Reasons voiced by participants for why they did not use library services suggest that promotion needs to highlight the competitive unique selling points for libraries, making clear the benefit of accessing services/activities from libraries (where these could be accessed elsewhere) and consideration of how best to mitigate concerns regarding practical barriers.

1.6 Conclusions

The research shows that a combination of different COM-B components and factors will be important in encouraging library engagement. As with any complex behaviour, the role that these play for each individual will be shaped by their personal perceptions, past experiences, awareness and knowledge of libraries, as well as motivations (circumstances and interests).

Some key considerations for each of these areas that could help develop library engagement include:

- Increasing capability by challenging low awareness and making clear what libraries offer. Raising awareness and giving people a reason to visit will be central to encouraging library use.

- Creating opportunities to support people in feeling confident in using libraries, particularly online. Addressing barriers such as opening hours, parking and accessibility will be an important step in building library engagement.

- Enhancing motivation of library use (online and offline) by building the relevant appeal of libraries and what they have to offer. Participants often struggled to identify the relevance for using library services/activities in the modern digital age. However, the research suggests some ways in which existing or potential appeal could be leveraged. For example, through promoting the library as a social space that enables and encourages community connectedness; learning a new skill; challenging the idea that library use is not convenient and recognising competitors by making clear the unique selling points of libraries. It will also be important to reflect that for some groups, there will likely be limited personal appeal even if awareness is raised.

Further quantitative research to assess the relative strength of barriers and enablers by demographic group will help identify key focus areas for increasing library engagement.

2 Introduction and objectives

2.1 Background

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) supports culture, arts, media, sport, tourism and civil society across every part of England — recognising the UK's world-leading position in these areas and the importance of these sectors' contributions to the British economy, way of life and reputation around the world. As part of this mission, DCMS has a statutory responsibility to superintend and to promote the improvement of local government's provision of public library services in England. The DCMS Libraries team is responsible for ensuring that library authorities deliver a "comprehensive and efficient" library service for their communities. It works closely with sector stakeholders to achieve this, as well as to advocate for public libraries across Whitehall.

In line with DCMS's Culture and Heritage Capital (CHC) framework, the 'stock' of libraries in England provides a vital 'flow' of cultural services which improve the welfare of the people who use libraries in the myriad ways available. Libraries also play a part in wider government policies such as the Levelling Up programme[6], initiatives such as Warm Banks, and activities such as supporting literacy, improving wellbeing[7] and tackling loneliness.

Despite the value of libraries for users, the library sector has faced several long-term challenges and the context for library engagement and delivery has changed exponentially. Key challenges include reduced funding, the impact of COVID-19 on engagement, how to integrate the digital offer alongside physical services and the future role for libraries as digital content becomes more embedded in peoples' lives. Although there has been some recovery in library use post-pandemic, the longer-term trend is one of decline. The most recent DCMS Participation Survey[8] found that between April 2022 and March 2023, 24% of adults in England had visited a public library in the past 12 months. The most common reasons reported for not using the physical library were 'I'm not interested' (32%), 'No reason in particular' (31%) and 'I don't have time' (18%).

2.2 Research objectives

An independent review of English public libraries led by Baroness Sanderson and response from The Minister for Arts and Heritage, Lord Parkinson[9] (both published in January 2024[10]) set out recommendations for what DCMS may include in a new Government Strategy for public libraries. These also set out the need for research to help inform the development the new Government strategy for public libraries.

This research set out to understand lack of engagement amongst those who do not currently use a public library. Specific objectives included:

- Explore current awareness and perceptions of library services.

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[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/annual-report-to-parliament-on-public-libraries-activities-from-april-2022-to-march-2023/report-under-the-public-libraries-and-museums-act-1964-for-202223
[7] https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/The%20health%20and%20wellbeing%20benefits%20of%20public%20libraries.pdf
[8] Main report for the Participation Survey (April 2022 to March 2023) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[9] Previously the Minister for Arts and Heritage, Lord Parkinson's role changed to Minister for Arts, Heritage and Libraries on 27 March 2024.
[10] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-independent-review-of-english-public-libraries-report-and-government-reponse

- Identify barriers to engaging with libraries.

- Identify enablers – or potential motivating factors – to increase 'visits' to libraries in the future.

- Explore what could encourage library engagement, and what specific types of support or interventions might be required.

3 Method and sample

3.1   Methodology

A mixed method qualitative research design was developed to explore participants' views towards public libraries and gather reactions to information about the library offer. Focus groups and depth interviews were carried out to generate a detailed understanding of library engagement. The research also included a cohort of participants who undertook a library journal which involved completing tasks such as visiting a local library. The aim of this was to understand experiences of increased familiarity of library services to support understanding on what might encourage engagement.

Throughout the research design and analysis, a behavioural framework was applied to capture a rounded understanding of library engagement. This is discussed further in section 3.3.

3.1.1 Focus groups and depth interviews

Fieldwork took place between 15 January and 14 February 2024. The research included 156 participants across 22 focus groups, 20 depth interviews and 12 journal participants. All participants were selected based on the criteria that they had not used a public library (physical or online) within the last 12 months.

Focus groups were ninety minutes long and took place online via Zoom. Each group included up to six participants. Depth interviews were 60 minutes long and were carried out online or via telephone. This provided an accessible way for those who were unable or uncomfortable in taking part in a group discussion (e.g., digitally excluded) to participate.

3.1.2 Sampling and participant engagement

The sampling strategy for focus groups and depth interviews aimed to capture diversity of experiences and views whilst supporting positive group dynamics and to reflect DCMS participation survey data[11]. The core sampling criteria focused on including a range of demographics across the research. DCMS participant survey data showed that both age and education status have an influence on library engagement. As such, 16 of the 22 focus groups were stratified on these two key demographics. Four of these groups focused on participants with a child in their household to explore any related barriers.

Groups were also stratified by region across England to ensure participants from a range of locations across the country were included. Quotas were also set to include both those living in more rural and urban areas in each group.

Quotas were also set to include people from ethnic minority backgrounds across the groups. The sample also included a further four groups amongst participants from particular ethnic minority backgrounds where DCMS data identified lower levels of library engagement. This included people from Pakistani backgrounds and people from Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black Caribbean backgrounds. A further two groups were carried out amongst people living in rural areas to explore any specific barriers they may face to library engagement.

Beyond demographic profile, there was a recognition that there may be differences in the degree of openness to library engagement. To address this, the sample included participants with a diverse range

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[11] [Main report for the Participation Survey (April 2022 to March 2023) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk)

of views about whether they felt they would be likely to use public library services in the next 12 months. This was to ensure a mix of views were captured and to foster discussion and debate.

Depth interviews focused on people with accessibility needs based on either disability or limited digital access/confidence.

3.1.3 Focus group and depth interview sample

Group 1 North-East 18-24 years Higher education[12]	**Group 2** North-West 25-44 years Higher education with children	**Group 3** Midlands 18-24 years Lower education[13] with children	**Group 4** South-East 18-24 years Lower education	**Group 5** South-West 18-24 years Higher education
Group 6 North-East 25-44 years Lower education	**Group 7** North-West 45-59 years Lower education	**Group 8** Midlands 25-44 years Higher education	**Group 9** South-East 25-44 years Lower education with children	**Group 10** South-West 45-59 years Lower education with children
Group 11 North-East 45-59 years Higher education with children	**Group 12** North-West 60+ years Lower education	**Group 13** Midlands 45-59 years Higher education	**Group 14** South-East 60+ years Higher education	**Group 15** South-West 60+ years Higher education
Group 16 North-East 60+ years Lower education	**Group 17** Pakistani 18-44 years	**Group 18** Pakistani 45+ years	**Group 19** Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black Caribbean 18-44 years	**Group 20** Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black Caribbean 45+ years
Group 21 Living in a rural area 18-44 years	**Group 22** Living in a rural area 45+ years			

The depth interview sample included:

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[12] Higher education was defined as with a Bachelor Degree or equivalent or Masters/ PhD equivalent qualification.

[13] Lower education was defined as those with a GCSE/O-level/CSE, vocational, A-Level of equivalent qualification or no formal qualifications.

- Depths 1-8: people with a disability, all aged 18+ years old and including a mix of male and female participants.

- Depths 9-20: people with limited digital access and/ or confidence, all aged 18+ years and including a mix of male and female participants.

3.1.4 Topic guide and stimulus

The research used a deliberative technique which involved capturing spontaneous views towards libraries, before sharing information to generate a more informed discussion of the library offer. This approach facilitated understanding of how existing knowledge and perceptions of libraries shaped barriers to engagement, and to explore the role that information about the library offer could play in addressing barriers or encouraging engagement. The topic guide was structured into three core stages including:

1. Exploring spontaneous views towards libraries. This included discussion of spontaneous views on likelihood to use library services, existing views towards/ knowledge of libraries, and perceptions of the library 'brand' and who library users are.

2. Informed discussion of libraries. This involved sharing stimulus materials (e.g., PowerPoint slides summarising the different types of services and activities provided by public libraries) to provide information about the library offer and discussing views on these.

3. Reflections on engagement. This involved discussion to focus on overall reflections on information shared including: which is most interesting and why, how participants felt about using library services in the future, and what might influence library engagement.

Stimulus materials providing an overview of the library offer were developed to demonstrate and illustrate the diversity of the library offer. It was not intended to be exhaustive, and it was made clear when presenting this information that the offer was not universal to all public libraries. The information was structured into four categories based on information provided in the DCMS Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021 Strategy[14] and the Libraries Connected Universal Libraries Offer[15]:

1. Health and Wellbeing.
2. Reading and Digital Services.
3. Culture, Creativity and Community.
4. Personal skills and Career development.

3.1.5 Library experience journal

The library experience journal captured 12 participants' engagement with and reaction to library services. The aim of the journal was to understand experiences of familiarisation with the library offer and what this experience could reveal about barriers and enablers to library engagement. The journal involved:

- An initial depth interview during which participants were introduced to the research, were asked to introduce themselves to the researcher, were able to share existing views about libraries and were introduced to the journal task.

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[14] Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[15] Universal Library Offers | Libraries Connected

- Completion of the journal task over one week. During the week, participants were asked to complete up to five tasks to familiarise themselves with a local library. These tasks were:

  - Task 1: look for information about your local library.

  - Task 2: visit a library in your local area.

  - Task 3: visit the website for your local library.

  - Task 4: find out what friends and family think about their local library.

  - Task 5: encouraging library use.

- Participants documented their experiences using Ipsos proprietary app, AppLife, via their mobile phone. This allowed participants to share their experiences when and in ways (including video, photo, audio and text) that best suited them.

- Participants then took part in a follow-up interview where there was opportunity to discuss their experiences in more detail.

Journal participants included a mix of male and female people from a range of ages as summarised in the table below.

Gender	Age	Ethnicity
6 females 6 males	3 aged 18-24 years 3 aged 24-44 years 3 aged 45-59 years 3 aged 60+ years	8 participants from White British background 1 participant from White and Black African background 1 participant from Pakistani background 1 participant from Indian background 1 participant from Other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background

3.2   How to read this report

When considering these findings, it is important to bear in mind what a qualitative approach provides. Qualitative research is illustrative, detailed, and exploratory. It explores the range of perceptions and opinions of participants in detail, and it provides an insight into the key reasons underlying participants' views.

Qualitative research cannot – and does not set out to be – representative of the wider population. We sampled participants purposively, to understand barriers to library engagement across a range of participant characteristics. When analysing the data, we were not seeking to understand prevalence, but rather the values and experiences which underpin people's perceptions and opinions. The findings cannot be considered quantifiable as they are not drawn from a statistically representative sample. As such, the findings should not be treated as generalisable to the wider population.

3.2.1 Reporting conventions

This research sought to explore perceptions and experiences of public libraries. Throughout the report, we have referred to "libraries", by which we are referring to public libraries.

Throughout the report, we have referred to "participants" and provided evidence through verbatim quotes where these illustrate findings. To protect participant anonymity, quotations have been attributed to key characteristics. Quote attributions also identify which strand of the research the participant participated in, as identified as "depth participant", "journal participant", or "focus group participant". The names used within the personas are pseudonyms; they are not the names of any participant within the research.

As outlined above, the research sampled participants who are non-users of libraries, having not visited a library physically or online in the last 12 months. Journal participants were tasked with visiting their local library and describing these recent experiences as part of the research. Analysis of the journal participants includes a mix of written, pictorial, video and verbal data, as collected throughout the journal tasks and interviews. Where written content from journal participants has been included as quotes, typos or grammatical errors have been corrected.

The conclusion includes four personas to bring to life some of the experiences described by participants across the research. These personas are composite and bring together a range of responses from participants to illustrate some typical viewpoints. Each persona focuses on a specific set of barriers and enablers experienced by participants and discusses what could support library engagement.

Throughout this report we refer to "barriers" and "enablers". In these instances, the barriers and enablers refer to conditions which drive behaviour, in relation to a behavioural framework as discussed in Section 3.3 below.

3.3   Applying COM-B

This research examines the factors that impact people's likelihood of going to the library. When examining human behaviour, it is important to account for different dimensions and the role each of these play in influencing people's attitudes and actions. To help us do this, we have used the COM-B model of behaviour change.

The COM-B behavioural framework was developed by Michie et al (2011)[16] and provides a structure for understanding an individual's behaviour and the factors that influence this. Understanding the different influences that play a role in shaping a behaviour can help identify the types of interventions that could best support behaviour change.

There are three components within the COM-B framework. The initials 'COM' stand for these three components (capability, opportunity, and motivation) which all play a role in influencing behaviour (represented by the initial 'B'). These components are described below:

1. **'Capability'** in the COM-B mode refers to a person's physical or psychological ability to engage in a specific behaviour. For example, an individual's capability to perform a behaviour could involve knowledge, skills, or physical attributes that are necessary to perform a specific behaviour, such as going to the library.

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[16] Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M. & West, R. The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Sci* **6**, 42 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42

2. **'Opportunity'** refers to the external factors that make certain behaviours possible or prompt them. This could be the environment, the social or cultural context, or the availability of necessary resources. For instance, a person might have the motivation and capability to perform a behaviour, but if they don't have access to a safe space to do so, the opportunity is lacking. In this model, opportunity is all about the conditions outside the individual that either enable or hinder the behaviour.

3. **'Motivation'** factors are aspects which drive behaviours. This dimension of the COM-B model refers to how much a person wants to carry out a particular action and can be a deliberate choice or influenced by subconscious factors. Individual elements such as personal beliefs, feelings, habits, or expected rewards or punishments can all impact an individual's motivation to carry out a behaviour.

The COM-B model represents the observation that at any given moment, a particular behaviour will occur only when the person concerned has sufficient capability and opportunity to engage in the behaviour and is more motivated to enact that behaviour than competing behaviours.

Figure 1 illustrates the model including definitions of the entities involved and specification of the relationships between them.

Figure 3.1: The COM-B model of behaviour[17]
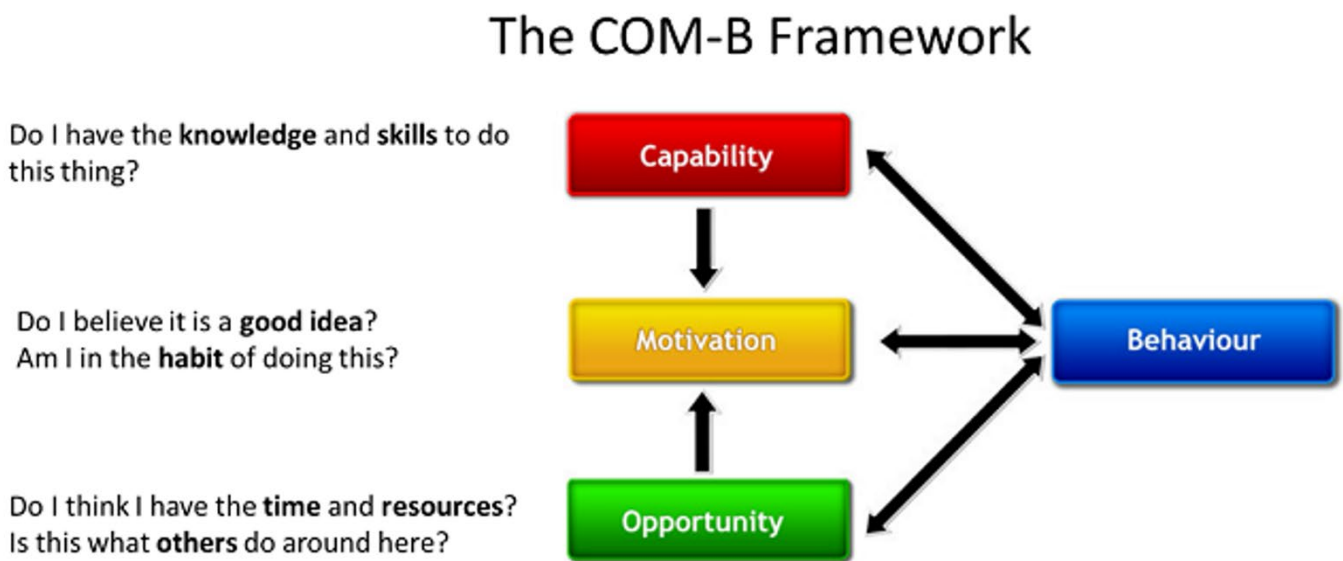
For this research, the COM-B framework informed development of the topic guides, with questions in the topic guides designed to explore each of the three components listed above. The framework was also used during analysis to help structure and understand the different influences for library engagement.

Chapter 7 of the report includes a COM-B summary of barriers and enablers are included to identify key influences on library engagement. This final chapter discusses the role that each of the COM-B components plays in shaping behaviour and begins the discussion on interventions that could support engagement.

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[17] Ibid.

4 Overarching library perceptions

This chapter describes spontaneous perceptions of libraries reported by participants. These were influenced by previous experiences, knowledge of library locations and types, and views that the library offered a valuable service for others in the community.

4.1 Previous experiences

Participants strongly associated libraries with their previous personal experiences.

All participants across the research had not used a public library service (online or physical) in the last 12 months. Recency of experience beyond the last 12 months was mixed. In some instances, participants recalled using public libraries relatively recently, for example prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but had not used it in recent times, often reflecting on new habits formed during the pandemic. Those with older or grown-up children remembered using library services with their child when their child was younger.

> "I used libraries a lot when the kids were younger." (Depth participant, aged 75)

Participants often recalled using libraries when they themselves were children, and this played a key role in shaping their perceptions of libraries.

> "I did spend a huge amount of my childhood in the local library, it's got to be said. I used to do quite a lot of clubs and things like that, back when I was growing up, and it was very much loved, and very much, I wouldn't say missed because obviously life goes on, but it was a really big part of the community." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, North-East)

These experiences generated a range of views regarding the types of services available at libraries and the library atmosphere. When asked to reflect on top-of-mind associations with libraries, both positive and negative associations were raised. The library atmosphere was described as "peaceful", "relaxed" and "welcoming" by some, but "boring" and "dull" by others. When describing library buildings themselves, participants used words like "dated", "dusty" and "old" as well as "beautiful", "modern" and "historic". These varied perceptions shaped barriers and enablers to library engagement, as further discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

4.2 Knowledge of library location and types

Participants typically knew where their local library was and identified that there were different types of libraries.

Overall, participants knew where their local library was, and felt that passers-by would be able to identify the local library. However, this was not universal. This knowledge was usually based on previous visits made some time ago, or experiences of passing by the library because it was on a main thoroughfare or attached to other Council services used.

Participants were aware that there were small local libraries and larger, more central libraries. They expected that the services/activities offered at these were likely to be different and this could shape the appeal of visiting the library. For example, participants anticipated that larger central libraries would have more services/activities but noted that local libraries were more conveniently located. There were also comments that larger libraries were more likely to be in "beautiful" buildings (historic or modern) and offer a wider range of amenities.

> "[Location] Central Library has a cafe and it's nice, but the little ones don't seem to have them, but I think that might entice more people in." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, North-West)

Spontaneous perceptions of libraries largely focused on physical library spaces, with few participants describing experiences related to online library services. Awareness of library locations and views towards what might be available at different types of libraries shaped barriers and enablers to library engagement.

4.3 Role of libraries in the community

Participants felt that libraries offered an important service for people in the local community.

Participants felt that libraries were important for communities and society. In addition to core services such as borrowing books, there was some awareness that they may be offering wider services and activities for the community.

> "I think they're a really useful resource in the community and I know, when I've gone past [location] Library, sometimes it is really, really busy…It's not just about going in and getting books. You know, there's the IT and there are different things going on. And there's information, you know, you can pick up information. You can get help with different things. So, it's more of a community hub, I feel, rather than just, you know, borrowing books. There's a lot more." (Focus group participant, aged 45+, England)

These wider services were considered particularly important for supporting different groups of people. This included things like supporting disadvantaged people within the community, providing a safe and warm place, recording and sustaining local history, and bringing the community together more generally.

> "I find libraries in my area [are] particularly used by marginalised communities because they're a good hub for printing and things that these people in lower-income families don't have access to in their homes. They're also a hub to run school holiday clubs and things like that, there's quite a lot of our libraries within community hubs" (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, England)

Whilst acknowledging that they themselves did not use libraries, participants were very positive towards this community provision and the role of libraries in providing a "safety blanket" (e.g., warm spaces, access to technology) where there was need.

Positive views towards the role of libraries within the community underpinned participant views and attitudes towards libraries throughout the research.

5 Existing barriers to library use

Participants identified a range of barriers to engaging with libraries. These are listed below and discussed in this chapter.

- Limited awareness of services/activities

- Time constraints

- Accessibility

- Social identity

- Library environment

- Personal relevance

- Availability of services/activities elsewhere

- Library atmosphere and aesthetic

5.1 Limited awareness of services/activities

A significant initial barrier to library engagement was a general lack of awareness of the full range of services/activities provided by public libraries, including the online offer.

When considering what libraries offered, participants were able to recall core services, such as borrowing physical books and accessing digital services such as computers, printers and Wi-Fi. Participants also spontaneously recalled services for children, referencing these previous experiences when describing library services/activities.

> "I remember when I was younger, we'd go to the library for children's story time, so I know they do things for kids, as well as the books. I'm sure they do other things but I'm not entirely sure what." (Focus group participant, aged 18-24, Midlands)

Whilst there were participants who believed that the library's only offering was core reading and digital services, others were conscious that the library might provide other services but were uncertain of what those might be. There was low awareness of the online library offer e.g., access to e-books and audiobooks. Overall limited knowledge of the full range of services influenced perceptions of whether the library offered something personally appealing (discussed further in section 5.6).

Awareness of the library location was also discussed. Participants reflected that whilst they knew where their local library was, this might be less clear to those unfamiliar with the area or who had not previously visited. There were very infrequent mentions of participants personally being uncertain or unaware of where their local library was.

Reasons for lack of awareness or perceived low visibility included lack of signage and poor visibility due to being "hidden down side alleys", or located within large council buildings which housed other services.

> "The one [library] locally, [is] not [visible]. It's hidden away, I don't think there's even a sign there, I hadn't noticed it [a sign] if there is." (Depth participant, aged 50)

Awareness levels played a key role in shaping wider attitudes towards library engagement, with participants typically reflecting on the appeal of core library services, including borrowing physical books, access to technology (e.g., computers, printing and Wi-Fi) and activities for children.

5.2   Time constraints

Lack of time was considered a barrier to engaging with library services/activities.

Lack of time was commonly mentioned amongst participants as a reason for not engaging with library services, with participants citing working schedules and parental/child-care responsibilities, including taking and collecting children from school, and extra-curricular activities such as after-school clubs and sports sessions.

> "I've got children, a wife, [and] we both work pretty much full time … So time together [is] quite limited. So actually, taking the time to go to the library is not really something we would do at a weekend normally." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, Midlands)

This was a particularly strong barrier for those who reflected that they were interested in library services (e.g., borrowing books) based on previous positive experiences, but simply felt they lacked the time to use these. These participants were typically less aware of online library services and therefore considered their ability to visit a physical library. Opening hours were seen as particularly restrictive.

> "The main challenge, as I said, is the fact that it's not accessible because I'm at work, or if I am there during the day, I'm probably popping to the shops in my lunch hour, so I haven't got time to go in." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, North-East)

5.3   Accessibility

Library services were not always considered convenient or easy to access.

A range of accessibility factors were highlighted by participants. These focused on accessibility of the physical library (reflecting low awareness of the online offer).

Opening hours: opening hours were often considered inaccessible, particularly when they clashed with working hours. Participants in more rural locations explained that local libraries were open only a few days per week which meant accessing the local library during opening hours was more challenging. Participants recalled this being a frustrating aspect of the library when they had previously used it.

> "[The] hours are ridiculous, they might be open 10-3 and then the next day, 9-1. I do find that really frustrating when I need to get something done." (Depth participant, aged 55)

Location: libraries were not always viewed as conveniently located, which influenced participants' desire to visit the library. This barrier was particularly prominent amongst participants living in rural locations, citing lack of public transport links enabling travel to the library.

Physical accessibility and comfort for people with a disability: a range of experiences were raised by participants with a disability or health condition that led to concerns regarding library accessibility and comfort. Shaped by individual needs, these included:

- Concern that travelling to the library would be too strenuous, particularly where the journey would need to be made by public transport.

- Availability of a paid-for carer.

- Lack of space within libraries to manoeuvre a wheelchair and library books on inaccessible shelves. Having staff available to support with accessing library resources was key, with this participant noting that concerns around lack of staff could deter them from visiting the library.

"Although it's accessible, it's quite hard to get around in a wheelchair. Things are hard to reach and there's not always someone available to get books down." (Depth participant, aged 49)

- Lack of step-free access.

- Concerns around noise, lighting, temperature and seating comfort.

- Concerns around shared spaces and concerns about feeling overstimulated were also raised by participants who identified as neurodivergent or had social anxiety.

"It's difficult because of social anxiety, shared spaces are a bit overwhelming." (Depth participant, aged 51)

Car parking: availability of nearby parking at both local and central libraries, as well as costs associated with parking, emerged as barriers to visiting a library.

"I don't think there's much parking around there if someone wanted to travel by car." (Focus group participant, aged 18-24, South-East)

Where participants felt that the cost to park at their local library would be high, a library visit felt expensive, especially where they anticipated that the key reason to visit would be to borrow a book.

"I don't want to pay £8 for parking to go look at some books." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-East)

They also reflected that this cost could offset any potential perceived benefits of the free services offered. For example, some observed that they could purchase a book second-hand for the same price as the parking charges and this would be more cost-effective for them, since they'd be able to retain the physical book copy.

5.4 Social identity

Where participants did not associate using library services as something that their social group did, they did not consider the library as part of their social identity.

Whilst participants recognised the benefits of libraries for different groups in society, they did not always feel that it offered benefits for their own social group and was therefore relevant to themselves and their peers. When asked to describe who a "typical library user" was, participants often mentioned other groups of people including students, retired or older people, people who don't have access to computers or technology, such as those with lower income and financial circumstances, parents of young children, children themselves, and people looking for work or support to find employment. Participants felt that these groups of people would be more likely to use libraries due to their personal circumstances. For example, students were perceived to be more able to use libraries as a study space, parents were mentioned as being more likely to use the library from taking their children to children-based activities and groups, retired people were thought to find the social interaction appealing, and lower-incomes groups and those looking for work may particularly appreciate the low cost/free services offered as well as a warm space to spend time during the day.

"I find libraries in my area [are] particularly used by marginalised communities because they're a good hub for printing and things that these people in lower-income families don't have access to in their homes. They're also a hub to run school holiday clubs and things like that, there's quite a lot of our libraries within community hubs. I think if you have slightly more of a disposable income you can get books quite cheap on Amazon and then they can be there the following day and then you don't have to worry of getting it back [to the library]." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-East)

Not associating library use as an activity carried out by their own social group was particularly prominent amongst young adults (18-24 years old), who felt that using the library was not something that their age group did, and therefore it was not thought of as a space that they envisaged spending time in.

"I just don't feel like going to the library is something that our generation does." (Focus group participant, aged 18-24, North-East)

This sentiment that libraries were less relevant to young people was also mentioned by some parents, who perceived the likelihood of young adults and teenagers going to the library to be much lower than when they themselves were of a similar age. These parents also suggested that library use - focusing on reading related activities - was unlikely to be endorsed or supported by their child's peers.

"I think children wouldn't brag about things like reading challenges with their friends, like how we used to." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, South-West)

5.5   Library environment

Where concerns regarding the library environment emerged as a barrier to visiting libraries, this was in relation to noise levels and cleanliness.

Perception of noise levels in libraries varied amongst participants, contributing to the perceived suitability of the library environment for different user groups. Participants who viewed libraries as quiet, serene spaces felt that libraries would be unsuitable for children or individuals who might find a social environment more appealing.

"I think that they're too quiet, and this is definitely enforced by librarians. It would be better for me if there was more of a social atmosphere where people could chat a bit more." (Focus group participant, aged 18-24, North-East)

In contrast, participants who perceived libraries as noisy spaces due to the high prevalence of children felt that this lessened the ability of libraries to provide a quiet and comfortable space, such as a study area.

"I think that it's more for children as in my experience there's often a bit too much noise for me to make it a welcoming space." (Depth participant, aged 55)

Cleanliness, specifically in relation to the sanitation of books, was another aspect of the library environment that, while less frequently mentioned, constituted a barrier to using the library. In a few instances, participants voiced apprehensions around the library books being shared public resources with potential to be unclean and unsanitised, making them prefer to access books online instead.

"I'm going to say something really random here, I'm a bit of a germaphobe and I don't like the idea of sharing stuff, and everything's so cheap online anyway I just feel like you can buy a book for 2 or 3 quid nowadays and so I'm just going to say germs comes to mind for me." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-East)

These participants tended to also note that these concerns about book cleanliness had been heightened in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Libraries have 'died down' after Covid. From a cleanliness perspective, you don't know whether a book has been sanitised." (Focus group participant, aged 45+, England)

5.6 Personal relevance

Perceived lack of personal relevance of library services acted as a barrier to engagement.

Discussions around personal relevance focused on the appeal of borrowing books and access to digital technology. A lack of appeal of library services was especially prominent among non-readers and those who felt less confident in their reading abilities. These individuals often viewed library users as 'educated readers' who derived pleasure from reading, aspects which they themselves did not personally identify with. These participants tended to have low awareness of the full offering of the library services, with the main perceived utility of the library being linked to reading for leisure.

"I think libraries are good for the community, but for someone like me, who doesn't do any reading, they don't have much use. I wouldn't enjoy going." (Depth participant, aged 55+)

Moreover, those who had access to digital services and equipment offered by their library at home, such as printers and Wi-Fi, noted that the library's ability to access these services was irrelevant to them.

5.7 Availability of services elsewhere

Participants felt that many of the services offered by the library had become redundant, due to the ability to access these services elsewhere.

When thinking about the ability to borrow books from the library, participants noted they were able to access books and e-books/audiobooks through alternative means, particularly via online platforms like Amazon, Vinted, and eBay, or at physical locations such as charity shops and supermarkets.

"I've not found anything that I do need that I can only get in the library and not online." (Depth participant, aged 29)

The perceived benefits of accessing books and e-books through these routes influenced this viewpoint, with sense of ownership being a key motivator.

"I'll buy the book, instead of loaning it. I like to have my own book and I like the freshness of a new book." (Depth participant, aged 55)

Potential resale value was raised when comparing buying books to borrowing books for free from libraries. Cost was also balanced with convenience and habit. These factors played a significant role in preferences to access books from alternative sources. This was particularly the case for technology-driven solutions such as the automatic link between Kindle and the Amazon store, which provided an easy, hassle-free reading experience.

"I think if you're a bit more computer literate, it's easier just to go on your Kindle." (Focus group participant, aged 60+, North-West)

"I just don't think I have a need for a library anymore. So I read quite a bit but I'm quite able to buy books now, I have an e-reader, so I find it a lot simpler just downloading it via Kindle or Amazon." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, North-East)

Participants indicated that this convenience had been reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they had adapted their habits to utilise online shopping and digital content consumption remotely.

Participants also appreciated the absence of pressure around return dates, late fines, or potential damage or loss of borrowed items when purchasing books. Experiences were recalled of waiting for books/e-books to be ordered in or to become available which negatively influenced their perception of libraries.

When reflecting on services/activities offered by the library there was also mention of workspaces and whether this was an offer unique to the library. Again, participants highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on remote working. It was noted that people were more familiar with working from home, replacing the need to find an alternative workspace. There were also comments that alternative locations such as cafes and coworking spaces were available. These sites offered benefits to participants looking for places to work, through being more modernised spaces that also served food and hot drinks, not something that was always associated with libraries. There were also queries around whether the library environment would be conducive to more collaborative working or instances where work calls had to be made.

> "For me it used to be a great space to go and study and do out of hours work on my laptop as a space out of the house but in [location] there's loads of these spaces that have popped up where you can just pay £10 for a desk for the day." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-West)

5.8   Library atmosphere and aesthetic

Where library interiors and/or exteriors looked "run-down" and participants recalled previous experiences of an uncomfortable atmosphere, the library did not feel like an appealing place to visit.

Experiences of walking past local library buildings and feeling that they looked "antiquated" or in need of modernisation could result in a general sense that the library did not feel particularly inviting or appealing.

> "The one we've got [local library], it has not been modernised since my boys were little. So it doesn't entice me in, maybe if it was modern." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, North-West)

There were also previous experiences of library visits where spaces were considered "dingy" and "unwelcoming" based on a recollection of dark interiors, lack of light, and in some cases poor condition of furniture. Young adults particularly mentioned the interior of the library being a factor in making the library less appealing to spend their time, with perceptions of it as an unwelcoming space.

> "I just think they're quite dingy, to be honest, that's all I imagine, somewhere quite dark and, yes, cold." (Focus group participant, aged 18-24, South-West)

Views that the library atmosphere might lack a "welcoming feel" was also cited by participants who recalled childhood experiences of libraries as "quiet" and "intense" spaces, with enforcement of silence by librarians. These memories were reported as influencing current negative perceptions that being in the library atmosphere would be uncomfortable.

6 Existing enablers to library use

Perceptions and awareness of existing services/activities (which typically focused on core library services including borrowing physical books, access to technology such as computers, printing and Wi-Fi, and activities for children) and previous library experiences shaped existing enablers to use library services. Whilst motivations were not strong, enablers identified are factors cited by participants as likely to support or make easy library engagement. Enablers identified included:

- Knowledge of physical presence and services/activities.

- Services/activities for children.

- The library as a community space.

- Free/low-cost benefits.

- Interactions with staff in the past.

6.1   Knowledge of physical presence and core services/activities

Even though libraries were not visited recently, their locations were generally known, particularly if participants lived in a small town or if libraries were "local" to them.

Whilst library opening hours were not top of mind, participants typically knew where their library was, and how they could get there.

> "It's on a main road." (Focus group participant, aged 45+, England)

> "Ours has got a big sign." (Focus group participant, aged 45+, England)

The buildings were often cited as being on the "high street". For local libraries, knowledge about them was gleaned "in passing" when participants were going to the local shops or visiting town. Sometimes libraries were seen as a local landmark, a point of interest or a historical building of note in their own right.

Libraries in the "city" often had a larger physical presence, particularly in major conurbations and city centres. This might extend to other services, such as a coffee shop. "New" buildings/ refurbishments of a library were also noted by those who had time or interest in other types of local news and might have picked up on a change, as well as "new things happening", in their local area at the library.

Convenient library locations could be appealing.

The location was seen as a benefit for some – with some libraries being co-located with other local council services, arts spaces (such as local theatre) or Citizens Advice.

> "Mine's located, it's next to a primary school and part of it's got a health centre all in the same complex so it's a community hub" (Focus group participant, aged 60+, South-East)

Positive associations with the library atmosphere led participants to reflect that they provided good quiet study or workspaces. However, students often noted that this space was also provided by their university or college library.

Participants had a good understanding of the core physical library offer despite this not feeling relevant or useful in their everyday lives.

Latent awareness was generally positive, not negative, suggesting an open door for more information about what the current offer(s) might be. There were many assumptions around what people thought they knew already, but this was out of date. Whilst awareness of the online offer was limited, there were some discussions about "virtual" libraries (e.g., borrowing e-books). This led to some curiosity amongst participants and a desire to know more.

6.2   Services/activities for children

Participants typically had fond, latent memories of libraries and noted that they were not averse to a visit.

Positive associations with using libraries as a child and with their own children shaped positive feelings towards libraries.

Personal resonance and motivations to go to the library tended to focus on whether there was a perceived need or benefit associated with personal circumstances. Presence of children emerged as a key circumstance that aligned with library use. Those with children recalled visiting the library when their child was younger, remembering fun activities. These participants felt strongly that there was a clear benefit that libraries offered them in that time of their life or life-stage as a new parent.

> "I think, when the children were young, we'd be in there quite a lot because it was just something else different to go to." (Focus group participant, aged 60+, South-East)

There was high awareness of libraries as having educational benefits for children. Participants recalled memories associated with their childhood or as parents taking their children/ younger family members in a vital stage of their cognitive development and benefited from the literacy skills development. Programmes that offered suggestions of books or were organised, such as summer reading challenges, rhyme time and baby bounce were seen as very positive. Participants expecting or hoping to become grandparents in the near future noted that they would anticipate using these services/activities.

> "I think they're very appealing. I mean, if I had grandchildren, well hopefully one day, I would certainly be taking them to the library. Absolutely, 100%." (Depth participant, aged 50)

6.3   The library as a community space

The library as a useful resource for the community with opportunities to socialise influenced positive feelings towards the library.

There was some awareness of libraries running classes and activities, offering rooms for hire and wider community events taking place within libraries. This awareness included witnessing others socialising for example when walking past the library, noticing other people walking in and out or seeing activity through the windows.

> "Libraries in my mind were always 'hush hush', but nowadays, there's a soft murmur of people doing what people do which is interacting and chatting over a cup of tea…'it's a great idea." (Journal participant, aged 65)

There was a feeling that libraries fostered a sense of community connectedness. The social aspect of the library held some appeal (based on personal preference) and, overall, participants suggested that the library could offer a good way to facilitate local people meeting each other, including new people and networking.

Those who felt strongly about the community role of libraries felt that if they did not exist a key resource would be lost. For these participants, the library was seen as something of a marker of "community" in the modern age and should be valued as such.

> "I feel like I should go. I should make an effort to go and look into what they're doing before we lose them." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-East)

Having a central hub hosting various community events was seen as appealing and unique to libraries.

There was some interest in the ability to attend a range of different cultural and religious events from those aware of these. Positive perceptions that these types of events were reflective of the local community, generated interest amongst some to go to the library for this. Examples mentioned included:

▪ **Cultural and literary events.** Although recollection and awareness of events was vague, there were occasional mentions from participants who thought that libraries in their area ran events such as local theatre outreach. This prompted some interest to know more about what might be on offer.

> "I'm pretty sure that my library runs a lot of events for specific occasions. For instance, they often do things for World Book days, I know they had an event about Windrush and Black Lives Matter. I think it's nice, the library is kind of reflective of the local community in that way." (Focus group participant, aged 45+, England)

▪ **Multi-faith celebrations**. There was some awareness of libraries running events celebrating different cultures/faiths at the library (e.g., for Diwali, Hanukkah). The ability to get involved in diverse events celebrating different cultures could feel appealing and felt like a somewhat distinctive offering.

> "They should be a thing of a community, and welcoming, and accessible for all. So, it would be quite nice to think that if someone spoke Arabic, that the library might be able to access some literature and people's native languages. Culture is such an important thing, and it doesn't have to be divisive. You know, we can all enjoy and celebrate each other's diversity and differences, and I think that's really important." (Depth participant, aged 50)

▪ **Social activities for those with care needs**. For people with care responsibilities, it was perceived that visits to the library offered benefits. Particularly, this was a place for helping people with caring responsibilities find entertainment and something else to do, such as parents going for story time with young children or activities for those with specific learning and development needs.

6.4   Free/low-cost benefits

Free services were considered a key asset for the local community, even where they held limited personal appeal.

Participants reflected that with a backdrop of today's "cost of living" crisis, free services and access to resources were valuable. Even where they voiced that this was personally not something they needed, there were positive associations with the library offering this. This was considered particularly beneficial to those struggling with energy costs during winter months and older people.

Free access to books or services such as Wi-Fi held limited appeal unless participants could identify a key reason or need for this service. Lack of convenience in accessing these services at the library for example, the need to return books was a key concern.

"I think I could be attracted to use the free Wi-Fi I suppose, have a little bit of me time."
(Focus group participant, aged 45-59, South-West)

"I wouldn't say that [free loaning of books] is enough for me to consider going to the
library. For me, the things I mentioned before like owning a book and not having to worry
about returning it is more important." (Focus group participant, aged 18-24, North-East)

6.5   Interactions with staff in the past

Where participants recalled positive experiences of staff interactions in the past, these were viewed as
important to the appeal of visiting a library.

A welcoming feeling was recalled positively, and staff were considered an important part of this.

"Somebody said at the beginning [of the focus group] how the staff were very friendly, I
tend to agree with that. They always were friendly in my experience so … I'm sure they
would be welcoming and warm." (Focus group participant, aged 60+, South-East)

7 Overview of existing barriers and enablers

The table below provides an overview of the key barriers and enablers to library engagement mapped against the components of COM-B. This table shows the combination of different factors at play in shaping current library engagement for participants, with each COM-B component playing an important part in shaping library appeal.

Capability: having the knowledge and skills to carry out a behaviour.

Capability factors highlight the important role that participants' existing awareness of library services has. An awareness of core library services could limit identification of something personally relevant and shape views on "who" the library is for. However, knowledge of the library location meant that participants knew where it was, should they decide to visit in the future.

Opportunity: having the time and resources to carry out the behaviour and identifying as a person who does this behaviour.

Opportunity factors focus on practical aspects of visits, with participants expressing concerns around opening hours, parking, and accessibility for those with a disability or health conditions. The free/low-cost nature of services/activities was identified as a benefit, but often considered beneficial for "others" or tempered with concerns about the convenience of using the library services.

Motivation: feeling the need or desire to carry out a behaviour more than other competing behaviours.

Motivation factors focus on the personal relevance felt by participants. Whilst there was some existing appeal, this was shaped by levels of existing awareness of the library offer and the extent to which services/activities were considered convenient or unique to the library. However, participants described a strong positive association with the library as an important community resource, which underpinned their feelings towards the library.

Figure 7.1: Existing barriers and enablers to library engagement

	Capability	**Opportunity**	**Motivation**
Barriers	Limited awareness of services: Existing awareness of the range of services/activities provided by public libraries was low. Time constraints: Lack of time was considered a barrier to engaging with library services/activities.	Social identity: Some people didn't feel as though library use was suited to their social group. Accessibility: Factors such as opening hours, parking availability and cost, as well as suitability for those living with disabilities cited as inhibitors to accessing the library. Library environment: Perceptions of noise levels, and book sanitation	Personal relevance: Perceived lack of personal relevance of library services acted as a barrier to engagement. Availability of services elsewhere: Feeling services offered by the library services had become redundant, due to the ability to access these services elsewhere. Library atmosphere and aesthetic: Memories of enforced silence during library visits shaped

		standards, made the library feel unsuited to participants.	perceptions that the library environment would feel too quiet and intense. Library exteriors and interiors were also cited as unattractive aspects of the library.
Enablers	<u>Knowledge of physical presence and core services/activities:</u> Their locations were generally known, particularly if participants lived in a small town or if libraries were 'local' to them.	<u>Free/low-cost benefits:</u> Importance of having a free/ low-cost access to important services such as books and digital equipment made the library appreciated as a 'safety net'. <u>Interactions with staff in the past:</u> The ability to benefit from friendly staff members with extensive literary knowledge was seen as an attractive quality of the library.	<u>Services/activities for children:</u> Parents were aware of the benefits the library offered for their children, making it an appealing place to take them. <u>The library as a community space:</u> Participants recognised the community events offered by the library and felt this was a distinctive offering.

8 Reaction to the library offer

To explore existing awareness, and understand the appeal of different library offerings, during the research participants were either given information about the range of services available across public libraries in England or set tasks to familiarise themselves with their own local public library.

Information about the public library offering was shared during focus group and depth interview research sessions where participants had discussed spontaneous views and awareness towards libraries. The information was developed in collaboration with DCMS and a copy is in the appendix. The aim of this information was to demonstrate and illustrate the diversity of the library offer. It was not intended to be exhaustive, and it was made clear when presenting this information that the offer was not universal to all public libraries. The information was structured into four categories:

- **Reading and digital services**: explaining resources and activities which help to give local communities access to books and digital services. This includes digital access (such as Wi-Fi, computers, printers, etc.), building digital skills, and supporting people of all ages to read (including access to online reading resources).

- **Health and wellbeing**: explaining resources and activities which support the health and wellbeing of communities at libraries, such as signposting to health information and support available, health promotion events, groups and social activities, providing welcoming spaces and support for those arriving to a new place.

- **Culture, creativity and community**: information about how libraries support in creating a place where people can experience diverse cultural and creative activities and events. This includes cultural events, creative activities and community activities.

- **Personal skills and career development**: information about how libraries support in creating a place where people can access education, career information and support. This includes educational resources and information, support for people looking for work, and support for people starting a business.

Tasks designed to increase familiarisation with local libraries were completed by participants who took part in the library journal. These tasks included: look for information about your local library; visit a library in your local area; visit the website for your local library; find out what friends and family think about their local library. Full details are provided in the appendix.

Reaction to this information and increased familiarisation identified how different elements of the library offer could reinforce or challenge existing barriers and enablers. This chapter sets out these reactions exploring:

- Awareness of the diverse library offer.

- Impact on library perceptions.

- Views on the personal appeal of library services.

8.1   Awareness of the diverse library offer

Existing awareness of the range of services/activities provided by public libraries was low.

Information (seen as part of information shared during research sessions or when completing library journal tasks) about library services was mostly "new" information to participants. They expressed surprise at the wide offering and different types of services available across libraries, reflecting that these were not all services/activities that they spontaneously associated with libraries.

"I was amazed with how much the library hub has to offer as in my mind it was just a library where you can get books etc from." (Journal participant, aged 47)

Information about loaning physical books, access to technology (e.g., computers and printing) and the provision of services for young children echoed existing expectations and awareness for what public libraries offer.

8.2   Impact on library perceptions

Increased awareness of the library offer started to positively shift or reinforce perceptions of libraries as a modern service and welcoming, dynamic space.

Participants responded positively to the range of services provided by libraries, noting that this challenged their impressions of what a library offered and the anticipated library atmosphere. They voiced a general sense that the library offer was becoming more modern through the provision of services to engage different types of people and was evolving alongside changes in technology e.g., by providing online services (particularly access to e-books/audiobooks) and self-service machines in libraries.

"Not just a stuffy old bookstore." (Depth participant, aged 55)

Information and library journal experiences also generated the impression that the library was becoming a more social space. Often building on pre-existing views that libraries offered a community space, this function was reinforced for participants as their awareness of services/activities increased. Positive views focused on the provision of a range of services/activities that provided a valuable resource for the community under one roof, and the library offering a social space for meeting new people or bringing together existing groups.

"I just expected it to be a library with books and stuff but to be honest with you it came as a bit of surprise because it's a community hub with literally everything under one roof." (Journal participant, aged 47)

Whilst less commonly voiced, there were some concerns raised by participants who wondered whether a diverse offering was stretching libraries too far.

Participants expressing concern regarding the range of services/activities offered by libraries queried whether this range risked diluting the core library offering or duplicated the provision of services already provided in other places. This viewpoint was often based on awareness of or expectation that some of the services/activities offered (e.g., career advice, health-related information and support in digital skills) were offered in other places and could lead to queries around funding for libraries and these services/activities. There was a suggestion that the local offer should be tailored to best fit the local need to avoid spending money on services that ultimately might not be relevant to the community the library served.

Existing views regarding the library atmosphere and environment influenced initial thoughts regarding the suitability of the library as a social space.

There were some concerns about how a social aspect to a library would work in practice. These included queries around whether noise generated from social events or activities would negatively impact those using the library for quiet reading or study/workspaces.

Where there were existing perceptions of the library as a cold and "run-down" space, participants raised queries around whether the library provided a comfortable and appropriate atmosphere for social interactions.

"A bit starchy, a bit unapproachable." (Depth participant, aged 75)

However, others – reflecting on positive previous experiences - felt that the library atmosphere would be welcoming and a 'good fit' for services with a social aspect. Some suggested that a café would be a good addition to the library, reflecting this more social setting.

Participants who visited a local library as part of the library journal task commented on the library look and feel.

Participants visited different types of libraries as part of the library journal task and reflected on their experiences.

Figure 8.1: Photos taken of library exterior by journal participants.

Having not visited a library for some time, participants were often pleasantly surprised by the look and feel of their local library. Words such as 'bright' and 'modern' were used to describe the library space with particularly positive comments around areas for children looking 'colourful'.

"As soon as the doors open[ed] I felt so overwhelmed it just hit me straight away how colourful it looked compared to my childhood days, so welcoming." (Journal participant, aged 48)

Figure 8.2: Photos taken during library visit journal tasks showing sections of the library appreciated by participants.
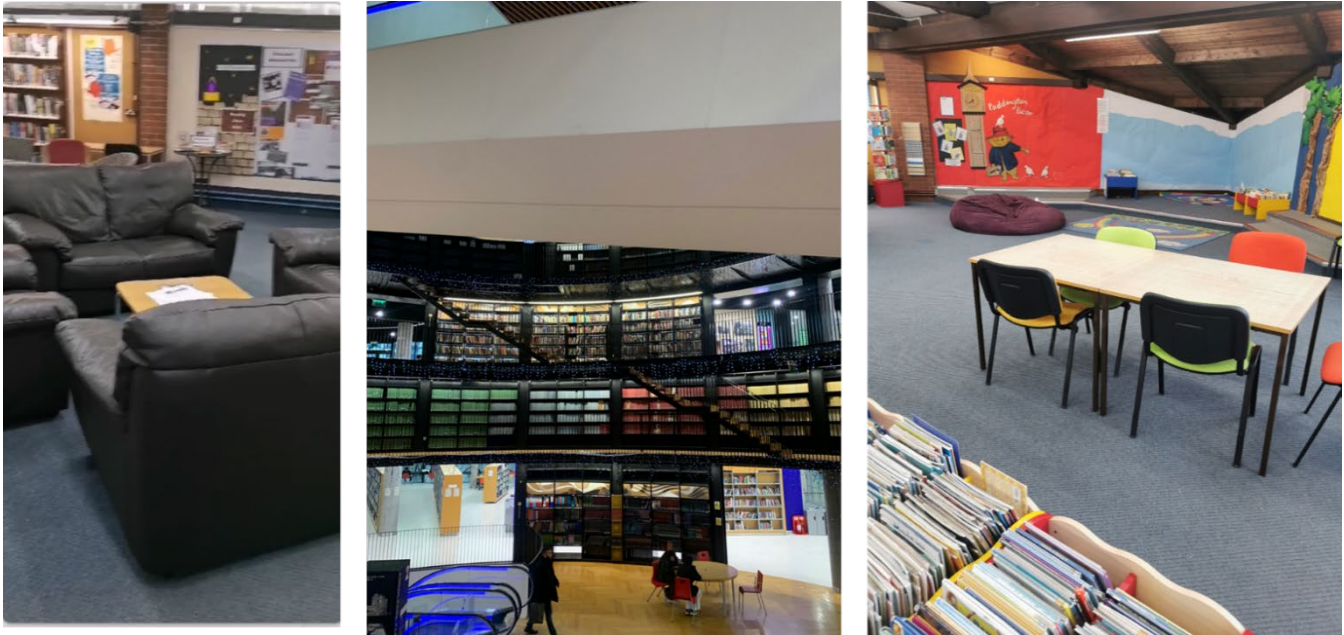
However, there were instances where participants felt that their local library was in need of refurbishment, noting that the "run-down" feel of the library made it and the services offered feel dated. One participant described how works being carried out in the library made it feel "messy". There were concerns amongst these participants that the dated look and feel of the library could be a deterrent to people, and limit how inviting it felt.

> "I haven't been to the library for quite some time so it was interesting to see it today. I did find it all inside a little bit tired, a little bit run-down. I thought the books themselves looked very tired and the selection on different topics that I looked at seemed a bit limited for a main central library. The toilets themselves were a little bit tired and could do with a refurb." (Journal participant, aged 64)

Figure 8.3: Photos taken during library visit journal tasks showing sections of library considered to be 'untidy'.

Staff played an important role in shaping library journal participant experiences.

Whilst not all participants described interactions with staff, those that did highlighted this as playing an important role in their positive library experience. Staff interactions supported a friendly and welcoming library feel, as well as providing access to useful information to help them navigate the library.

"We were greeted at the door by one of the security guards who asked us how we were and whether he could help us find anything within the library. He was very helpful as there was quite a few floors so felt quite overwhelming." (Journal participant, aged 23)

"Personal service, in my opinion there's nothing like personal service to feel the book in your hands, to speak to librarian who have depth of knowledge when it comes to books and history about [the] library." (Journal participant, aged 48)

8.3   Views on personal appeal of library services

Views regarding the personal appeal of library services/activities were mixed. Whilst there were participants who identified services/activities that might be of personal interest, others reflected that the library did not offer anything that was currently appealing or anything that they could not access elsewhere. The following factors influenced personal appeal:

▪ The extent to which library services/activities chimed with an area of personal interest, a personal learning/ development goal or personal circumstances.

▪ Familiarity with accessing similar services/activities elsewhere.

▪ Library convenience and accessibility.

8.3.1 Reflecting personal interests and circumstances

Participants voiced personal appeal where a service/activity chimed with an area of personal interest, a personal learning/development goal or personal circumstance.

Influenced by individualised factors of personal interest and circumstance, participants across the research identified a range of services/activities as potentially appealing, and something that they would

be interested to learn more about. This appeal was typically based on learning about a service/activity that the participant had not previously been aware of and included:

- **Topic/subject appeal:** interest in services/activities that reflected topics of personal interest or areas of study (alignment with studies was particularly noted by students). A variety of services/activities were mentioned, ranging from specific creative or craft activities, learning about technology, attending topic-related events, learning languages, well-being, building digital skills and/ or loaning tech equipment (mentioned by those with limited digital access/confidence) to activities of interest for children (further discussed later within this section).

    "The internet access aspect of it, and getting books delivered, that would be beneficial to me and now I know that you can do that, I'm going to explore that." (Depth participant, aged 55)

- **New ways to access resources:** for example, interest in access e-books/audiobooks, access to equipment loan (e.g., blood pressure monitor) and access to less ubiquitous technologies (e.g., podcast equipment).

- **Social and cultural engagement:** appeal for services/activities with a social or cultural aspect for example, theatre, cultural or art events where there was scope to meet like-minded people. For example, there was some appeal for social groups, such as boardgame clubs and knit and natter groups. Participants noted that these would need to chime with something personally interesting (e.g., a theatre performance or exhibition that they were interested to attend).

    "I had a look at the events section for my local library and saw there is an event to meet an author in March. This is something new to me, I thought it was events aimed mostly at children and seasonal like easter or Christmas etc." (Journal participant, aged 24)

There was also a suggestion that the library itself could be a destination. This perspective was voiced by a participant who visited a refurbished central library with a roof-top garden, historical points of interest and wider facilities.

Whilst infrequently mentioned, there was also some interest in "re-engaging" with services that had been used in the past, such as borrowing physical books or using the library for study/workspaces.

"I was surprised on how much the library had to offer and was also pleasantly surprised to see many students working in the library. I feel I may give this a go in the future as there seemed to be quieter areas to work in." (Journal participant, aged 23)

However, the appeal of these services, as well as new services/activities, was often caveated by participants who were keen to consider how convenient it would be to use the library for these when compared to the ease of accessing these elsewhere.

There was a strong perception amongst participants that libraries would be particularly valuable for children.

Echoing existing views, as participants learned more about libraries, they continued to strongly feel that a key benefit of libraries was the educational role they played for children. They particularly focused on benefits for younger children (e.g., pre-school) with libraries providing free activities and access to books to support literacy and engagement in reading. This was often based on ways in which participants themselves had used libraries as children, and when their own children were younger. Related to this

was the library as a space where parents/grandparents could meet each other. However, amongst participants with children, awareness and appeal of these services was mixed.

Where appeal was strongest, participants felt that during the research they had become aware of or reminded of a service/activity that their child would likely be interested in. Services/activities mentioned varied, and included story-based activities, coding club, Lego club, reading challenges and Makerspaces.

> "Looking at the website I found that the library offers a lot more services than I thought and would not have realised unless looked into or told about. It has under 5 reading interactive story time which I would be interested in for my son." (Journal participant, aged 35)

Seeing spaces for children during library journal visits led to participants reporting that they'd be keen to take their child/grandchild. The bright, inviting spaces were often highlighted as particularly encouraging.

Whilst of potential interest, participants raised queries around how accessible services/activities would be. For example, whether they would be available locally and whether timings/opening hours would be compatible with other family commitments.

Overall, a number of pre-existing concerns (as described in chapter 5) remained a key barrier to using these library services. These included:

- Concern that they would need to keep their child quiet (in line with their expectations for the library environment). This was a particular concern where their child was neurodivergent or had a disability.

- Noting that their children were able to access books from alternative routes including via school libraries, as gifts at Christmas and birthdays from family and friends, and that parents could buy books cheaply and conveniently elsewhere.

- The perception that library services were largely focused on activities for younger children (e.g., pre-school). Even after learning about different types of library services, participants still felt that there were limited activities likely to appeal to their tweens/ teens.

Whilst services/activities often lacked personal relevance, participants reflected that it was useful to know about them.

Even where participants became more familiar with the library offer, they did not always feel that the library offered something personally relevant. For example, there were journal participants who whilst positively surprised by their library visit, felt that there was not anything that would encourage them to visit again in the future.

However, a number of services stood out to participants because they had relevance to family members or friends. For example, participants described older family members who lived alone who might benefit from the social aspect of libraries. Participants also reflected that although services/activities (e.g., access to support services such as Citizens Advice, access to careers advice or new business start-up support) might not hold current relevance, they may benefit from this in the future and therefore knowing about them was useful.

> "I think all of it's useful but [it is useful] when you need it." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, South-West)

Regardless of whether participants felt that there was something personally appealing at libraries, they were keen to note that they saw the value of these spaces for others and the local community.

Building on existing positive perceptions, learning more about the library offer reinforced views that the library played an important role as a community space offering important support to a range of people in the local community, including:

- People financially struggling and those in need of a warm space (including those who were homeless) were considered key groups who could find support and value in accessing library services.

- People who may feel lonely. This was noted as particularly important when reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health over recent years.

- People with specific health conditions. Services related to autism and dementia were mentioned as providing an important service for affected people and their families.

- People who might find it difficult to access library resources who may benefit from the home delivery service.

8.3.2 Familiarity with accessing similar services/activities elsewhere.

Participants reflected that many of the services provided by libraries could be conveniently accessed elsewhere.

Echoing spontaneous views regarding library services, participants continued to raise their ability to access many library services/activities elsewhere as a barrier. They typically referenced "online sources" as the main place they would expect to find similar services/activities. Whilst less frequently voiced, there were also comments that these types may be provided in other community venues such as community centres, leading to queries around the potential for duplication of services/activities.

However, some points of differentiation for provision of services/activities at libraries emerged across the research.

Four points of differentiation for accessing services/activities at libraries emerged.

1. **Accessing services in a face-to-face setting:** whilst participants noted that they could access services/activities such as educational classes or guidance for CV writing online, there was a feeling that there were benefits to accessing this type of content in a face-to-face setting. For example, the ability to ask questions to support understanding and learning and an opportunity to meet other people. A face-to-face setting was considered a useful resource for people who may not be able to complete interactions online e.g., completing forms.

2. **The experience:** where library journal participants reported a very positive experience of visiting their library, they identified this as a distinctive part of the library offering. These participants enjoyed the library atmosphere and specifically identified staff as playing a key role in creating a welcoming and informative space. These participants enjoyed browsing the services/activities available and planned to return in the future.

"I definitely would say to people about libraries in the future is that despite there being a lot of…books online and e-books and e-audios I feel like it's such a great experience to go and visit a library and kind of you know, have your headphones in and kind of find books that you might enjoy or want to take home and read especially it kind of motivates you to get out the house and you know, have a different kind of experience in a different kind of environment especially with such lovely staff and so many books that you might not be able to find online, I think it's such a great experience." (Journal participant, aged 23)

3. **Accessing services that might otherwise be difficult to access:** services such as speaking to someone for health advice (e.g., via the GP), and speaking to someone at Citizens Advice were considered difficult and time consuming to access. With this in mind, whilst not necessarily considered personally or currently relevant, there was interest in being able to access these services at the library. There were also suggestions that the library might provide a welcoming space for some services that were typically about sensitive or challenging topics (e.g., finances or employment) although this led to concerns around where any related discussions would take place. Additional services seen as potentially harder to access included specific health-related groups e.g., Dementia groups. This view came from participants who felt that these services were lacking in their local area or that the library could provide a more comfortable space for these.

4. **Free/low-cost services/activities that are difficult to find elsewhere:** the low-cost and free nature of services/activities offered at libraries was particularly appealing where this related to services that were considered difficult to find for free or at a low cost in other places. For example, free or low-cost activities for children, access to expensive technology such as 3D printers.

"Yes, if there was something on, 100%. Like, we're always looking for stuff to do at the weekend with her [child] to keep her active, and she's quite an active kid. And, yes. So, I would definitely, if there's something on, like, either Stockport or even Manchester, we could take the trip in if it was worth it." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-West)

However, as discussed earlier in chapter 5, convenience typically shaped the appeal of accessing free or low-cost services that could be accessed elsewhere for a small cost. A small cost to access something convenient and familiar was often more appealing than something free but requiring effort to use.

8.3.3 Library convenience and accessibility

Even where there was interest for library services/activities, the anticipated convenience and accessibility of using the library for these influenced the overarching appeal of these.

Reflecting the accessibility concerns described in section 5.3, factors such as opening hours, timings for specific services/activities, parking availability and cost, and accessibility of the library building and facilities were all considered important when determining how convenient and therefore how appealing library engagement was. This included thinking about going to the library with family members or friends with accessibility needs. There were suggestions for longer opening hours as well as dedicated and free parking to help mitigate these barriers.

These factors were often raised by participants who visited a local library as part of a library journal task. Participants explored the opening hours of libraries to inform their visit and experiences were mixed. For example, one participant had to visit a library further away from their home as it was the only one they could visit in light of opening hours. Another participant discovered that their local library was open for extended hours one day a week.

"To my surprise I had no idea and just discovered the opening times have extended on Thursday are till late they have some flexible times to suit everyone." (Journal participant, aged 48)

Parking as a key barrier was reinforced where library journal participants travelled to their local library by car. Participants reported frustration at needing to pay for parking at the library. Whilst they reflected that parking costs were challenging in many places beyond the library, it was identified as a key barrier to visiting the library.

"Today I visited [Location] library, I knew where it was, so I drove down and parked at the library. As with all places I had to pay to park which is ridiculous and a definite barrier to visiting it for a long period of time. Walking or public transport just isn't an option…The checking out a book was easy, and it all seemed quite modern and well-lit which is a change from what I had expected. In general, I was impressed but still would struggle to find a reason to return, especially considering I technically have to pay for the pleasure to visit." (Journal participant, aged 40)

Figure 8.4: Photo of parking costs taken during library visit journal tasks

Participants raised questions about which types of services/activities might be available at different libraries and therefore what might be available locally and conveniently accessed.

The location of services/activities was queried. Participants expected and voiced some scepticism about the availability of these types of services at their local library.

"The reality is our local library, it's a very small old building. There is no way there's any way to do all these lovely things." (Focus group participant, aged 45-59, Midlands)

There was an expectation that these types of services would only be available at larger libraries, and these were often considered inconvenient to get to and therefore less appealing.

Participants raised queries around how some services/activities would work in practice.

Queries around how services/activities would work in practice included questions around who would be providing services/activities with participants seeking reassurance that where required, they would be provided by experts and people with relevant skills. For example, that there would be professional health advice when loaning health equipment such as a blood pressure monitor. There were also queries around what some services/activities would comprise. For example, whether advice on different topics

(e.g., health, finance) would involve someone giving advice or signposting to leaflets. If the former, there was an expectation that there would be separate or confidential spaces if these could potentially cover sensitive topics. There were also queries on who services/activities would be for and how clearly this would be communicated, and whether people needed to be a library member to use services/activities.

9 Encouraging library use

Participants were asked for their views on how best to encourage library use. This chapter sets out their recommendations for how to raise awareness, and which aspects of libraries to promote.

Lack of awareness of the library offer was considered a key barrier to use.

Participants reflected that people may lack knowledge of the current library offering and saw this as a central part of encouraging greater use of library services/activities. They suggested a number of ways to do this, including advertising library services both online and offline, and highlighting the benefits of using library services/activities. They also felt that there was an opportunity to challenge dated perceptions of libraries and their services/activities and to consider targeting groups likely to experience particular benefits.

9.1   Raising awareness online

Spontaneous thoughts around ways to raise awareness online revealed existing low levels of awareness of the online library presence.

Participants suggested both social media and library-specific website content to help promote library services/activities, expressing limited awareness of the current existence of these. Where library journal participants visited these during the research, they identified ways in which these could be improved.

Social media was suggested to promote library services/activities.

Advertising via a range of social media platforms was suggested by participants. Participants aged 25+ years favoured promotion via Facebook, noting that Facebook groups related to the local area would be a good fit for this type of information. Those from younger age groups were particularly likely to suggest the use of TikTok or Instagram. Advertising via social media was considered a way for libraries to "move with the times", and there were some suggestions for libraries to have their own social media accounts to gain followers and to use this to share information.

> "If [the library] did have a social media page, I would follow it." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-West)

A library website/ content on a Council webpage was also considered important.

Participants, particularly those aged 45+ years and those who did not frequently use social media, felt that the library services could be amplified via a dedicated library section on their local council webpage.

Library journal participants tasked with finding information about their local library online identified current strengths and weaknesses for online library information.

Participants described mixed experiences of the library online presence. Views focused on ease of navigation, amount of detail about specific services/activities available, and the general "look and feel" of the information.

Where navigation was simple, participants noted that they had been able to directly access a library webpage via an internet search or had been able to easily navigate to the page from a Council website.

> "The information I found was quite interesting. I found there are quite a few local libraries that I haven't been to, and some that I hadn't even heard of before. The information was easy to find with just a Google search, although I'm not sure how easy this information would be to find without internet access as I don't see information like this advertised anywhere I go." (Journal participant, aged 23)

Participants noted that there was information on webpages about library locations and opening hours, but they were also keen to find information about the services/activities available. Where this information was easy to find, it helped participants build a picture of what would be available at the library.

> "I didn't realise before they had this many [services] especially from looking at this website. I also spoke to the librarian who gave me more detail about these services. The one that appealed to me the most was being able to search on their online catalogue and being able to renew my books online." (Journal participant, aged 23)

Figure 9.1: Screenshots of web pages showing services offered at the library during library website browsing journal tasks
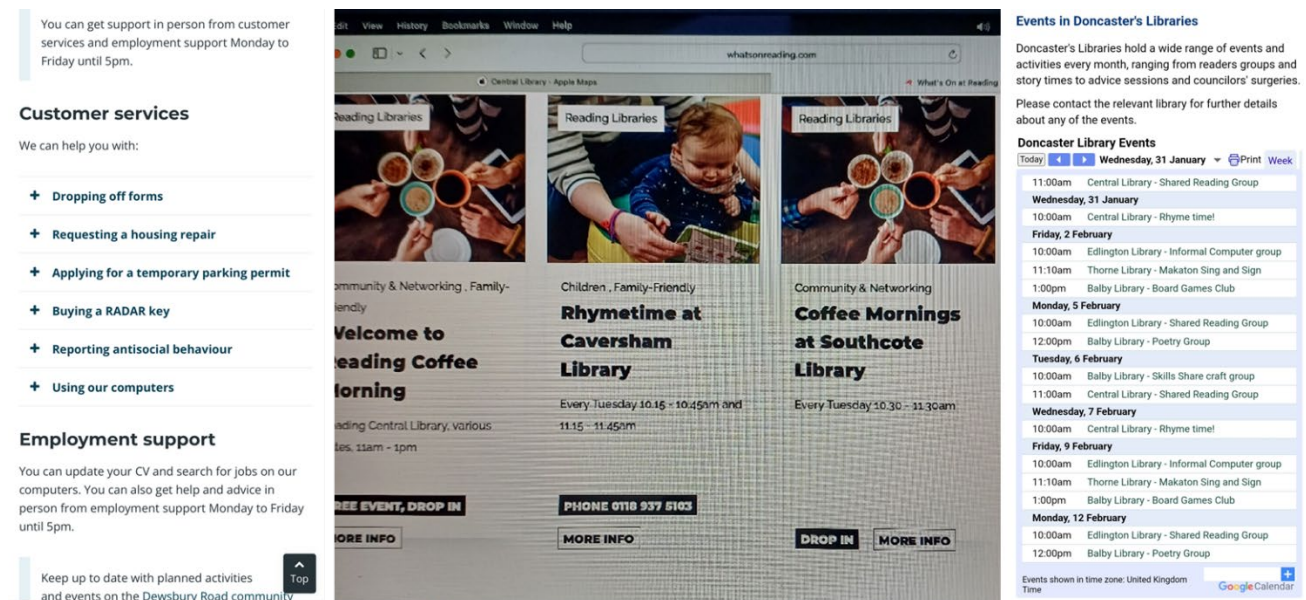
However, finding detailed information about what was on offer at the library was considered more challenging. Journal participants reported that to find the website for their local libraries, sometimes they would be routed through a local council website. In these instances, participants also discovered information about other local libraries and services available to them. Whilst often considered frustrating where participants wanted to understand the offer at a specific library, this could lead to discovery of library provision that could be of interest in the wider area.

> "It just kept taking me back to the Worcestershire libraries and I actually wanted to look at [local library]. It just kept kicking me out, and I couldn't work it out." (Journal participant, aged 50)

The look and feel of library webpages were also raised as needing improvement. Participants often felt that these lacked dynamic content that would encourage or inspire use of services.

> "The first thing I would do is sort the website out! It is terrible. The front page, which is tied in with the Borough council, is boring and very uninteresting. It totally under sells the great services it offers." (Journal participant, aged 64)

"For me it wasn't an attractive website. It struck me as 'this is pure information" I know it sounds daft, but it struck me. I think they could've jazzed it up and made it much more appealing." (Journal participant, aged 38)

Figure 9.2: Screenshots of web pages that participants felt were uninformative during library website browsing journal tasks
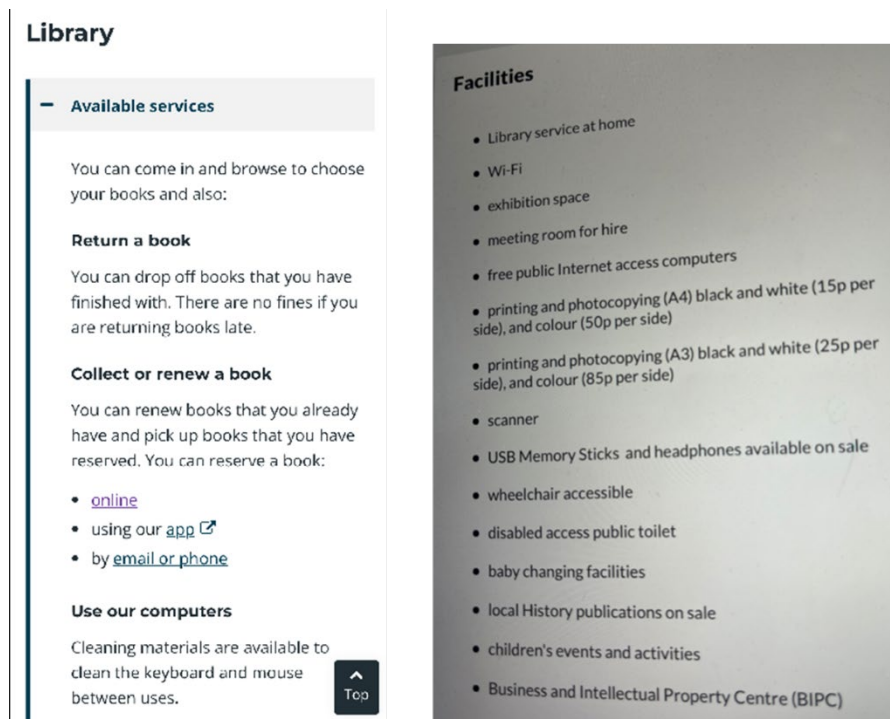
Where participants came across Facebook pages for their local library they felt that these were more engaging and informative.

"I visited the [location] library pages accessed from the [Council] site and found them to be bland, basic and not inspiring. There were very few pages available, really only basic information such as opening times, directions etc. I also visited the [location] library Facebook page which was a lot more vibrant, engaging and informative." (Journal participant, aged 65)

9.2   Raising awareness offline

Physical advertisements were suggested as ways to signpost to library services/activities locally.

Participants suggested that physical advertisements could take the form of posters, leaflets, and flyers, placed in high footfall public areas like supermarkets, GP surgeries, bus stations, local parks, and schools to maximise exposure. There were suggestions that signposting was likely to be particularly effective where the organisation signposting linked to the type of service/activity being promoted; for example, GPs signposting to health and wellbeing services/activities and job centres signposting to careers advice and support.

Participants with limited digital literacy and/ or individuals aged 45+ favoured this approach, and there were also suggestions for advertisements to be delivered to people's homes through the post.

"[Library services should be advertised in] organisations that you'll be utilising like NHS services." (Focus group participant, aged 45–59, Midlands)

> "[Receiving a leaflet] through the door would be the greatest thing, with a list of what they actually do." (Depth participant, aged 76)

Word of mouth recommendation was also highlighted as a means through which participants felt information should be shared to raise awareness.

Word of mouth from trusted and respected individuals in the community such as doctors and teachers was suggested. Linked to this, there were suggestions that there should be more joined up activity with schools, both through the provision of information via schools and school visits to the local library.

> "[Information should be] sent to the schools to then be distributed for the kids to take home." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-West)

Word of mouth was also suggested by library journal participants who noted that a good way to promote library services would be for people to share positive experiences of their own visits.

> "I would like to tell people just to have a look at what libraries can offer and support as it's more than just a library! I was surprised at how it can probably bring people of all ages together and people with the same interest. I would tell people with small children that the library offers interactive reading for groups of children which can help develop a child's reading, being able to socialise and play and learning. An area I would be interested is the use of e-books and taking my children to the library as an opportunity for them to go and pick a book that they might like and give them that confidence." (Journal participant, aged 35)

In-library noticeboards and information from staff were considered important ways to raise awareness of services/activities for those who visited the library.

Library journal participants noted the importance of clear information about services/activities within libraries themselves. Journal participants were impressed by the information provided via noticeboards and staff within libraries when they visited. They saw these as a key way to promote services/activities for those visiting the library.

> "It was eye-catching to see a range of posters and activities held by the library, when I spoke to the lady it was so lovely to discover they have real life authors that come in and read their books, to the members of public, I thought that was so amazing, to actually get chance to meet the person behind the amazing stories we read." (Journal participant, aged 48)

Viewing the noticeboard prompted participants to speak to staff to find out more information, who were able to provide further information leading participants to reflect that staff played an important role in disseminating information about services/activities. Generally, the information provided on the noticeboards was easily understood by participants; however, there was a comment that some phrases such as 'digital champions' were not clear.

> "There are plenty of groups you can attend but unsure what some of them were like "digital champions" or "bookbuddies" don't think I'll be rushing back." (Journal participant, aged 50)

Figure 9.3: Photos of physical library dashboards seen at the library during library visit journal tasks
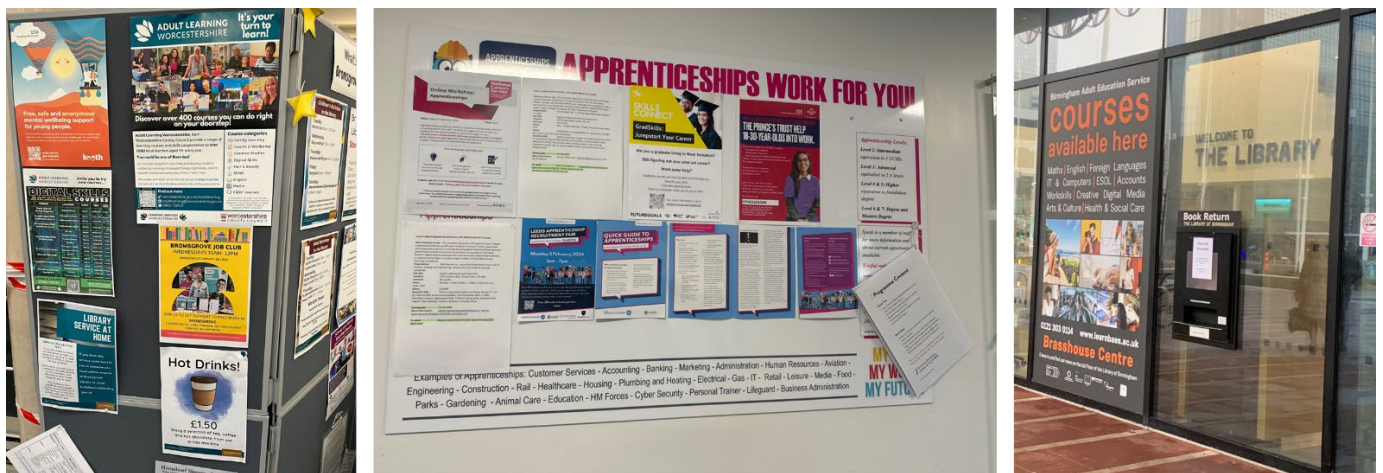
9.3   Promoting library services

Participants spoke of the need to challenge dated perceptions of the library and its services, providing a real opportunity to create a narrative around the library and how relevant it is to modern day life.

Participants felt that challenging dated perceptions of the library should be a key focus of any awareness raising activities. In particular, they suggested drawing attention to some of the perceived "newer" services offered, to help depart from the "dull" and "bookish" image that is traditionally associated with libraries.

> "It needs to lose the stigma of its just a boring library." (Focus group participant, aged 25-44, North-West)

> "Show people there is more than just books." (Depth participant, aged 27)

It was noted that building awareness of a range of services could help remind those who had fallen out of the habit of using libraries about what they had to offer, as well as generate an understanding of the library as a place that could offer a range of benefits beyond those associated with more "traditional views", such as those related to wellbeing, employability, and socialisation. It was further noted that making clear the online offer would help portray the library as a modern service.

Reasons raised by participants for why they did not use library services suggest that promotion needs to address a range of barriers.

Participants described a range of barriers and enablers to using library services, indicating that promotion will need to be carefully considered as a way to highlight enablers, make clear the benefit of accessing services/activities that could be accessed elsewhere, and consider how best to mitigate concerns regarding practical barriers.

> "I actually spoke to friends about this one during the week as I was quite impressed having visited the library and seen some of the digital offerings. There seemed to be the same understanding of the library amongst my friends as mine, some with kids actually said they would probably make more effort to visit the library as they had pictured it as old and dated but were suitably impressed. That said they like me couldn't see a reason for themselves to go in the physical library and whilst tempted with the digital offerings didn't see them changing from what they have today." (Journal participant, aged 40)

"It was nice to hear about my nans positive views of the local library (location), and how it has been of great use to her over the years. I feel it does not play the same role in people's lives in the present day, and I'm not sure whether this is because of things moving online, or a lack of awareness of library services." (Journal participant, aged 23)

When thinking about raising awareness and promoting library services/activities, participants noted that there were specific groups who could be targeted reflecting specific services/activities.

Scope for targeted promotion included suggestions to highlight study spaces for students, careers advice to those leaving education or children's services/activities to families.

10 Summary and conclusions

Across the research, it was clear that a combination of different COM-B components will be important in encouraging library engagement (as shown in Figure 10.1).

Figure 10.1: COM-B components needed to encourage library engagement.
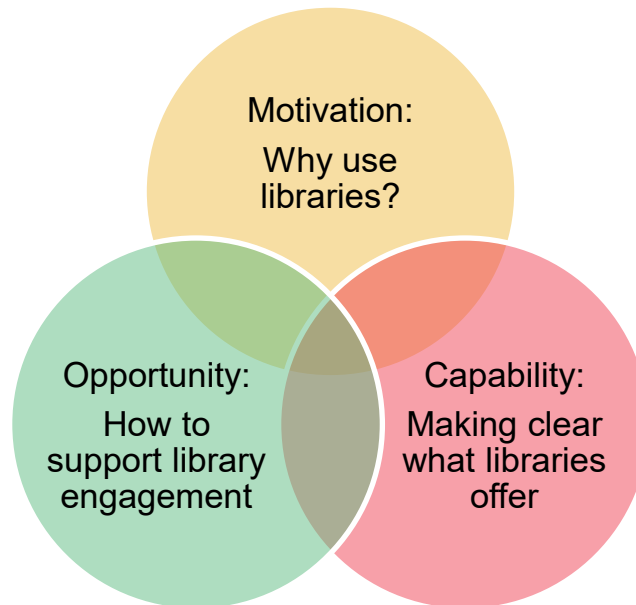
As with any complex behaviour, the role that each of these components play for each individual will be shaped by their personal perceptions, experiences, awareness and knowledge of libraries, as well as their circumstances and interests. Below, we reflect on the research findings and detail key implications for each of these areas that could help develop library engagement. Further research to quantify strength of barriers and enablers could help identify key focus areas for different groups.

10.2 Increasing capability: making clear what libraries offer

Existing awareness and knowledge of the current library offer was low. Raising awareness and giving people a reason to visit will be central to encouraging library use. The research suggests that this awareness-raising should:

- Better communicate that the current library offer goes beyond services considered 'traditional' core services. This will help challenge out-dated views and misconceptions of what libraries offer.

- Promote the online offer. Low awareness of the online offer and 'the internet' as a key challenger to library services/activities suggests that raising awareness of this offer is particularly important. This will help make clear the modernisation and relevance of library services in a digital age.

- Highlight information about how to access or use the services/activities alongside their benefits. This will make it easier for people to identify personal reasons to use libraries.

- Anticipate ways in which people may seek additional information, including what further details may be required. This may involve ensuring there is clear, easy to find and informative content with sufficient detail about library services.

- Consider what can be promoted broadly vs. locally. The diversity of the library offer across library types presents both awareness-building opportunities and challenges. Broad promotion of the range of library services/activities could increase the potential of people identifying something of personal relevance. However, there may also be disappointment if these services of interest are not offered locally, disengaging people from library services generally.

- Recognise that there may be some queries around whether a diverse offering is stretching libraries too far and the use of funding, particularly where services are believed to be offered elsewhere.

- Awareness raising may be done in many ways, including advertising online (webpages, social media) and offline (in local places particularly those linked to specific audiences) and through word of mouth.

10.3 Creating opportunities: supporting people in feeling able to use libraries

Practical barriers to engaging with physical libraries could act as key deterrents to using libraries even where there could be something that potentially appeals. Research findings suggest that addressing the following barriers will be an important step in building library engagement. In particular, it will be useful to reflect on what a convenient library engagement might look like to someone interested in using library services. This could include:

- Reviewing opening hours, including making clear where they extend beyond the 'typical' working day.

- Promoting the online offer as a way to remotely and engage with library services. Making clear how the online offer works could help inform queries people are likely to have around the convenience of this offer.

- Reviewing availability of parking facilities and the cost of parking.

Access and comfort of libraries is also important. Looking at the accessibility should involve consideration of appropriate access to all parts of the library and staff support with using library services.

Clarification of the types of spaces available in libraries may help challenge some misconceptions. This might involve providing some reassurances for people who are concerned that libraries are too quiet for social or children's activities or too noisy for quiet reading and study.

10.4 Motivating use: building the motivational appeal of libraries

Participants often struggled to identify motivations for using library services/activities. However, the research suggests some ways in which existing or potential appeal could be harnessed.

- Promote the library as a space that enables and encourages community connectedness and socialising. This could include promoting events and social activities. Considering the scope for wider amenities such as a café could also increase appeal. This could help build a more value-based relationship based on positive emotional associations, with the library highlighted as a way to support and engage with a valuable community resource.

- Consider where promotion of activities can best be targeted for specific groups, particularly considering where there is scope to challenge existing perceptions that there are no relevant

services/activities available (e.g., tweens and teens) or to include information that might increase the motivational appeal (e.g., specific spaces for children mean noise is not a concern).

▪ When communicating about services/activities, highlighting the benefits of these will help people identify if they are personally relevant and why they should make time for them.

▪ Find ways to challenge the idea that library use is not convenient. This might involve promoting the online offer, making clear where fines no longer apply, or demonstrating ways in which book renewal has been simplified.

▪ Recognise the role that staff play in generating a welcoming space and promoting services/activities.

▪ Recognise challengers to library services/activities by highlighting why accessing these at the library offers something different and beneficial. This could include highlighting the benefit of accessing services/activities in a face-to-face environment (rather than online), a library visit as an 'experience' with knowledgeable and friendly staff, the ability to access services/activities that are difficult to find or access elsewhere particularly where these are free/low-cost.

▪ Recognise that for some groups there will likely be limited personal appeal, even if awareness is raised.

10.5 Example personas

Below are some personas that bring to life the way in which barriers and enablers are experienced and interact for individuals. These show a selection of some different experiences and views to emerge across the research and reflect on the types of approaches that could help support library engagement.

Gary loves reading books but started using an e-reader during the pandemic.

Engagement with the library:

Gary used to use the library before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, he was gifted an e-reader from a family member as he wasn't able to go to the library anymore. Since having the e-reader, Gary has not returned to the library as he finds downloading books on to his e-reader more convenient than going into a physical library to borrow physical books.

Encouraging Gary to use the library:

Gary is currently unaware that the library offers digital services, including borrowing e-books which he could download to his smartphone or tablet. Once aware of this service, Gary could be encouraged to re-engage with the library in order to utilise the online offer. Gary could be made aware of this offer through advertising on social media and throughout the local town.

Cathy is 68 years old and has low digital literacy and confidence.

Engagement with the library:

Cathy has not been to a library in years. She did use the library when her children were young. She is not passionate about reading and prefers to watch the television. Cathy is not confident in using the internet. She asks her adult children to help her use the internet as she is not very confident in booking or buying products or services online.

Encouraging Cathy to use the library:

Cathy could be encouraged to use the library by raising her awareness of activities that could support her in building online skills and confidence. She would also be interested in meeting other people who might be in a similar situation. Cathy's awareness of library services could be raised through flyers received by post or posters displayed where she does her weekly shop.

Zariah is a busy mum with a young child.

Engagement with the library:

Zariah is a mum to her eight-year-old daughter and two-year-old son. Whilst she has familial support, she would like to get out of the house more often with her son and meet other mums. Zariah does not work and is from a low-income family. She has not considered the library as a location where she could access activities for her child.

Encouraging Zariah to use the library:

Zariah could be made aware of mother and toddler groups at her local library. It will be important to emphasise that this service is free or at low cost. Zariah could be made aware of this and offerings for children through advertising at her daughter's school or through local social media pages.

Michael works at a demanding job and has a busy family life.

Engagement with the library:

Michael has fond memories of visiting the library as a child but has not been to a public library since that time. He is a busy, working father and generally finds it challenging to find spare time for personal interests or hobbies.

Encouraging Michael to use the library:

It will be challenging to encourage Michael to use the library. Michael typically works during the hours that his local library is open in the week and would find it difficult to visit the library during the weekend due to childcare commitments such as taking children to swimming or football sessions. Michael does not view the library as personally relevant to him as he's not interested in reading and thinks that books at the library are likely to be out of date. It could be useful to keep Michael up to date with library offerings so that he knows what is available and could utilise these services at a later time.

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Ipsos' standards and accreditations provide our clients with the peace of mind that they can always depend on us to deliver reliable, sustainable findings. Our focus on quality and continuous improvement means we have embedded a "right first time" approach throughout our organisation.

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