

# JOIN OUR LITERACY CAMPAIGN FIGHT FOR LIBRARIES – AND THE FUTURE

**“I**f you are going to cut libraries you must be prepared to build more prisons and more homeless hostels,” said John Bird in a speech in the Lords. “Libraries are essential.”

When The Big Issue founder said this last autumn he lit the touch-paper on our new campaign.

We are launching our Big Issue literacy campaign this week. We believe books matter. We believe reading matters. We believe early help can improve the life chances of those who need it most.

Our future success is dependent on providing the next generation with the tools they need. And literacy is key. Without reading skills, doors will close and futures will be darker. Attainment gaps widen between poorer students without access to books and their better-off contemporaries. Any government that shuts poorer families out from having a proper life chance is being unfair and reckless. And they are storing up problems, and costs, for the future. As the

Reading Agency put it: “Reading for pleasure is more important for children’s cognitive development than their parents’ level of education and is a more powerful factor in life achievement than socio-economic background.”

## And the cost?

Low levels of literacy cost the UK an estimated £81bn a year in lost earnings and increased welfare spending, impacting on the success of the economy as a whole. When competitiveness becomes key when we leave the EU, it’s more important than ever that everyone can read and write.

This campaign is not only about giving the marginalised in society a fighting chance. It’s about keeping communities together and libraries open.

Libraries are meeting places and vital community spaces. On a simple level, they house toddler groups like Rhymetime, Bookbug and other early-start initiatives that bring infants and their parents in. This stretches to Chatterbooks, which allows eight- to 12-year-olds who perhaps have been unable to articulate and share thoughts find like-minded souls, discover books and talk about them. They are also numerous adult book groups.

Libraries bring solace to children who have chaotic home lives and struggle to find peace and quiet. Importantly, they can also study for exams there. When home life is characterised by noise, disorder and worry, the library offers a retreat; time and space to imagine what you might do to set your own, better, path. For some, like our columnist Damian Barr who fought to save Newarthill Library, this can be the

**190,000**

adults in Scotland – **3.6%** of the population – have serious literacy challenges

**5 MILLION**

adults in England – **16%** – have ‘below functional’ literacy

**12%**

of adults in Wales – **360,000** – lack basic literacy skills



difference between living in a dead end and taking a leap into a brighter future.

Libraries are welcoming places where homeless people can find heat, light and access to the simple things many of us take for granted. They are used for driving test study, learning to research family trees and, for some older people, getting together to simply chat and beat the growing scourge of loneliness. As job centres close, they become more vital spaces for those seeking work – to use technology to fill out application forms and get some advice.

And if the luxury of time allows, they can be also be hubs where local residents come together to learn about creative writing, songwriting, arts and crafts and much more.

As more schools lose their one full-time librarian, partnerships with local libraries become more crucial than ever.

Libraries offer futures. And we will agitate for a future for libraries.

According to the 1964 Libraries and Museums Act, authorities must provide a “comprehensive and efficient library service” for all. We believe that closing hundreds in the last six years, and leaving local authorities with little choice but to save money by decimating services, does not meet the requirements of this Act of Parliament.

And if government snubs the opportunity to show they genuinely wish to help, then we must work to find another way. From now on, The Big Issue will be your nerve centre for ideas and requests. We will work to find solutions.

In the coming weeks, we’ll also work with partner organisations to get books into the hands of as many people as we can, for free.

Literacy matters, now more than ever. **TBI**

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John Bird, The Big Issue founder

## WHAT'S NEXT?

We want to know what your library means to you, and how we can use our Big Issue networks to help your fight to keep it open.

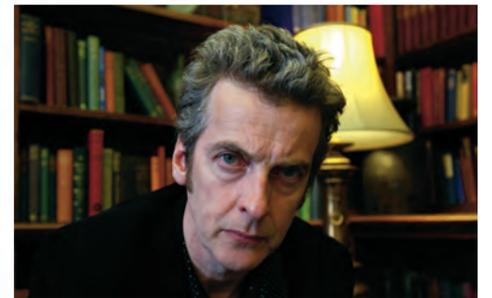
Tell us on email:

editorial@bigissue.com,  
Twitter: @BigIssue and  
facebook.com/BigIssueUK

Next week we will be revealing our ambitious new plan to take books to where they’re needed, making sure everyone has an opportunity to open a new chapter.

We will also be working with The Reading Agency and others fighting to save libraries, as well as helping to share books and keep our independent bookshops thriving.

We will highlight events happening around the UK, from World Book Night to Libraries Week – if you have something going on, tell us about it and we’ll spread the word.



## WHY LIBRARIES MATTER

The Doctor backs the Big Issue campaign

“It is about people making the best of themselves and each other,” says *Doctor Who* star Peter Capaldi. “And living in a society that encourages that across the board. The idea libraries are closing down and we can’t have access to all this fabulous inspiration and education is awful. It is not just about literacy. It is about learning. It’s about looking at art books and seeing fabulous reproductions of paintings. It’s about being able to find books that tell you how to do stuff. It is about history and literature. It is really important we should be pointing ourselves towards an enlightenment, and our young people – all people – towards learning more about the world and what they are capable of, both as citizens and as artists. It is their right. It is your right to be shown the intellectual and artistic richness of the world. It is not something you should have to battle for. The Doctor would agree with that – he is about helping people to learn and become the best version of themselves.”

TURN TO PAGE 23 TO READ MORE ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF BOOKS...