

Autism Friendly Libraries

Your guide to becoming an inclusive venue



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Welcome

In 2016 we partnered with the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians and Libraries Connected (formerly the Society of Chief Librarians) to help libraries across the country become more accessible.

With funding from the Arts Council England, we developed this training video and the first edition of this training.

We were contacted by libraries up and down England as they started their journey to becoming autism friendly.

Now, we're taking the training a step further – we hope a more comprehensible guide will provide you with the knowledge and tools you need to confidently welcome customers on the autism spectrum.



Understanding autism

It's estimated that 1 in 100 people across the country have autism - that's around 700,000* - and that it touches the lives of 2.7 million people per day.

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person senses the world, and too much sensory input can be overwhelming. It can affect how people communicate and, because it's a spectrum condition, everyone experiences it differently and no two people are the same.

This means they can have difficulty with:

- Social communication (making their thoughts understood)
- Social interaction (knowing social rules)
- Social imagination (predicting what others think)
- Processing sensory input (lights, sounds, smells and textures can be too overwhelming).

While it appears to affect more men than women, research shows women tend to “mask” it and sometimes aren't diagnosed until adulthood*.

Masking is a term used to describe when people with autism mimic or replicate behaviour from their non-autistic peers, without fully understanding their behaviour.

*<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/> | **<https://www.spectrumnews.org/>

40 % of people with autism never visit the library. 90 % would if changes were made *

*DimensionsUK autism friendly libraries survey 2016



What is sensory overload?

People with autism can find it difficult to suppress background input and being able to focus on making decisions or listening to your instructions.

Imagine trying to do long division in your head at a music concert. Too much input can cause sensory overload. This is why routine, reduced sensory input and clear instructions and choices can really help your customers who have autism.

Sensory overload can cause a meltdown – where the person reacts in an erratic way. They may thrash around on the floor crying or shouting.

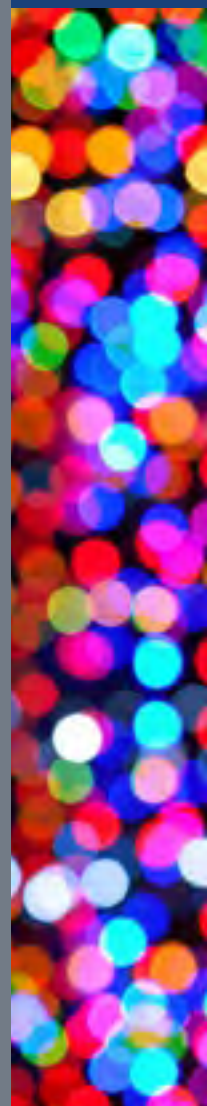
If you see someone having a meltdown, clear the area of potential hazards and try to make the environment less stimulating. Ask the person who's with them, or wait for them to calm down, and ask if there's anything you can do to help.

Sensory overload can also cause shutdown – where the person closes their senses and themselves off. They may not move, speak or respond when engaged with.

If you see someone who has shutdown, give them space and quiet, and make sure someone is around to help when it finishes.

Suggested videos

- ▷ [Watch this video about autism friendly libraries](#)
- ▷ [Watch videos on Dimensions autism friendly playlist](#)
- ▷ [Watch this video from the BBC for a short introduction to autism](#)
- ▷ [Watch this video about sensory sensitivities](#)



Communicating with people who have autism

Everybody experiences autism differently, so you will find your customers prefer to be communicated with differently too.

But, Dimensions consultant, Lauren, can give you a little insight into her world.

Meet Lauren

My name is Lauren Rebello, I'm 18 and have Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of autism.

I love Japanese films, especially animé and I am studying film-making at college. I like books about these topics – but also manga.

I have sensory processing disorder and for me that means that I experience sensory input much greater than others.

For example, sounds are louder, smells are stronger and lights are brighter. So it makes going to public places very difficult and can make me anxious and exhausted.

I have selective mutism which means that I can talk but find it difficult to speak to strangers, particularly when stressed.

My younger brother and sister are also autistic but they experience this in different ways, so I have thought about how to help people with autism when they visit your library. Here are my tips for autism friendly libraries:

Photo credit: Chelmsford Library courtesy of FG Library & Learning



- Eye contact -

Don't expect eye contact - it's not always comfortable and autistic people can find it hard to concentrate on the conversation.

- Listen -

Don't assume silence is because of a lack of understanding. Some autistic people can find it difficult to talk, while others can talk quite a lot about topics or areas they have an interest in or know a lot about.

- Patience -

Autistic people can find it hard to block out background noise, lights and colours to focus on the conversation, so allow at least six seconds of thinking time.

- Help them to choose -

Lots of options can be overwhelming so instead of saying "What sort of book would you like?" say "Shall I show you where the non-fiction books are?"

Try not to give too much information if it's not necessary and give information in advance.

- Help plan -

Try to be specific but don't make promises you can't keep; for example, saying when a book will become available if it might be returned late.

- Empathy -

Some autistic people can say hurtful or rude things when stressed but please don't take it personally, they might be having trouble communicating their distress. Show understanding. They should feel comfortable at the library without fear of judgment.

Also autistic people can have very keen empathy for others and can find emotional books distressing.



- Don't rely on words -

There are tips in this training on how to use signs and imagery. These can be very helpful for autistic guests. Also, Makaton is a simplified version of sign language which is getting more popular. Try learning some basic Makaton signs such as book types and genres.

You don't need to be fluent, but knowing a few words can really help show your understanding and enthusiasm.

- Think literally -

Avoid jargon, slang and metaphors. Just simply say what you mean.

- Independence -

Put up plenty of signs and provide information online, to use before they visit and to reduce the need to ask for help.

- Personal space -

Some people with autism do not like being touched, it can cause a lot of stress and anxiety.

Everyone's experience of autism is different so be aware that some people find it hard to understand personal space and they might want to hug you or take your hand. If you don't want this then please gently and firmly tell them what they should do instead.



Your sensory friendly environment

Libraries are generally considered quiet places, which can deter some people with autism from attending. They're afraid of disturbing the peace.

While many people with autism need a quiet environment, they make noise themselves. People might talk to themselves or others, they are easily excitable and might move around.

It should be clear to other customers that your library is autism friendly, and that includes tolerance of certain levels of noise and acceptance of different behaviours.

Your staff teams should see this as an opportunity to help raise public understanding about autism. Encourage them to explain to other customers what being autism friendly means, and by hosting special events too.



Reducing sensory stimulation

At times, libraries can also be bright, loud and exciting places with children and groups enjoying this public space.

For many people, the main causes of sensory overload are noise, movement and lights and colours. Plus social interaction can really increase stress.

You know your library best – think about how you can create a sensory friendly and consistent atmosphere. This includes reducing or increasing the lighting to a neutral level, reducing noises and minimising strong smells.

Where you can't make changes to the environment, provide as much guidance and as many signs as possible. This will help customers to prepare and understand what to be aware of when they arrive.

Allow areas of the library to have ambient noise and make it clear to other customers that your library is autism friendly, which includes tolerance of certain levels of noise and acceptance of different behaviours.

Everyone with autism experiences things differently. Someone might be hypersensitive to sound. Someone else might be hypersensitive to silence. Someone might have selective mutism, whereas someone else might be particularly talkative.

Let everyone know you're an autism friendly environment

One of the most important things people with autism and their carers want is understanding.

They want to know they're in a safe and inclusive place where people won't judge them.

Make it clear to all customers – those with autism and those without – that you are an autism friendly library. Display signs and posters ([templates are available on the ASCEL website](#)) and use the autism friendly logo (available from Dimensions).

Share the adjustments you have made and the resources and support you have available, but encourage customers to talk to members of staff to find out more.

Use this as an opportunity to share your knowledge and understanding, all while providing security and reassurance to your customers.

80 % of people with autism, who we surveyed, have felt excluded from their community.

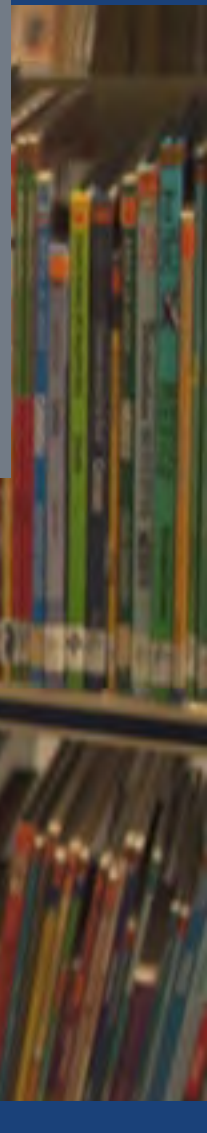
They worry most about being judged by other people.

And value opportunities to be in judgment free environments above other adjustments.*

*DimensionsUK 2018/19 autism friendly screenings survey

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Share information

Provide signs, instructions and equipment

Many people with autism hate uncertainty. They need to have absolute confidence, before entering and on entering an environment, about where to go and what to do.

You can really help them, and the person who supports them, by providing as much guidance as possible. Here are some tips and suggestions:

- Think about how your signs, guidance and maps can link together.
- Consider colour coding areas of the library, or genres of books.
- Keep imagery and language consistent.
- Avoid adjectives and keep language clear and concise.
- Use clear images that relate to the message you're trying to convey.
- Avoid bright colours.
- Remember your audience will include autistic adults too so don't just aim to appeal to children.

- Signs and guides -

Signs, guidance, posters, leaflets and social stories that people can use to navigate the library can really help. The following includes general signage and some further guidance that might benefit visitors.

Directional signs

- map of the library
- reception
- reading areas
- computer areas
- where to ask questions
- where to hire books out
- book genres and types
- toilets

Information signs

- opening and closing times
- event dates and times
- when the library is expected to be particularly busy or quiet
- how to identify a member of staff (such as a sign with a photo of the lanyard staff members wear and “Ask me a question” text)
- ‘Not every disability is visible’ on the disabled toilets

Warning signs

- when a noisy event is taking place or due to take place
- for the hand-dryers in the toilet
- where there’s a bright, moving computer screensaver
- other areas where sensory stimulation can’t be significantly reduced

Guidance

- how to get a Library Card
- how to use the self-service machine
- how to check a book out in person
- how to hire a computer
- library fines, how they work and what to do if you get one

Information on the Library Website

- information (as listed above)
- guidance (as listed above)
- maps
- a social story (guide with pictures) about their visit ([a template is available on the ASCEL website](#))

Going a step further

These are the basic steps you can take to make your library more autism friendly.

But there are some extra steps you can take to make the experience even more inclusive and enjoyable for your customers on the spectrum.

Provide disability positive books

There are some books that could help all your customers learn more about autism, disability and differences. There are many available, and some research can give you more options. Below are three that Dimensions has a connection to:

[Jess the Goth Fairy series by Jess Hiles](#)

Jess Hiles is an author with a learning disability and one of Dimensions Learning Disability and Autism Leaders for 2018. Her books celebrate difference and she regularly reads them to local school children.

[Hal and The End Street by William Hawkes](#)

William Hawkes is an illustrator who has autism and his books include an autistic protagonist called Hal. He works with author Jude Lennon on the Hal's Books series.

[Simple Autism Strategies for Home and School: Poetry, Tips and Resources to Support Your Child by Sarah Cobbe](#)

Michelle Rebello is Dimensions Involvement and Engagement Co-ordinator, consultant for autism friendly training and an illustrator. She's illustrated the front cover for this book, which contains insights into autism.



Provide specific times for extra autism adjustments

Some people might only feel comfortable in the library when they know that the environment is autism friendly, and that other customers are completely aware and comfortable this is an autism friendly time.

This gives you the opportunity to implement more autism friendly adjustments (reducing the lighting, having extra staff on hand to provide further support and guidance and providing some sensory equipment) as well as getting a better understanding about your autistic customers and what interests they have.

Create a private space

If you have the space available, make it clear to customers that there is somewhere private, quiet and calm they can use if they start experiencing sensory overload. Some time to relax might be the difference between a meltdown and shutdown, and having to leave or being able to continue their time at the library.

Create a sensory space

If you have a private area away from hustle and bustle, you can create a sensory room or space for customers. This can be an area where children can go to enjoy some sensory activities.

Provide some board games and educational books and resources for entertainment, including fidget toys for self-stimulatory behaviour (also known as stimming).

Projectors with calming scenes, fairy lights, floor mats, cushions, beanbags and pop-up tents are great ways to create a comfortable and welcoming environment.

Customers can use this area when the environment becomes too overwhelming. This sensory space can be



a place for someone to self-regulate and take a moment to calm. It helps them to reset so they can enjoy the library at their own pace.

Make sure it's clear this sensory space is autism friendly and isn't a play area for children – the confusion and noise could cause stress and deter your customers who have autism.

Host autism specific events

When you have got to know your autistic customers, you might want to host events they'd enjoy.

Are some of your customers fascinated with the workings of the railway system? Ask an expert to host a talk about it. Is there a book that's proving popular? Ask someone to do a live reading of it or invite the author to speak.

- When hosting events -

- Don't overfill – make sure there are free spaces for customers to sit, move around, change seats and mitigate feeling cramped in.
- Ask customers what adjustments would help them in advance and let them know you'll do what you can to accommodate.
- Create a social story and even a video to walk them through what to do and what to expect. This should include a schedule for the event too.
- Put signs and posters up so it's clear where they are, where they should go and what they're there for.
- If it isn't a specific autism event, allow customers with autism to come earlier than the other customers so they can get settled.

- Have everything set up and ready to go before customers arrive.
- Make sure the person introducing the event explains clearly what is going to happen, what adjustments are in place, where the toilets are and who to go to with queries.
- It is always better to take payments in advance and have sensitive refund policies in place if people cannot attend or have to leave early.
- Put up clear signs saying where they can't take food and drink. Images as well as words here will help.
- Make a quiet space available for customers who want to leave and calm down – put up signs to show where it is and have someone available to let others know if it's occupied.

These events could be open for anybody to come to, with a focus on them being autism friendly.

Always make it clear that the environment is autism friendly and if anyone has any questions they can speak to a member of the team.

Photo credit: Chelmsford Library courtesy of FG Library & Learning



Promoting your autism friendly work

Promoting your autism friendly library and events is key to growing your audience base.

They need to trust your space and feel confident that your staff team understands autism.

There are a number of ways you can promote autism friendly libraries to your local community – don't keep it all online, provide printed materials and talk to customers locally too. Word of mouth will be your greatest asset.

Remember to keep autism friendly at the forefront of your messaging and design – keep the language simple and inclusive (say what you mean) and the design clean with a good contrast.

Use this as an opportunity to engage with potential customers and showcase your autism awareness and understanding.

Photo credit: Chelmsford Library courtesy of FG Library & Learning



Promoting nationally

Email dimensionscampaigns@dimensions-uk.org and let us know you're an autism friendly library! We'd love to hear more and discuss opportunities for Dimensions to share your work across our digital channels and PR.

We're well known for our autism friendly cinema screenings, so we can share your work with thousands of potential customers and provide extra support and guidance to develop your autism friendly work.

Promoting on social media

Using your Facebook page or Twitter account is a great way to promote your autism friendly library.

Share your work, events you're holding and provide customer service for customers who have questions.

Follow @DimensionsUK, @ASCELUK and @Libsconnected on social media and tag them in your posts so they can share them too.

Using popular hashtags, tagging relevant accounts and posting on relevant Facebook pages can all help your reach. Consider these autism hashtags:

- #autismfriendly
- #autismlibs
- #sensoryfriendly
- #asd



Promoting locally

You can promote your autism friendly library and events locally by reaching out to local support services, groups, schools and publishing on directories.

Having positive and proactive relationships with local groups, schools and charities is critical but building those trusting networks takes time.

Hosting joint events, inviting them to tour the library and getting their feedback and advice will help you develop that relationship as well as better understanding local needs and expectations.

Your offline work should also support your online work, if you have posted on a local group's social media account call them to explain a little more and share flyers they can distribute.

Where to find local services

To grow your audience at a local level, we strongly recommend that you contact your local authority to access information on local services and organisations.

Search for Local Offer – this is the provision made by each local authority. Local Offer is a way local authorities give children and young people with special educational needs (SEND) and/or disabilities and their parents or carers information about what activities and support is available in the area where they live.

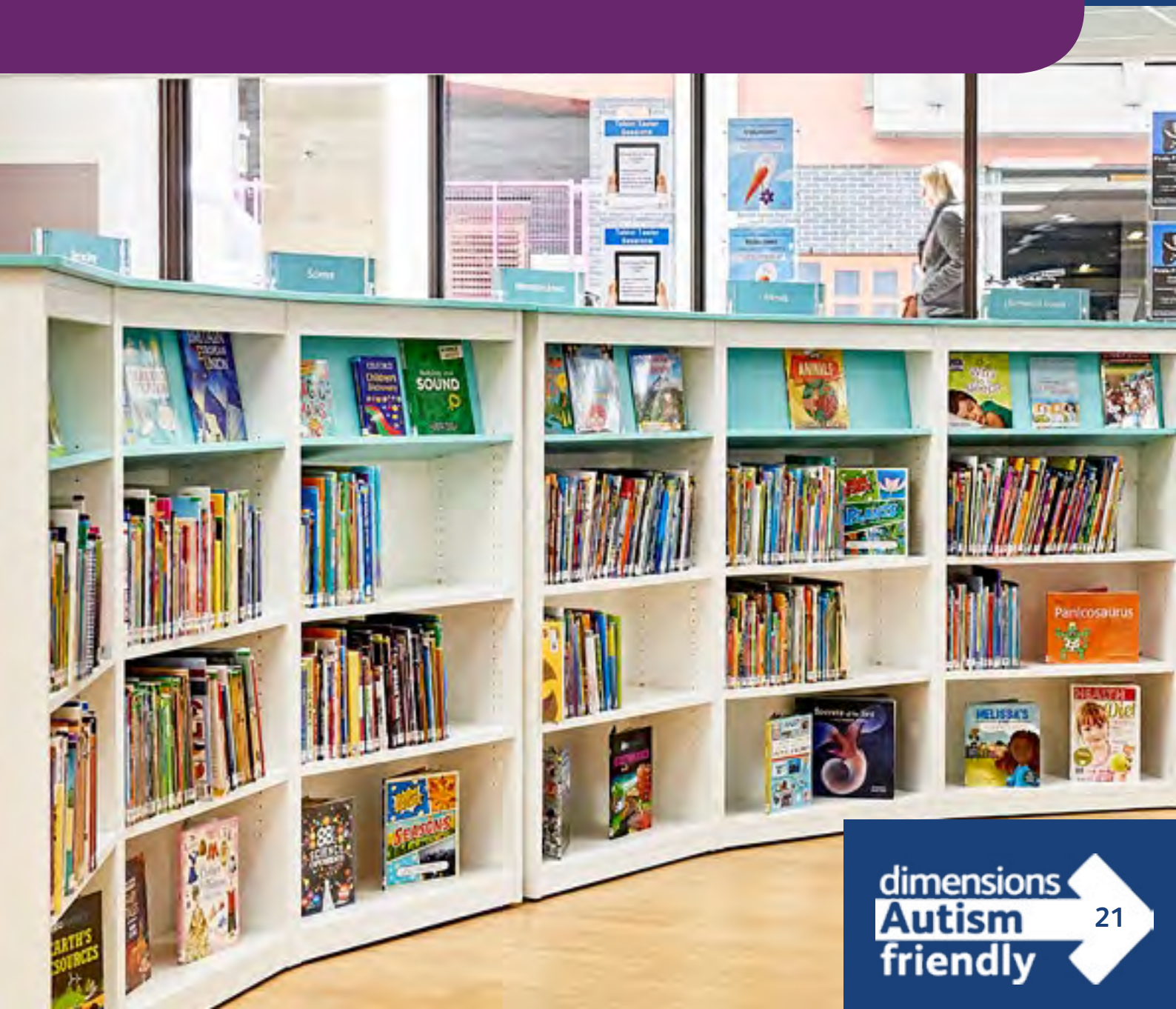
Most local authority websites will have a section dedicated to 'disability services' and will generally have separate listings for adults and children (Disabled Children Services/Adult Care and Health). You may find that your local authority has collated all the information into a downloadable information pack.



The local authority websites will have contact details for children's centres, schools, outreach teams, local services and organisations for people with autism, all of which are great places to contact and pass on information about your library and events.

The National Autistic Society also has an A-Z directory of available services around the country, an excellent resource to use to see who you can contact in your local area.

NAS Services Directory: autism.org.uk/directory/a-to-z/l=A.aspx
The majority of the services are listed alphabetically, starting with the town name of where the organisation is based. If you are unable to see anything relevant on the list, there is also the option to do an advanced search autism.org.uk/directory/advanced-search.aspx



About Dimensions

Thank you for becoming an autism friendly library – it's so rewarding and you are helping people with autism feel more welcome and accepted in society as a whole.

This guide was written by Dimensions, with help from autism consultants and experts, ASCEL and Libraries Connected. We provide autism friendly training resources for a number of venues, including cinemas and museums.

Dimensions is a national not-for-profit organisation that supports people with learning disabilities and/or autism. This means our resources and any surplus goes back into providing high quality support services.

But, we want to change society and help people we support and their families to lead this change. We want to see a world where people with autism and learning disabilities are in paid employment, able to enjoy time in their communities and don't face the stigma and ignorance that is still so abundant.

At Dimensions we're proud to make a difference – we don't just talk about the change, we help make it happen – and by partnering with us for autism friendly libraries you can be part of it.



Contact Dimensions

Email: dimensionscampaigns@dimensions-uk.org

Web: www.dimensions-uk.org

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Social: @DimensionsUK

About ASCEL

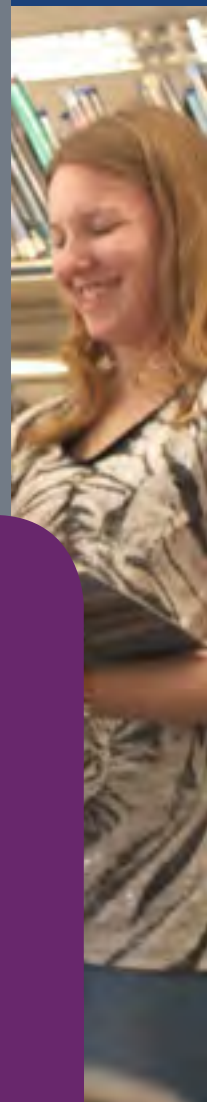
ASCEL (the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians) is the national network of senior managers in Children's Public and Schools Library Services.

Their aim is to lead excellence in library services for children and young people and schools so that:

- every child and young person visiting a public library should be inspired by an exciting environment which makes reading for pleasure irresistible
- every school has access to a high quality school library service.

They:

- Work together to stimulate children's and schools' library service development.
- Contribute to the national dialogue around children's and young people's learning, reading development and library services.
- Work in partnership with Libraries Connected and library partners on national initiatives.
- Provide support and skills sharing for members.
- Provide guidance to ensure excellence in children's library services and to ensure that children's services are represented in the Universal Offers.



Contact ASCEL

Web: <https://www.ascel.org.uk/contact-us>

Social: [@ASCELUK](https://twitter.com/ASCELUK)



About Libraries Connected

Libraries Connected believes in the power of libraries to change lives.

Their vision is an inclusive, modern, sustainable and high quality public library service at the heart of every community in the UK. They work to promote the value of libraries, broker national partnerships, share best practice and drive innovation in the sector.

Made by their members, they represent all the public library services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Contact Libraries Connected

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