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Policy Brief

Strengthen the Local Role of Libraries

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2025

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rivano Eckerdal, J., & Engström, L. (2025, Mar). Policy Brief: Strengthen the Local Role of Libraries. Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT) .

https://transforminglibraries.net/media/pages/publications/policy-brief-local-involvement-se/fc2cf003c4-1743003129/pb-local-involvement_se-en.pdf

Total number of authors:

2

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Policy Brief

Strengthen libraries' local role

Introduction

The authors of this policy brief are contributors to the research project Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT). ILIT's objective is to examine public libraries' role in this era beset by social challenges such as segregation, discrimination, austerity measures, and unemployment. ILIT began conducting research in three urban communities in 2022: Malmö, Sweden; Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and Vienna, Austria. The project will conclude in 2025.

ILIT's research explores three principal themes: community librarianship, the politics of the library, and local involvement. This policy brief addresses the theme related to ILIT's study of how users perceive libraries' work with local involvement.

The central thrust of our study comprises an attempt to understand libraries as *social infrastructures*. Infrastructure is defined as a fundamental structure that plays an important role in maintaining a well-functioning society. The term is often used to refer to physical infrastructure, such as conduits for electricity, water, and Internet cables, and transportation networks for cars, trains, bicycles, and pedestrians. Publicly funded libraries are an infrastructure providing access to information and culture. For many people, libraries are the place to turn to for advice and support on many of life's important questions and decisions. This is especially true for people in vulnerable situations. In Sweden, the *Swedish Library Act* stipulates that each municipality must provide public libraries for its residents.

By describing public libraries as *social infrastructures* we emphasize their social function, in which library staff play a key role. Libraries contribute to a community's well-being through the support they provide to individuals in their everyday lives, which includes serving as meeting places. Library staff play a crucial role in enabling libraries to fulfill this role. Notwithstanding, we observe that this social function of libraries is currently under threat due to cutbacks and austerity policies. In light of these developments, we wish to draw attention to the value of libraries and their staff as an asset in maintaining a well-functioning, sustainable, and robust society (see also our other recommendations available on the project website www.transforminglibraries.net).

In this policy brief, we address policy makers and present our recommendations aimed at strengthening the local role of libraries. This policy brief presents recommendations aimed at strengthening librarians' social role. These can be used to advocate in favor of granting public libraries greater resources to use in support of their cities and local residents.

The ILIT research project

Brief overview of the project:

- ILIT began in 2022 and is scheduled to conclude in 2025.
- Research conducted as part of the project is being carried out in a total of three public library organizations in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria respectively.
- The project's research group consists of seven researchers and one designer working in the field of social design.
- In Sweden, regional administrative body Region Skåne is involved in the project as a professional partner.
- ILIT receives funding from the EU via the framework program ERA-NET Cofund Urban Transformation Capacities (ENUTC). The Swedish contribution to the project is funded by Formas, the Swedish research council for sustainable development, and the Swedish Energy Agency.
- ILIT's research group is multidisciplinary in nature.
- The project makes use of a combination of qualitative research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and critical policy analysis.
- ILIT has developed a participatory research method it calls "zine-making workshops." This method involves organizing workshops in which participants create simple publications called "zines." Librarians, library management, library users, decision-makers, and other stakeholders were invited to take part in ILIT's zine-making workshops. Participants were tasked with jointly investigating how libraries can function as social infrastructures and also further develop their role in this respect.

Aim of this policy brief

ILIT considers that the potential exists to further strengthen public libraries' role as social infrastructure in their local communities. For each part of the project, we present our recommendations on what conditions are needed for libraries to best carry out their daily work to fulfill the role of the library as a social infrastructure. This text relates to the part where we concentrated on those who already visit the libraries and also those who could become visitors. The recommendations are directed at those who have influence over libraries. They are based on 1) the fieldwork conducted by the Swedish members of ILIT during the fall of 2024 at two public libraries managed by local municipal department Malmö Public Libraries and 2) discussions and reflections that occurred in subsequent dialogues with academic colleagues, library staff and representatives from the offices of the regional administration, Region Skåne. The fieldwork included participant observations and conversations at the two libraries and three zine-workshops with users and representatives from the organization Funktionsrätt Skåne. We have also visited and invited representatives from organizations working to promote mental health and LGBTQI rights.

Terminology

Public library

Sweden's public libraries are funded by its respective municipal governments, which have a statutory obligation under the *Swedish Library Act* to provide access to library services. Public libraries in Sweden must be universally accessible, and the Act stipulates that libraries must give individuals with functional impairments, national minorities, persons with a native language other than Swedish, and children and youths special consideration as prioritized groups of library users. (*Swedish Library Act, 2013:801*)

Social infrastructure

Infrastructures are basic structures that support important public services. Physical structures such as roads, power grids, water mains, and Internet communication systems have long been described as “infrastructures.” When ILIT refers to libraries as “social infrastructures,” this designation includes physical elements such as the library space, but also the nonphysical connections and networks that a library's operations facilitate.

Issues & challenges

Our research shows that libraries function as social infrastructure of fundamental importance for people's life opportunities. In this third and final part of the ILIT project, we are particularly interested in how libraries live up to their claim of being a place that reaches out and is relevant to everyone in the local community. We have identified three societal factors that influence libraries in their ambition to be a place for local participation.

1) The central role of the library as a meeting place

Consumption is an integral part of urban culture. In recent times, certain forms of consumption have been accentuated and expressed in what we call ‘caféisation’. Cities and towns have a wide range of places where people can eat and drink, but spending time there requires consumption. The lack of open spaces that do not require consumption has a very negative impact on people's ability to participate as equals in their communities. Libraries are one of the few places that do not require anything from the visitor, either in terms of money or activity. You can just be in the library. As more and more places become commercialized, the importance of the library as a physical place in the city increases. But for the library to fulfil its role as a meeting place, everyone must be able to access it and feel welcome. Continuous work is needed to ensure accessibility for all.

“ During a reading circle meeting, a participant comments on the ILIT research project, saying: “What we do here is what the library is. What we do here together is the social role. Then what politicians and others say somewhere doesn’t matter so much, it’s this. We are the library.” When the meeting is over, the person adds that the coffee is an important part of the social aspect of the meeting. The librarian who held the meeting replies ” that they are happy to be able to offer it.

2) Public libraries as places for work and formal learning

Libraries in the educational sector have traditionally been places of formal learning, while public libraries have focused on informal learning linked to the idea of the value of people’s civic education. Over time, a shift has taken place where public libraries have also become central to realizing the transformation from an industrial to a knowledge society and offering support and resources for lifelong learning. In a society marked by overcrowded housing, public libraries can offer students, from primary school to university, space to work individually and in groups. At the same time, the problem remains that many primary schools lack adequate school libraries.

“ When I come to the library, I feel that it is calm and cozy. You feel comfortable when you are in the library. You can focus and you get better thoughts. If it [is] messy somewhere, you can always come to the library. If they [have] more activities in the library, more people would come. ”

3) Lack of representation and accessibility hinders participation

According to the Library Act, prioritized groups are persons with disabilities, persons belonging to national minorities, persons whose mother tongue is not Swedish, and children and young people. Libraries work actively with these groups, for example by offering different ways of reading and accessing media. However, much remains to be done to expand library activities and services to make them more relevant and accessible to people. Participation requires continuous work with different groups who can share their perspectives through dialogue with library staff. It is also important that library staff include pe-

ople with different experiences and backgrounds, not least when it comes to language, which is a cornerstone of libraries.

“ Daydream: 3D glasses with audio that describes where you are walking using an app or various apps. Visual interpreter
Headphones so you can get information about the printer, where different books are, how to find them. Dream: When you open a book, it starts talking. ”

“ Daydream: **Silent rooms at every library**
A private room in every library. In this room people can have small meetings, for example to get help filling out forms or getting instructions for Legimus [A digital library with audio books, braille books and e-textbooks]. Another idea is that people should be able to meet with social services or psychiatrists in the library, a place where you feel safe. When you feel bad, it might feel better to be in the library than in an environment where you meet those who feel even worse. **Self-service opening hours** with the same card and code to all libraries across Sweden, and preferably throughout the Nordic region or Europe. Then you always have the opportunity to enter a safe environment. ”

Recommendations

During our fieldwork, we observed how people use libraries and engaged in conversations about how libraries could make it easier for more people to access library services. We understand libraries as an important part of society's infrastructure. This also means that the social challenges that are prominent in society are reflected in the library. Our study confirms libraries as a central place in the lives of many people. Libraries offer care, community, information, education and cultural experiences. Library activities

foster connections with the local community and offer people help and support in their lives. Based on our study and the challenges we present above, we would like to highlight the following points as important for strengthening the role of libraries as social infrastructure for local involvement:

- **Public libraries play an important role as an open space with no requirement for consumption and therefore access to library services must be ensured for all.**

As a result of public sector cuts and the commercialization of urban space, there are fewer and fewer places where people can spend time without spending money. Libraries are one such place. Therefore, accessibility issues must be prioritized so that everyone feels welcome and can visit libraries and access their resources.

- **Dedicate a refreshment area in the library.**

It is beneficial to have a designated area for eating snacks and packed lunches. The opportunity to bring your own food and drinks during library visits is an important aspect of inclusivity.

- **There is a high demand for study spaces, and a variety of library types are required to meet this need.**

Public libraries play an important role in both informal and formal learning. But to meet the needs of students, school libraries must also provide high quality activities to support their students.

- **Multiple sound levels simultaneously.**

There is a strong desire for more quiet places dedicated to reading and studying. At the same time, many visitors want to talk. Therefore, there must be places that allow different sound levels in the library, including silent ones.

- **Information in text, audio and images.**

To make the library accessible to people with different needs, information and instructions must be offered in several forms, including text, audio and images. Text, audio and images must be clear in both form and content. This applies to both physical and digital library spaces and services.

- **Recruit library staff whose mother tongue is not Swedish.**

For staff to have knowledge of the languages spoken by users, they must have broader language skills than they currently possess. This in turn requires that librarian training programs succeed in attracting more applicants whose mother tongue is not Swedish.

- **Safeguard the library's low threshold.**

To successfully offer activities and services that meet the needs of the local community, it is paramount to build and sustain relationships with diverse groups within the community. The low threshold must be continuously honed and maintained.

Social infrastruktur som gör skillnad: Folkbibliotekens transformativa kapacitet i ett åtstramat stadsliv is the name given to the ILIT project in Sweden.

Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT) is the project's name in English.
Infrastructuring the Social: Public Libraries and Their Transformative Capacity in Austerity Urbanism

FUNDING

ILIT is funded by JPI Urban Europe via the ERA-NET Cofund Urban Transformation Capacities (ENUTC) initiative, as co-funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant Agreement No. 101003758.

The project is financed in the Netherlands by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), in Austria by the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG), and in Sweden by the research council for sustainable development Formas and the Swedish Energy Agency.

PERIOD

May 2022–April 2025

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