

Books, Bags and Boxes:

A study of the role and impact of the
Leeds School Library Service



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Introduction

The **Leeds School Library Service (SLS)** is a support service staffed by qualified librarians, offered to Local Authority Controlled primary schools via de-delegated funding and primary academies can opt to buy into the service. Schools are entitled to borrow boxes of resources on a termly basis.

The Leeds SLS currently serves **180 primary schools** and delivered **9514 boxes of resources** in the academic year 2022-23.

The SLS website provides an overview of the resources and services available <https://www.leedsforlearning.co.uk/Page/31833>.



Books, bags and boxes: A study of the role and impact of the Leeds School Library Service funded by a research grant from the UK Literacy Association (UKLA) sought to investigate the role and impact of the Leeds SLS and identify future directions for the service.



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Executive summary

The Leeds SLS is very highly regarded by its users. The resources it provides make an essential contribution to the curriculum, enabling primary schools in Leeds to offer children current, diverse and engaging texts across curriculum areas. The SLS has a core role in supporting reading for pleasure in most of the schools surveyed, as well as in contributing to the development of children's literacy skills. Most of the services offered by the SLS are in extensive use by the schools who are entitled to them, but some are less well known. Users perceive the current services as good value and they would like to be able to access more of the services on offer.

- **Resourcing and teaching of the primary curriculum:** users of the SLS rely on the topic resources provided. They are integral to curriculum planning and design. School budgets do not allow schools to purchase their own resources in adequate quantity or quality.
- **Resourcing and teaching of reading and reading for pleasure:** users of the SLS consider the resources essential in delivering reading for pleasure. The resources are key in planning for reading and are an intrinsic part of schools' identity around reading.
- **Staff in primary schools in Leeds:** the resource boxes provide opportunities for knowledge sharing amongst staff. The SLS librarians are an essential resource for professional development and school staff feel that the resources facilitate their roles.
- **Children in primary schools in Leeds:** the SLS enables children to access many more books, both fiction and non-fiction, compared with what a school alone can offer. The range of books is wider and more up to date than schools' own resources and the new stock provided by the SLS creates enthusiasm and engagement.
- **Wider community support:** the SLS can help schools to manage unexpected and tragic events affecting their communities. In a form of 'library first aid', the SLS has provided at short notice books on topics such as death and bereavement. This specialist and responsive service is not easily replicable outside the SLS.

The Leeds SLS must continue to receive recognition for the essential role and impact that it has in schools using the service. Without the SLS, primary schools in Leeds would find it very difficult to resource the curriculum, or provide up to date, high-quality texts for reading for pleasure. Pressures on school budgets mean that a centrally funded loan service provides children and teachers with the best possible access to high quality, new and relevant texts. It ensures that access to texts is equitable and is particularly important for schools in economically disadvantaged areas.

The Leeds SLS plays an important part in the 'Attaining and Achieving' target in the Child Friendly Leeds action plan because access to quality resources for learning is essential in narrowing the achievement gap between different groups. It also has a significant role in enabling schools to deliver the Leeds Priority 1 target for reading. A regular supply of quality, up-to-date texts is fundamental in supporting all children in Leeds to improve reading fluency and enjoyment.

Key recommendations

1. **Ongoing investment.** Schools requested an increased range of class readers, more texts for early years and further development of the available resources to match curriculum developments. Continued investment in stock will meet the needs of schools in these areas.
2. **Additional staffing.** Difficulties noted by schools in the timing of delivery and collection of resources cannot easily be addressed with the current level of staffing. The SLS would benefit from extra staffing at key times to enable quicker turnaround and allow schools to keep resource boxes for longer.
3. **Maximise usage.** To maximise the use of the SLS across the city, new ways of publicizing the services available will likely be beneficial. In the event of increased demand for services, the capacity of the SLS with current staffing levels and the possible streamlining of services to meet user's preferences will need consideration.



Findings

For this project, we collected data in two ways, through an online survey and through interviews. The research team and staff at the SLS co-designed the questions used in both research tools. Section one presents the online survey findings and section two the insights from the interviews.

1. Online survey

Summary of respondents

- We shared the survey with all 226 primary schools in Leeds, UK.
- We received 67 responses representing 43 different schools.
- 37 schools were local authority schools, 4 were academies, 1 selected 'other' and identified later in the survey as a free school, one did not specify.
- 42/43 of the schools were current users of the service.
- The survey respondents consisted of 38% senior leaders, 28% class teachers, 17% had responsibility for English/literacy, 14% were TA or HLTA and 3% did not specify. One respondent identified as a School Librarian later in the survey.

We present the survey findings in four parts:

1.1 Knowledge of the service

1.2 Accessing the service

1.3 Using the resources

1.4 Service users suggestions

1.1 Knowledge of the service

School entitlement through de-delegated funding offer (excluding nursery) is:

- 1 x Fiction 'Bookworm' box per class, twice a year
- 2 x Topic boxes per class, per term
- 3 x Non-fiction extra boxes, per school, per term
- 3 x Audio sets per school, per term
- 4 x Class reader sets per school, per term
- Self-Select – 1 x Fiction book per child in school (issued for a calendar year)
- Advisory visits to schools

Services available at additional cost:

- Author visits
- Story bags
- Weed the library
- Classify the library
- Book purchasing scheme
- Reading for pleasure projects

Of the services that are part of the de-delegated funding offer, the most well used are the topic boxes (100% of respondents*), followed by class readers (73%). 67% used the fiction 'Bookworm' boxes, followed by self-select fiction (40%), advisory visits (27%) and audio sets (25%). The least well known of the services in the offer were the advisory visits and the self-select fiction boxes. The most known about but not used was the audio sets.

Of the services that attract an additional cost, author visits, weed the library, and story bags are the most popular options followed by classify the library and the book purchase scheme.

Topic boxes are an essential part of curriculum provision for users and all respondents were aware of this service. For all the other services offered, including those forming part of the de-delegated funding offer, there were increased numbers of respondents who stated they were not aware of the service. 22% of respondents were not aware of the 'Bookworm' fiction box scheme, and 43% were not aware of the self-select fiction service. 46% were not aware of the entitlement to advisory visits. For the additional services, which do not form part of the de-delegated funding, 25% were not aware of the story bags resource, and 30% were not aware of the author visits and reading for pleasure projects. 54% were unaware of the service classifying the library, 62% were not aware of the service to weed the library and 75% were not aware of the book purchase scheme.

**These figures might not accurately reflect the percentage of schools using the services as 10/43 schools were represented by more than one respondent.*

Recommendations

- The SLS should consider ways to further publicise the range of services on offer, though with an awareness of the capacity of the current staff to deliver increased demand for a wider range of services.
- Alternatively, the service could consider reducing some aspects of the offer to enable a greater focus of time and resource on services schools use most frequently. Services such as audio sets and story bags which have a high level of awareness (59% and 73% respectively) but low levels of usage (25% and 33% respectively) could be considered for removal, however, these services are valued by the schools that do use them.

1.2 Accessing the service

Of the 63 respondents 37 stated that they had responsibility for ordering resources from the SLS.

These respondents completed a free-text question about [how they made the decisions about ordering](#).

Responses fell into three categories:

1. Talking to colleagues about their requirements (n=19)
2. Looking at long-term curriculum plans to select appropriate resources (n=17)
3. Choosing resources for reading for pleasure (n=7)

(Note- some respondents cited more than one approach).

This indicates that the provision of SLS resources is embedded in both long and short-term curriculum planning. 47% of respondents consulted documents mapping the school curriculum and 51% of respondents addressed the immediate needs of colleagues. The selection of SLS resources therefore provides opportunities for professional conversation and engagement between school staff.

They also completed a free-text question about [how accessible they found the order form](#).

70% (n=26) stated that it was easy to use. However, 3 respondents found it took a while to get used to but became easier with experience; 4 suggested an online form with tick boxes would be quicker and easier; 1 found the form hard to navigate; 1 suggested distinguishing more clearly between different forms; and 1 suggested the forms could be presented in a different order.

Recommendation

- The SLS could develop the presentation of the ordering forms to improve accessibility. In particular, they could look at possibilities for an online form to increase ease of use and clarity. Although as the majority of respondents did not report difficulties, such developments might not be of immediate priority.

Respondents who stated that they had responsibility for ordering the SLS resources (n=37) were also asked to complete a free text question about **any difficulties they had when using the service**.

51% (n=19) stated they did not have any difficulties in using the service. Of those who raised issues, 9 said timings of delivery and pick up were often mid-term which impacted teaching; 3 noted difficulties in their school collecting books to be returned; 2 said the boxes they wanted were not always available; 2 had problems with late returns; 1 wanted to be able to order more class readers; and 1 participant asked for longer opening hours.

This indicates that whilst the majority of users have no difficulties, the timings of deliveries and the collection of resources was difficult for 24% of users. This concern was echoed when all participants (n=63) were asked to make suggestions about the development of the service (see section 1.4).

Recommendation

- The SLS staff would benefit from extra staffing resources at key times to enable quicker turnaround and allow schools to keep boxes for longer.

1.3 Using the resources

Services provided as part of the core entitlement

All participants were asked questions about their usage of SLS services. For each of the de-delegated services participants were asked **whether they were aware of the service** and **whether their school used it**. Based on their answers they were asked further questions about the way the SLS resources were used. Participants could select as many statements as applied.

- **Topic boxes** were used by 100% of respondents.

69% stated that the topic boxes were displayed in their classroom, whilst 11% kept the resources in the box. 63% made their own choices about which topic box they would have, and 31% said a colleague chose the boxes on their behalf. 45% had a topic box specifically for their classroom, while 39% said they shared a box with another class. 58% believed the boxes were highly relevant to the curriculum, but 36% said they could not always find a box that linked to their curriculum focus. 41% stated that they used the topic box resources to support literacy skills.

- **Class readers** were used by 72% of respondents.

14% stated that they knew about the service, but their school did not use it. 13% stated they were not aware of the service.

Of those that used the service (n=46), 51 % stated that they used the class reader to support reading for pleasure, and 40% used it to support literacy skills. 47% chose their own class readers, and 29% said a colleague on their behalf chose them. 42% agreed that the selection of class readers was good, whilst 29% said they would like a wider range of class readers to choose from. The option 'Other' was chosen by 11% of respondents who contributed free text comments including that they were used in drama lessons and that there was not always enough allowance for every class to have a class reader. 14% of respondents suggested specific titles they would like to access.

Of those that did not use the service (n=9), 44% stated that they had their own selection of class readers, 11% said that class readers did not form part of their approach to teaching English and a further 11% responded that no one in school was responsible for choosing the books.

- **Bookworm fiction boxes** were used by 67% of respondents.

10% stated that they were aware of the service, but their school did not use it and 24% were not aware of the service. One respondent noted that the service was used, but not for every class in the school.

Of those that stated their school used the service (n=42), 65% said that the children in their class had free access to the books and 13% said that the books were stored in the box. 48% added them to the class library. 63% said that the books were used to support reading for pleasure and 30% that they were used to support literacy skills. 50% agreed that the selection was generally relevant and appealing for their class, with 5% stating that the selection was not always appropriate. 48% of respondents said that they had a box for their class, whilst 33% said that they shared a box with another class. One user suggested that a fiction box with a specific focus would be useful.

Of those who stated that they did not use the service (n=6) 2 respondents said this was because they had their own selection of fiction, 3 cited organizational factors such as difficulties keeping track of the books and one did not know.

- **Self-select fiction boxes** were used by 41% of respondents.

10% stated that they were aware of the service but their school did not use it. 44% said they were not aware of the service.

Of those who stated that their school used the service (n=26), 70% stated that the books helped them support reading for pleasure with 39% stating they used them to support literacy skills. 57% chose the books themselves and did so to suit the needs and interests of their class. 17% reported that a colleague chose the books on their behalf. 65% stated that they added the books to their class library and three respondents chose 'other' stating in free text that they added the books to the main school library. One respondent kept the book selection in the box.

Of those who stated that their school did not use the service 20% said they used their own selection of fiction and the other respondents cited various organisational issues, such as having the time to come to the SLS to make the selection, and having no one allocated to take responsibility.

- **Audio sets** were used by 25% of respondents.

53% stated that they were aware of the service, but their school did not use it. 22% were not aware of the service.

Of those that stated their school used the service, 71% chose the sets themselves and 21% said a colleague chose on their behalf. 36% found the selection appropriate and relevant. 29% used the sets to develop literacy skills and 21% to support reading for pleasure. 21% selected 'other' stating that sets were chosen for the whole key stage, or to be placed in the school library.

Of those that stated that their school did not use the service (n=34) 38% stated that audio resources were not part of their approach to teaching and 31% stated they did not know. 34% selected 'other' and cited issues with technology, having used them in the past but not currently and ordering them only for specific requests because they were not being used regularly.

- **Advisory visits** had been used by 27% of respondents.

25% stated they were aware of the service but had not used it and 48% were not aware of the service.

Those who stated that they have had an advisory visit (n=16) were asked to answer a free text question detailing the focus of the visit. 7 respondents stated the visit was for the redevelopment and review of the school library, 5 stated the visit was around stock quality, 2 had visits about setting up a new library and 1 about the use of the school library. 1 respondent cited a visit which had to be cancelled and needed to be rescheduled.

Those who stated that they did not use the service were asked to answer a free text question about why this was the case (n=16). 3 stated they did not know, 4 stated they did not currently need an advisory visit, six stated that they had used the service in the past (in a previous school), 1 stated there was expertise in school and one stated

that they used the service for impromptu support rather than organising a formal visit.

Services not provided as part of the core entitlement

- **Author visits** had been used by 47% of respondents.

22% were aware of the service but had not used it. 31% of participants were not aware of the service. Of those who were aware of the service but their school had not used it, 54% (n=7) stated that the costs were too high, and 23% said they preferred to arrange such events themselves. A further 39% (n=5) answered 'other' and gave free text answers stating that the author visits became booked up too quickly (3) or they did not know.

- **Book purchase scheme** (30% discount) had been used by 8% of respondents.

17% stated that they were aware of the service but had not used it. 75% said they were not aware of the service.

- **Story bags** had been used by 35% of respondents.

40% were aware of the service but did not use it. 25% were not aware of the service.

- **'Weed the Library'** had been used by 25% of respondents.

13% were aware of the service but had not used it. 63% were not aware of the service.

- **Classify and catalogue the library** had been used by 16% of respondents.

29% were aware of the service but had not used it. 56% were not aware of the service.

1.4 Service users suggestions

Respondents were invited to complete a free text question detailing any comments or suggestions they had about the SLS. 29 respondents completed this question. 21 suggestions were put forward (some respondents suggested more than one thing). 15 positive comments were received. No negative comments were received.

- **Suggestions**

Specific requests were made by 9 respondents;

- 3 requested more resources for nursery and reception age children
- 5 made suggestions about the non-fiction selections
- 1 requested more class readers

Comments about access and timescales were made by 5 respondents requesting more opening times and changes to the delivery and collection schedules. Five respondents commented that they would like to know more about the range of services on offer.

- **Comments**

Respondents commented on their satisfaction with the service using the following phrases *'invaluable', 'very effective', 'fantastic service', 'extremely helpful', 'fantastic resource', 'staff are great, very knowledgeable', 'helpful...advice', 'great service', 'very happy', 'great service', 'really grateful', 'very satisfied', 'invaluable', 'really like,' 'wonderful'*.

Reasons given for the satisfaction were as follows *'wide range of books that are up to date', 'range of books available is great', 'regularly update our resources', 'bespoke box', 'gives our children a wider range of books to read for pleasure', 'self-select opportunities', 'extras offered like the Leeds book awards', 'author visits', 'constant changing and updating books', 'support'*.

Summary of the online survey findings

The Leeds School Library Service is very highly regarded by the users. The resources form an essential part of the ways that primary schools in Leeds resource their curriculum, enabling them to offer children up to date, varied and engaging texts across a variety of curriculum areas. The School Library Service plays a core role in supporting the reading for pleasure aims in most of the schools surveyed, as well as contributing to literacy skills. Most of the services are well used by the schools who are entitled to them, but some are less well known. The service is perceived as good value by users and they would like to be able to access more of the services on offer.

Recommendations

- The SLS could consider new ways to publicise the services available or streamline the service to focus on things preferred by the users.
- Difficulties noted by schools in the timing of delivery and collection of resources cannot easily be addressed with the current level of staffing, therefore a higher level of staffing is needed. This would enable the service to be open for longer hours and for book boxes to be processed more quickly.

2. Interviews

Staff in four schools were interviewed, of which three schools were SLS users and one was not. The non-using and one of the using schools were academies, the other two schools were local authority controlled. In total, eight staff participated in the interviews.

Interviews took place online or in person based on the preference of the interviewee. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews were analysed by generating codes, which a) arose from the data and b) addressed the research focus on the role and impact of the SLS. Four themes were developed from these codes; for each theme the role and impact of the service was identified. The four themes

were curriculum, reading, staff and children; the responses of the participants were coded according to whether they referred to the role or impact on curriculum, on reading for pleasure, on the staff users on the service or on the child learners.

The key findings from the interview analysis were as follows:

1. Regarding the resourcing and teaching of the primary curriculum, schools in Leeds who use the SLS rely on the topic resources provided. They are integral to curriculum planning and design. School budgets do not allow schools to purchase their own resources. Sample comments:

'really useful', 'rely heavily', 'there's no way we could afford to keep up with it', 'invaluable', 'we'd really struggle', 'it adds to our curriculum', 'a benefit and a positive', 'worthwhile investment', 'we feed them through the curriculum'

2. Regarding the resourcing and teaching of reading and reading for pleasure, schools in Leeds who use the SLS consider the resources to be essential in delivering reading for pleasure. The resources are key in planning for reading and are an intrinsic part of schools' identity around reading. Sample comments:

'it's invaluable, absolutely', 're-invigorating class libraries', 'forms the main bulk of it [class library]', 'We are very book rich and the SLS just makes absolutely sure that happens',

'..the class text so they could all read it... it was much more engaging', 'helped promote reading in school because kids have had more access to books',

'spurred some of them on to actually start reading', 'you don't want 30 books to store, you want to use them and send them back and get 30 different ones. I think that's a huge benefit'.

3. Regarding the children in primary schools in Leeds who used the service, interviewees commented that the service enabled children to access far more books, both fiction and non-fiction, compared to what the school alone could offer. The range of books was wider and more up to date than the schools' own resources and the new stock provided by the library service created enthusiasm and engagement. Sample comments:

'they are grabbing them and reading along', 'the children can do something together' 'they're used really well'

4. Regarding the staff in primary schools in Leeds which use the service, interviewees stated that the boxes provided opportunities for knowledge sharing amongst staff, that the librarians from the SLS were an essential resource for professional development and that the job was made easier by having the resources. Sample comments:

'a really discreet way of CPD', 'it gives us that opportunity when we're together to discuss', 'it really helps',

'they do have ownership and they're going in and having those conversations', 'having the boxes in gets you talking about books and then staff can share that',

'hand in hand with that professional dialogue', 'sometimes you realise that actually some of the children in this class really like a particular author that they've read through school library,'

'it helps you in your job, doing half the hard work for you'

5. An additional finding relating to the schools who use the service was that schools used the SLS to help the school community manage unexpected, tragic events which affected the community. Books were requested and immediately provided in a form of 'library first aid' to supply books about, for example, death and bereavement. This is not a role that can be replicated outside the service.
6. From the interview with the participant whose school did not use the service, the key points raised were financial with regard to initially resourcing and then continuing to maintain quality resources for topic work and reading for pleasure. It was noted that high levels of investment in stock were needed. Decisions about resourcing needed to be made by senior leadership teams.

Summary of the interview findings

In line with the findings of the online survey, participants using the SLS indicated that they valued the service very highly and that they regarded it as essential. All participants stated that it was very difficult for individual schools to resource the curriculum and reading for pleasure adequately due to pressures on school budgets. The range and quality of the stock was praised, along with enthusiasm for the continued investment in resources that would be available to schools. The expertise of the librarians was considered to be invaluable in supporting schools.

Conclusions

The Leeds SLS plays an essential part in the educational provision of primary schools in Leeds. Leeds is fortunate to have maintained a SLS to support curriculum and reading for pleasure across the city, where many such services across the country have diminished or closed altogether. The service must continue to be recognized for the important role it plays and resourced accordingly so that it can maintain and develop this quality of service into the future.

