**The role of Schools’ Library Services in the UK**

**What is a schools’ library service?**

In the UK many local government authorities offer a designated “schools’ library service” (SLS) which works directly with individual schools to lend resources in bulk – predominantly books, but also artefacts, DVDs, photo packs, story sacks and other resources which enhance learning. Some SLSs are managed within their public library service, some in education departments and some independent of local government in trusts either with or independent of the public library service. Most are traded services, charging for their services and covering all staff and resource costs in their annual budget. The advantage of this is the ability to offer a service to schools in neighbouring authorities where there is no SLS.

Many SLS managers are in membership of the Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians (ASCEL), alongside their colleagues in public library services who manage services to children and young adults. ASCEL is an excellent national forum for these professional librarians and is served by a national committee which runs an annual conference on strategic matters as well as contributing to national policy with a wide range of organisations and partners serving children and young people in reading, education, health and other child-related matters. Members also meet regionally.

“SLS-UK” has grown as a brand within ASCEL for all the SLSs as a group to promote national offers which can be made across the board, including to schools in local authorities where there is no SLS. Currently there are three offers of this kind, one for an introductory loan subscription for schools in areas without a resident SLS, a second relating to a library management (computer) system and the third, a national award for schools to accredit their own school library (The SLS-UK School Library Award).

**Curriculum support**

SLSs offer schools support for all aspects of the curriculum. This is principally through bulk loans of books to enhance topics in the classroom, but can also be for longer loans to add to a school’s own library stock for fiction and recreational non-fiction to support reading for pleasure.

Most SLSs support the primary sector (Key Stages 1 and 2) and many additionally support secondary schools through to the sixth form. At the other end of the spectrum many also serve Early Years settings whether in schools, nurseries or through home education services.

A wide variety of materials is available to meet the needs of all levels of ability including those needing ‘hi-lo’ stock whether for reading or topic-based work, and gifted and talented students who might benefit from a higher level of textual content. In terms of sixth form and avid readers in lower year groups at secondary level, there may be scope for adult fiction, and SLSs can provide this range of material more easily than schools, especially where there may be specialised materials required for one or two pupils only for a short period, e.g. books in a specific foreign language or for visually impaired individuals. Many SLSs also run local book awards to enhance and encourage reading for pleasure.

SLSs can garner specialist provision more quickly than schools who may not know where to start in terms of suppliers. SLSs can also deliver materials as required and return the stock to base after use by one school for users in another school in the future.

SLSs can offer tailored artefacts, sometimes in bulk, as well as online resources including e-books. The latter widen the choice and increase the quantity of texts, enabling borrowing across the whole authority rather than tying up physical texts to one school for a long period.

Most SLSs create boxes of resources afresh for each loan to a particular school class, so there is rarely a standard list of titles. These will vary according to the school’s requirements and may depend on the number and range of subjects included in one box, for example, because of cross-year / vertical tutorial groups or small class sizes. This approach ensures that damaged or out-of-date stock is repaired or replaced and that resources in newly-packed boxes are clean and in good shape for the next loan.

SLS staff keep up to date with changes to the national curriculum and other curriculum models used in schools so that they can buy the latest and best quality titles to lend. SLS staff are creative in seeking out supporting artefacts, books on wider topics which include specific curriculum subjects not otherwise covered, and sometimes making their own supporting resources, particularly in the areas of geography and local studies.

SLS staff maintain their awareness of changes announced by government departments and bodies like Ofsted and teacher unions, as well as the research and recommendations of a range of partners such as The National Literacy Trust and The School Library Association. They are also kept informed via ASCEL’s information update service of key changes and trends in services to children and young people which have an impact on the library profession.

**Wider support of school libraries**

Many SLSs also offer CPD to school staff to support not only curriculum developments but management of the school library and reader development work in school. The professionally-qualified SLS staff work with and support librarians or other school staff who have responsibility for the school library and literacy development, whether in primary or secondary sectors, through the provision of book awards, reading promotional work and library development. While SLSs are predominantly a paid service, they offer exceptional value for money by:

* lending books more cheaply than these could be purchased by schools
* selecting high-quality and up-to-date appropriate resources to support the curriculum and extend pupils’ subject knowledge and understanding
* saving time for hard-pressed school staff, freeing them to get on with their specialism - teaching.

SLS services do not replace a school’s own library. While some schools are very restricted in their own library provision, even those with large libraries and full-time designated staff benefit from the wider provision that the SLS brings. The nature of borrowing for specific topics as required ensures that books and artefacts remain relevant, up-to-date and are in school when needed rather than cluttering up shelves for the most part of the year when they are not. It saves schools making mistakes by buying stock that was misrepresented in a catalogue. It also allows schools to experiment by borrowing titles about which they were uncertain as to their popularity or which might just be too expensive to purchase on a regular basis or in larger quantities.

In terms of school budgets, subscription costs for SLSs are not high, especially considering the potential savings on borrowing books delivered directly to school over selecting, ordering and paying for books to come into school. Most SLSs operate on yearly subscription rates but are more than willing to tailor subscriptions to suit different needs in a particular school, and it is always wise to make a phone call or email enquiry about this when budgeting. The wider benefits of discounts on further services like training or library maintenance work add to the value for money as does the free advice that can be given over the telephone.

SLS staff are always happy to advise school staff on how to get the best value from their SLS subscription.

**Public Libraries**

As shown above in relation to school libraries, SLSs do not replace public library use by schools in terms of class visits and activity sessions or individual borrowing. The essential difference in terms of borrowing is that pupils are encouraged to borrow from public libraries for their leisure reading needs and the occasional item for homework support. Public libraries also offer neutral space for reading or study and computers if required as well as high-quality reading support activities like the annual Summer Reading Challenge and diverse activities after school and in school holidays.

Bulk borrowing of texts by schools works best via the SLS as this ensures the quantity of texts required can be made available and that books are pitched at the right level for a particular group’s needs.

**Conclusion**

During a time of decreasing budgets, the UK SLS model provides schools with a value for money opportunity to support reading, teaching and learning in the classroom and school library. The model does require schools to pay for the service, but this has been the case for decades. The only change has been that, whereas that payment was previously ring-fenced in school budgets by the local authority, now schools have to find the money from diminishing budgets and sometimes perceive cutting the SLS subscription as a small saving to be made when other budgets are more difficult to cut.

This is a sad state of affairs especially when many schools do see the advantage of borrowing resources in this way to supplement material already in school and to widen choices for pupils not only in reading for pleasure but in learning about subjects across the curriculum. From the library side it is sad that there is no longer a SLS in every authority, but increasingly SLSs are working together to transform services and ensure a core offer is available as far as possible to all schools and that SLSs in neighbouring authorities can serve schools which are part of an authority where there is no resident SLS.

**Note**

*Schools’ Library Services (SLSs) operate in a number of local government authorities in the UK and are central to support of the curriculum in many schools. For brevity the term ‘SLS’ is used generically for all services of this type operating separately from the public library service, although some have other titles such as Education Library Service. Further information on SLSs and the national offers can be found at:* [*https://schoolslibraryservicesuk.org/*](https://schoolslibraryservicesuk.org/)

*Further information on ASCEL can be found at:* [*http://www.ascel.org.uk/*](http://www.ascel.org.uk/)

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