Belonging Forum

Public Libraries as Infrastructures for Belonging

A Case Study of Buckinghamshire



Isobel Glover

THE BELONGING FORUM

The Belonging Forum is a global organisation that stands for a simple belief: that **"every person, by simple virtue of being born, has the right to belong"**

For this report, three streams of the Belonging Forum's efforts hold relevance:

- **The Belonging Lab:** Officially launched in 2022, the Belonging Lab is a global collective of scholars who share a commitment to building social and economic systems that centre on the value of belonging.
- **The Samuel Fellowship**: Now entering its seventh year, The Samuel Fellowship supports individuals across the globe to undertake research into questions relating to belonging and its relationship to contemporary social challenges.
- **The Belonging Barometer:** An annual study of how people across the UK experience belonging, drawing on a national sample of approximately 10,000 respondents.

Kim Samuel, founder of the Belonging Forum, conceptualises belonging through four dimensions:

PEOPLE

The quantity and quality of relationships a person has with others.

PLACE

Our 'relationship with nature, with the lands on which we live, whether in a forest or a city neighbourhood'.

POWER

Our 'capacity to participate meaningfully in decision-making structures of the broader whole'.

PURPOSE

Our 'ability to create meaning in our lives and to share our gifts with the world' –
Kim Samuel (2022), *On Belonging.*

INTRODUCTION

When we think of libraries, books are often the first thing that comes to mind. Yet contemporary public libraries extend far beyond book lending, providing spaces for culture and creativity, health and wellbeing, information and digital access, alongside reading.

As accessible spaces outside the home and workplace, libraries can facilitate belonging and strengthen community networks by providing people with somewhere to spend time without needing to purchase anything.

Their contribution is both social and economic, with research commissioned by Libraries Connected East (2023) estimating that England's public libraries generate at least **£3.4 billion in social value each year.**

This report examines how libraries function as infrastructure for belonging, asking how the people, places, systems of power within and purposes of libraries shape people's opportunities to participate in and feel a sense of belonging to their communities.

The research combines national data with 27 interviews across Buckinghamshire's three models of library provision (local authority, community supported, and community managed) to explore how these different models create the conditions for belonging in practice.



WHY LIBRARIES MATTER

Public libraries are a **third space**, a low-barrier, non-commercial space where people can encounter one another through everyday, often low-intensity interactions.

In the Belonging Forum's **2025 Belonging Barometer** survey

43% of respondents who reported a public library within approximately 15 minutes of their home reported high levels of belonging.

67% of respondents who reported using libraries as a third space also reported belonging fairly or very strongly to their local area.

and were 2x as likely to volunteer. 28% of library third-space users reported volunteering, compared with 14% of those who did not.

18% of people who reported having a public library within approximately 15 minutes of their home identified libraries as third spaces where they spend free time, making them

2.2x more likely to use libraries as a third space, than those who did not report a library close by.



LIBRARIES IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

As of 2026, Buckinghamshire has 29 libraries; **nine** of which are **local authority-managed**. However:

- **Eight** are **community-supported:** libraries that remain part of the local authority library service but are supported by volunteers, supplementing paid staff and existing library provision.
- And **twelve** are **community-managed:** libraries operated by community organisations, typically through a local charity or trust, with responsibility for staffing, management and sustaining the service resting with the community.

The development of these models has coincided with a substantial reduction in expenditure on libraries, with net current expenditure on Buckinghamshire's library service falling from £9.3 million in 2009/10 to £4.8 million in 2024/25. The largest reduction occurred between 2014/15 and 2018/19, when expenditure fell from £7.1 million to £3.8 million, following the introduction of a 'county and community' model in 2011, proposing community partnerships at 14 libraries.



68%

Of libraries in Buckinghamshire operate with community support.



48%

£9.3m → £4.8m
reduction in net expenditure on Buckinghamshire's library between 2009/10 and 2024/25

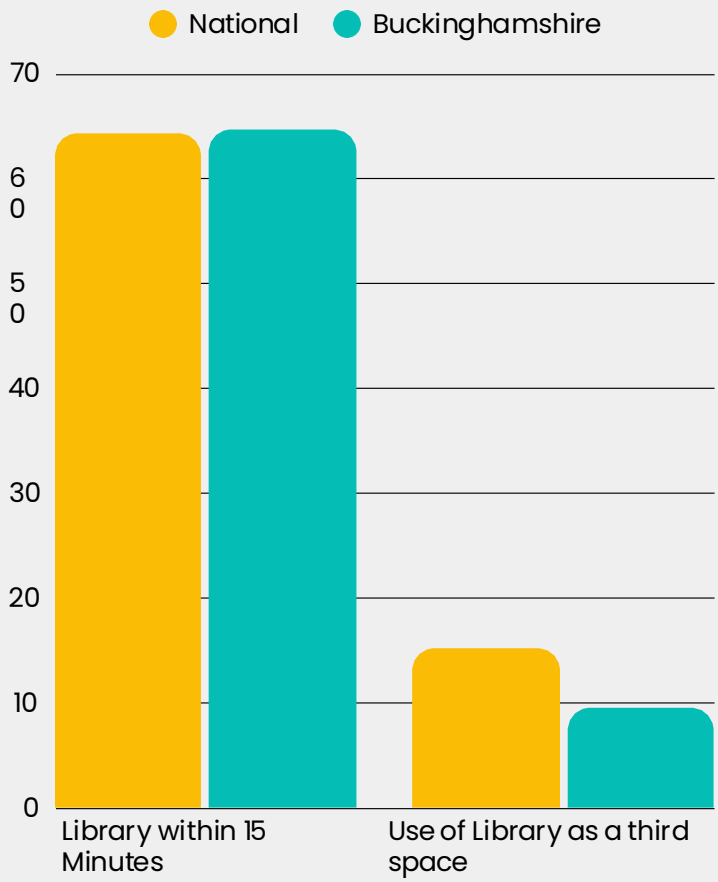
The models differ in their levels of staffed provision. A review of Buckinghamshire's opening arrangements, conducted for this study in March 2026, found average staffed hours of:

Library model	**Average staffed hours per week**
Local Authority	27.6
Community Supported	25.8
Community Managed	19.8

It should be noted that these figures describe staffed provision rather than total public access, particularly following the introduction of LibraryFlex, which enables access to some libraries outside staffed hours.

Nonetheless, such differences matter for how libraries function as spaces of belonging. local authority and community supported libraries, with their staffed provision, generally have greater capacity to offer consistent opening hours than community managed libraries, where opening hours depend more heavily on volunteer availability.

These differences in provision sit alongside differences in how libraries are experienced and used. Buckinghamshire is broadly in line with national patterns of library availability, but differences emerge in library use. This suggests that access alone does not determine use: how libraries are experienced, what they offer, and the opportunities they provide for participation also shape how people engage with them.



The qualitative element of this study comprises **27 semi-structured interviews** with library staff, volunteers, and other community participants across **eleven Buckinghamshire libraries**. Libraries were purposively selected to reflect the three models of library provision examined in this report: Local authority, community supported and community managed.

Selection aimed to capture variation in library size, location, community context and model of provision, rather than to produce a statistically representative sample. Twelve libraries were invited to participate, and eleven responded:

Library model	**Libraries represented in interviews**
Local Authority	Amersham, Aylesbury, Buckingham, High Wycombe,
Community Supported	Great Missenden, Micklefield, Winslow
Community Managed	Castlefield, Haddenham, Farnham Common, Wing

Interview data were thematically coded using the **Four Ps framework,**

People, Place, Power and Purpose

while allowing additional themes to emerge inductively from participants' accounts. Responses were considered both across the sample and comparatively between the three library models.

The qualitative findings are considered alongside the quantitative analysis presented earlier, which draws on the 2025 Belonging Barometer, Arts Council England Location Dataset, and data from the Local Government Association. Together, these sources provide an indication of broader patterns of library use and belonging and an understanding of how these experiences are produced in individual library settings.

PEOPLE

People give the library its social character

The interviews suggest that belonging is created through the relationships that develop within the library. Staff, volunteers and regular users create familiarity and recognition, turning the library from a public facility into a place where people feel welcomed and safe, a place people want to return to.

Familiarity matters.
Regular interactions- being greeted, remembered, or simply having a conversation- can create a sense of belonging.

Staff provide continuity and expertise.
Permanent staff can build long-term relationships with communities while providing the professional expertise needed to support users and volunteers.

People expand the library offer.
Users may move from attending activities or using services to regularly visiting, organising activities or taking on responsibility for sustaining the library.

Volunteers extend the library's social capacity.
Volunteers provide additional time for conversation and offer local knowledge, making the library more community-embedded.

"The physical layout has changed... Apart from that, though, the foundations have stayed the same. We still have Duke of Edinburgh volunteers. We still have children coming in from the school. We still have parents bringing their children. That core community has remained remarkably consistent... The foundations really haven't changed."

– Community Managed Library Volunteer

PLACE

Place creates the conditions for belonging

Libraries provide physical spaces in which people can encounter others, participate in activities and spend time without needing to purchase anything. However, the interviews show that the characteristics of the space, including its accessibility, size, location and atmosphere, influence how these opportunities are experienced.

Physical accessibility enables participation.
A library's location, opening hours, layout and accessibility determine who can use the space and when.

Libraries provide low-barrier spaces for everyday life.
People can read, work, study, access computers, attend activities or simply spend time without an expectation to spend money.

The library's physical environment can support different forms of interaction. Smaller community libraries can facilitate familiarity and informal conversation, while larger local authority libraries can accommodate a wider range of activities and users.

A library's existence does not guarantee meaningful use.
Proximity creates the opportunity to participate, but whether residents experience the library as somewhere they belong also depends on what happens within the space.

"Libraries offer spaces, warm spaces, places where people can simply come and be. For some people, it's the only conversation they'll have that day. They can come in, speak to somebody, see a friendly face, find information, use IT if they need it, and just know there's somewhere safe they can go."

– Local Authority Library Staff Member

POWER

Power determines who can shape and sustain the library

Power concerns who makes decisions, controls resources and has the ability to influence what the library provides. The interviews suggest that community participation can strengthen people's sense of ownership and agency, but participation does not automatically mean power.

The three models distribute responsibility differently.
Local authority libraries remain primarily institutionally governed; community supported libraries combine institutional authority with greater community participation; community managed libraries place greater responsibility directly with communities.

Responsibility without resources can create pressure.
Community involvement cannot substitute indefinitely for funding and professional expertise.

Community participation can strengthen ownership.
Belonging is produced through volunteers and locals contributing through fundraising and shaping activitires.

The greatest frustrations emerged when participants felt unheard or unrecognised.
Volunteers and staff described tensions where their contributions were celebrated publicly but their concerns about funding or organisational decisions were not seen as carrying equivalent weight.

Power therefore requires meaningful influence, not simply participation.

"We're wheeled out when they want to show how wonderful the library service is. We've been mentioned as an example... And you think, 'Oh yes, but that didn't stop you cutting our budget."

– Community Managed Library Volunteer

PURPOSE

Purpose gives people reasons to participate

Libraries serve purposes that extend beyond borrowing books. The interviews show people using and contributing to libraries for reading and learning, social connection, volunteering, accessing information and services, and responding to local interests. These purposes can be created by the library, but also by the community itself.

Belief in the value of libraries motivates participation.
Staff and volunteers described their work as both providing a service and supporting something they believed was important to their community.

Purpose can create a sense of loyalty and commitment.
Longstanding staff and volunteers described a strong attachment to their libraries, with some continuing to contribute despite financial or organisational pressures.

"I wanted to give something back. I knew I wanted to volunteer, but I wasn't sure where... I actually think giving your time is harder than giving money because time is precious... I wanted to make more of an impact. I wanted to give my time because that's the more valuable thing."

– Community Managed Volunteer

People actively shape the library's purpose.
Volunteers and users contribute their own ideas, from board games and children's activities to cultural and current affairs groups, extending the library's purpose beyond its formal offer.

Volunteering creates a reciprocal purpose.
People contribute time because they value the library and want to sustain something that they, or others in their community, may need in the future.

This commitment is a resource, but should not be taken for granted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Protect core provision**
Maintain sufficient staffing, opening hours and physical space to keep libraries accessible and welcoming.

2. **Use volunteering to enhance, not replace, provision**
Support volunteers to bring local knowledge, skills and capacity, but do not rely on volunteering to replace core professional provision.

3. **Treat libraries as part of a wider local ecosystem**
Strengthen links between libraries and local services, recognising their role as trusted access points to the council, healthcare, education and community support.

4. **Recognise belonging as an outcome of library provision**
Measure libraries' contribution to belonging alongside traditional measures such as borrowing or footfall.



"It isn't the building, is it? It's the people."

– Community Managed Volunteer