

## **Universal Design in UK Libraries: Best practice in British public libraries**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper seeks to describe examples of best practice in library service design and building layout according to the principles of Universal Design in public libraries in the United Kingdom. As well as looking at services which are incorporated into the overall library offer, it will focus on several different libraries referring to the Universal Design principles and the way in which new and refurbished British public libraries are increasingly recognising the requirements of the widest range of age groups and specific needs. Examples will be given of libraries who have provided flexible spaces for families and children with special needs including autism, new community hubs where health and wellbeing are taken into account in the planning of the space and buildings which have been refurbished to provide more equitable access to the whole library with an additional range of services. The paper will also show how the needs of people living with such conditions as dementia, sight loss and autism are incorporated into the design of services.*

**Keywords:** Disabilities, Accessibility, Universal Design, Libraries.

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### **Universal Design in UK Libraries**

Across the United Kingdom, library services have become focused on the way in which their services can be accessed universally and over recent years, there have been many initiatives, new services, new and refurbished libraries which have begun to take this need into account.

A greater understanding of long term conditions, learning disabilities, lifestyle challenges and specific needs have led to an assessment of how public libraries can support and how they need to be adjusted to provide the maximum benefit to the widest audience.

Across the United Kingdom there are 151 library services in England, another 22 in Wales and in Scotland, 32. Northern Ireland has a single library service having amalgamated five into one.

There are many examples of the ways in which either complete nations such as Wales or Scotland have focused down on specific needs which are delivered through the universal offer of the public library, or where particular authorities have taken an initiative and delivered activities which are designed for all.

In Scotland, most public library authorities are now “Dementia Friendly” having provided their staff and workforce with training and awareness, as well as looking at how their libraries might need to be adjusted to ensure that they provide a welcoming space.

In the City of Glasgow all 53 libraries are now autism friendly having been assessed and with staff undergoing training packages to help them understand the needs of their customers in using public spaces. Autism friendly guides to the city, developed by Glasgow Life (the independent trust who delivers Glasgow’s public library service for the City Council) provide details for parents, carers and autistic people to help them prepare for a visit to the library and to get the most from the service.

In Wales, the Welsh Government has recently agreed to fund a country wide Books on Prescription scheme which will bring a consistent approach to every library service in the Principality. This will ensure that each library service can provide the same service to a wide range of people with specific needs for self-help. The schemes cover long term conditions, mild to moderate mental health challenges and longer term conditions such as dementia.

It is in the design of new or refurbished spaces, though, that Universal Design principles become most important. Over recent years, the way in which we provide our libraries in the UK has changed. There are few new libraries now who segregate areas of their service for specific purposes and spaces which we design now are much more flexible, with the widest range of needs incorporated into their layouts.

There are many examples of great design across the country and many of these can be found on our library design web page, Designing Libraries.

([www.designinglibraries.org.uk](http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk))

By way of example, these are just a few short case studies of libraries from the past few years which have been refurbished or newly built.

### **Stockton Libraries and Information Service**

#### **Yarm Library and Newcastle Building Society**

The historic town of Yarm lies on the south bank of the river Tees in the former North Riding of Yorkshire. The branch library was opened in the 1960s and is one of Stockton Borough’s six “town centre” libraries. The building featured a small meeting room with a traditional “High Street” shop front library layout and prior to refurbishment was receiving around 70,000 visits per year.

The library had not been refurbished or remodelled since its opening and presented a number of serious accessibility issues. The main entrance to the building was not accessible to wheelchair users and the interior layout was difficult. In 2015 an opportunity arose to work with a local Building Society to share the building by remodelling the small meeting room area to include a public counter area, small office and small conference room. The Newcastle Building Society had previously had a full service branch in Yarm High Street but had closed this due to the costs of maintaining the building. A partnership with the library was an attractive proposition as it shared potential audiences and running costs.

The library was redesigned in 2015/16 to feature

- A completely new entrance arrangement which provided universal access via ramps into the front of the library space with a much more prominent profile on the High Street. Accessible toilet facilities were provided for the first time in the building and doors were automated to allow much easier access.
- A completely flexible multi use library space which can be used for events and activities by moving the shelves, which are on castors and mobile as a result.



- Self Service library terminals and a self-service connection to Stockton Borough Council's Customer Services centres.
- The layout of the library was made much more informal with lower shelves to provide more visibility and reduce the sense of claustrophobia caused by the height of the 1960s wooden and metal units
- A gravel courtyard at the rear of the library was transformed into a Reading Garden with sensory planting and herbs at wheelchair height.



- Sensitive colour schemes have been used which take into account the needs of people with dementia, or with sight loss to reduce anxiety but also to allow those who need good colour separation to navigate the building as easily as possible.
- A small building society branch which offers financial services (paying in and withdrawal of cash, mortgage and financial planning advice.).



The changes have stimulated great feedback from the local community

- “Very impressed with the face lift. Light, airy and very welcoming”.
- “We adore the children’s area great collection and so comfy!”
- “Garden is super – spacious, well laid out. Relaxing place to read in fine weather!
- New children’s area lovely.”
- “Well I think everything is just wonderful!!! Not only have we kept our library but it’s all new as well!”

And the Andrew Haigh, Chief Executive of Newcastle Building Society, has been equally delighted.

- “It is all about people – and the relationship banks and building societies have with their communities. The local Council told us that a revamp of the library had opened up free space . We were all too happy to use it to open up a new branch. We are hoping the new arrangement will be a win-win for everyone – encouraging more people to visit the library and also enabling us to better serve customers in a friendly environment”

Usage of the library has increased dramatically and the Building Society have experienced a very impressive increase in transactions as a result of the partnership.

## **Essex Libraries**

### **Chelmsford Children’s Library and Family Hub**

Chelmsford is a city in south east England and is also the administrative centre for the County of Essex. The library which was opened in 1988 is part of the County Hall complex. It is a large and busy city library with 458,871 visits in 2017/2018 and a large area for children. The local Family Hub supporting children and young people aged 0-19 and their families use the children’s library for group activities, parenting support and one to one sessions with families.

The children’s library was in need of refurbishment and two large grants (Libraries Opportunities for Everyone Innovation Fund and Community Infrastructure Levy) made it possible for to think creatively and fulfil the services’ dreams for the space. The library team were particularly anxious to ensure the children’s area was welcoming and accessible for children with additional needs and autism.

The space features:

- A close partnership with the Family Hub staff to choose the designs, colours and fabrics for the library, which has kept the area very light with feature colours and wood and natural materials whenever possible with wipe clean flooring. Lighting is on dimmer switches so that the lights can be dimmed in separate parts of the library if children require it. These all help children keep calm and focus.
- A library layout full of soft curves and flowing lines, creating interesting pathways through the space, and safe cubby holes and hideaways among the shelves. Safe places for children



- A full length sensory wall. This includes led lights, tactile shapes for little hands to pull off, hold and move around, flowing water through glass surfaced panels, cubby holes with changing colour lights that children can climb into and curl up in. Some of the features are sensitive to sound changing colour as children clap or make a noise. For special events a projector can project images onto the flooring allowing children to interact with the pictures – jumping on them to change them.
- A “pool area” with soft cushions in which children can sit and read and strips of led lights that change colour that children can hold and manipulate
- Sturdy “dog” seats – children are loving sitting on these



- A stage area where performances can take place.
- Sensory LED water tubes with changing coloured lights and flowing water dotted around the whole library.



- A cosy one to one room with sofas and a new sink area and a health and wellbeing area to support parents.
- A surprise hit of the whole space - the new young adult area. This is a large area with tables, sofas, USB charging stations, tables and computers – opening during revision time, it has been packed out every day

The feedback from the community has been amazing.

“Calming beautiful place”

“Beautiful sensory, lovely colours”

2/3/18 Beautiful, fresh, light, clean, welcoming and excellent selection of new/ clean books to invite us to read. I'll recommend to everyone! Well done on making such a lovely space. Also fantastic improvement in YA, graphic and audiobook selection. We'll be back time & again.

Essex Libraries strategic manager, Sarah Mears, says “We are very proud of the space which will allow us to work together sharing space and jointly delivering health and wellbeing services to the community of Chelmsford.”

## Warrington Libraries

### Great Sankey

Warrington lies in the historic county of Cheshire in England's North West, set midway between the major cities of Liverpool and Manchester, the Borough is home to around 208,000 people. Great Sankey lies two miles west of the town centre and the parish is home to 24,000 residents. Warrington's library service is delivered by an independent trust, Livewire, alongside a range of other cultural and leisure services and the recently opened new library hub at Great Sankey will eventually sit alongside floodlit tennis courts and football pitch, swimming pool, sports hall, fitness studios, NHS health suite, conference facilities and a concourse with food outlets.



The new facility has been carefully planned by Architects, Walker Simpson, and library designers, The Design Concept. The intention of the design was for an integrated space for everyone. The new facility includes

- integrated facilities that include cultural, leisure and health provision to promote wellness and wellbeing.
- a small library which has its focus in the Concourse area of the building immediately accessible from the entrance lobby
- both books and a digital offer with a children's library at the heart of the space
- a dementia friendly design with consideration of colour contrasts, high levels of natural and artificial lighting, acoustics, furniture and fittings, and signage
- a library not confined to one location, but which is dispersed throughout throughout the building
- after-school gym sessions for children and a coding club within the children's digital area.

From the outset, the brief for Great Sankey Neighbourhood Hub was developed in close consultation with stakeholders and funding bodies including LiveWire, Culture Warrington, Warrington Borough Council, Sport England, Warrington Disability Partnership, Warrington CCG and Warrington Dementia Action Alliance.

The project has been developed with the University of Stirling's Dementia Services Design Centre and aims to be one of the first public buildings in the UK to gain dementia friendly accreditation.

“From the outset of a design, the diagram of the building on the site was considered and included determining the sun’s path, orientation and wayfinding in and around the facility. How users of the building would arrive was a key element of the design - by bus, car, cycle or walking? The layout of the building has been designed to meet a wide variety of needs.

“In its simplest form, dementia friendly design complements the principles of good public building design: clarity of form, orientation, wayfinding, accessibility, convenience, good levels of natural and artificial light, controlled acoustics, air quality and temperature control.”

Daniela Hislop from The Design Concept adds: “Colour affects people physically and emotionally and contributes enormously to an interesting and inspiring environment. People with dementia often have vision problems, including impaired depth perception and altered colour perception, reducing their ability to perceive contrasts. Carpets, wall colour, fabrics, furniture and accessories look much brighter in direct daylight than under artificial light.”

In the design process measures were taken of the contrast between surfaces by their light reflective value.

“Careful consideration of the light reflective values on all finishes was key during our design and colour selection process, and presented an interesting challenge to ensure that the colour palette selected would appeal to all users.”

In developing the key theme of an integrated building, careful design allows the building to be open from early morning to late in the evening, and with the library offer is dispersed through the building, the opportunities for discovery are so much greater when integrated with a wider leisure, cultural and wellbeing public space.



The success of this project is leading to plans for other libraries within Warrington to be refurbished with dementia friendly design features, including the South Warrington Library in Stockton Heath. Here, the proposals have been carefully developed with LiveWire and the local library group to offer community facilities with accessibility for all.

### **Ammanford Library**

Ammanford is a town of around 5,300 population lying in the south of Wales in the county of Carmarthenshire. A former mining town, Ammanford serves as a local shopping and community focused centre for the surrounding district. In 2017 Carmarthenshire Libraries

received a grant from MALD of £72,454 in order to fund a Makerspace facility at Ammanford Library. The Makerspace project known as Stordy Creadigol - is a state of the art creative store and is the first of its kind in Welsh Libraries

The Makerspace is intended to inspire creativity and innovation, encouraging non-traditional users, with a view to integrating traditional core services at the forefront of the service's thinking. Carmarthenshire Public Libraries are challenging the traditional view of libraries through connecting local people to places where they can learn about the latest technical innovation and have the newest technology at their fingertips.

The new Makerspace Library at Ammanford Library encompasses a number of new and creative technological/maker services throughout the library. Among the many innovative resources offered the space includes;

- Recording Studios, Digital Design Workstations, Green Screens, 3D Printers, Robotics, Gaming/VR and sewing machines which are all compatible and can be customised to suit all audiences.
- Multifunctional facilities designed for all ages and needs, including adaptable spaces for people with disabilities.
- Occasional and regular workshops and activities
- Schools and community group liaison activities tailored to specific needs where appropriate.



Technology that Carmarthenshire Libraries users can access through the Maker Space include: 3D printing & scanning, media creation & editing, digital music creation, VR gaming, robotics, green screen, textile & craft machinery and computer coding and programming for all ages.

Makerspace aims to allow library users to experience technologies or activities that they may not have used and gives members access to opportunities that may not be easily accessible otherwise. This collaborative learning space encourages innovation and product design where

people can gather to co create share resources and knowledge, work on projects, network and build, fuelling creativity and entrepreneurialism.

The new facility was positioned in a no longer used stock area following an internal review of the service. Making this space available provided the opportunity for Ammanford Library to undertake an exciting and forward thinking transformation in service delivery. The room increased the public accessible area of the library by a minimum of 26 m<sup>2</sup> and has been designed in an adaptable way in order to meet the needs of the wide ranging usage it is now seeing. There are regular sessions for people living with dementia, wheelchair users, schools and members of the general public.

Raising awareness and promoting the new Makerspace facilities have been the key to its success; this has been achieved through interaction from schools, partners and public, the project enormously popular and the first 4 weeks attracted a 60% increase in membership, eager to use the Makerspace equipment.



The Community engagement was the most noticeable benefit of the Makerspace initiative working in partnership with Fusion, Unloved Heritage, Communities 1st, Repair Café and Media and Film Youth workers, who have embraced the project and signed up for workshops and projects, for example 10 week animation project with the green screen equipment & an Art Exhibition.

The Welsh Government minister for Culture, Tourism and Sport has given his support to the project and has publicised a statement "Libraries have always been resilient, adapting to change and technology and my recent visit to the digi lab at Ammanford is an example of this" (Information Professional May 2018)

## **Acknowledgments**

Sarah Mears, Library Services Manager, Essex County Library.  
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The Design Concept  
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**References**

[www.designinglibraries.org.uk](http://www.designinglibraries.org.uk)