

Festival of Libraries 2026 Impact Report

By Eric Hildrew
Independent Evaluator



Contents	Page
Impact Highlights	3-4
1. Introduction	5-6
2. Festival Outcomes	8-24
2.1 Creatively engage people with Greater Manchester's libraries	8-11
2.2 Stretch public perceptions of Greater Manchester's libraries as cultural hubs	13-17
2.3 Positively impact on attenders' wellbeing	19-20
2.4 Achieve year on year growth as a major festival of local engagement with international reach	21-24
3. Partner feedback	26-28
4. Artist feedback	29-31
5. Future Priorities	34-35
Appendix 1: Participating Libraries/Partners	36

Front cover: *The Quest for Planet P*, Knotted Hawk Productions, Leigh Library

All photography: [North Star Digital](#)

Festival of Libraries 2026 - Impact Highlights

A record
94.6k
festival
attenders

Average audience event rating:

8.7/10

40% of attenders
made or created
something
themselves



"I couldn't have asked for a better school. The kids were really engaged, they got stuck into everything, and produced some lovely poems"

Creative Practitioner

96%

of attenders enjoyed
their festival event

"A fantastic event which gave me increased pride in, and recognition of my Jamaican culture, language and heritage."

Audience member

"Such a powerful event - we conversed and danced and it was beautiful!"

Audience member

98%
of attenders
feel libraries
are *'an
essential
community
service'*

54%
of attenders
learnt something
new at the
festival

*"We had a really good
event – people were
coming out buzzing
afterwards."*

Library partner

*"My experience was
superb."*

Creative practitioner



*"Everyone across the ten authorities thinks the festival
is really important. It's the one time of the year when
we all do things together so long may it continue."*

Library partner

73% of attenders
felt the festival:

*'demonstrated that
their library had
more to offer them
than they'd
previously thought'*

**138
events
over 5
days**

1. Introduction

1.1 Festival of Libraries 2026

The Festival of Libraries was conceived in 2019 as a strategic collaboration between Manchester City of Literature and key partners, including public and independent libraries across Greater Manchester, Manchester's universities, and the international network of UNESCO cities of literature.

In 2026 the festival delivered its sixth annual edition from 10-14 June. This year saw the enlarged programme of the previous festival virtually matched in scale. A total 125 events, exhibitions, performances, or workshops, delivered by over 100 artists and creative practitioners, took place in and around Greater Manchester's libraries and cultural venues.

Once again, core programming partners the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, and Salford University supported the festival programme by selecting speakers and workshop leaders. This year's international guest City of Literature was Barcelona.

In their role as lead partners of Manchester's accreditation as a UNESCO City of Lifelong Learning, the work and skills team at the city council also contributed support and funding for creative skills-based events, hosted by their network of training providers.

Under the broad thematic heading of *Bound together, Connected through Stories*, this year's festival included the largest number of artists and creative practitioners to date (just under 100). The programme was truly multi-disciplinary and incorporated creative exhibitions, poetry, music, theatre and dance, film, speaker/author events, and participative workshops with wide-ranging cultural and environmental themes.

The final programme comprised a mix of directly commissioned works curated by the festival team at Manchester City of Literature alongside many events initiated by partners themselves. A programming meeting with partners early in the year aimed to match commissioned creative practitioners with the most appropriate venues and ensure a balance of events across Greater Manchester.

Events aimed at families, children, and young people once again formed a significant part of the programme and a number of events were delivered to 'closed audiences' comprising local schools.

Key programme strands in 2026 included:

- ⇒ **Inspired by Libraries** – Q&A speaker events with cultural celebrities connected to Manchester, which this

year included DJ Paulette, Divina De Campo, Bobby Seagull, and Mollie Ray.

- ⇒ **Look for a Book** – a clue-based children’s trail around participating library green spaces to find 500 free hidden copies of Corinne Bailey Rae’s *Put Your Records On*. Special ‘golden ticket’ copies invited children to meet Corinne at a special event.
- ⇒ **Exhibitions** – 14 exhibitions (the largest number of any Festival of Libraries to date) spanning photography, visual art, literature and history.
- ⇒ **Dance and Theatre** – family-orientated shows from Vanhulle Dance Theatre, Knotted Hawk Productions, Malandra Jacks, and Betty the Beekeeper.
- ⇒ **Comics** – Exhibitions and workshops including guests from Jordan and Denmark.
- ⇒ **Environment** – Workshops and events exploring local nature and sustainability.
- ⇒ **Unlimited Artist’s Residency** – Artist Sophie Woolley was paired with the John Rylands Research Institute and Library over the festival period where she performed her comedy work-in-progress.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The Festival of Libraries aims for 2026 were unchanged from the previous year. The overarching goal of the festival is to enhance the collective profile of Greater Manchester’s libraries

by expanding their potential as cultural spaces at the heart of their communities. Connecting people with libraries as cultural, creative, and social hubs is central to the project.

The festival’s emphasis on diversity of artforms and formats differentiates it from many literary and book festivals with an (ultimately commercial) focus on author talks, book launches and sales. The festival aims to:

- ⇒ **Creatively engage people with Greater Manchester’s libraries**
- ⇒ **Stretch public perceptions of Greater Manchester’s libraries as cultural hubs**
- ⇒ **Positively impact on attenders’ wellbeing**
- ⇒ **Achieve year on year growth as a major festival of local engagement with international reach**

These are the intended outcomes which this report aims to measure the festival’s impact against.

1.3 Evaluation Methods

This evaluation draws on a range of quantitative and qualitative data gathered during and immediately after the festival, including:

- ⇒ Self-completion audience survey (digital/paper - 157 responses)
- ⇒ Creative practitioner survey (digital – 12 responses)
- ⇒ Creative practitioner interviews (online/phone x9)
- ⇒ Group feedback session with library partners (x11 participants)
- ⇒ Data monitoring forms from participating libraries/venues

Survey participation was incentivised with the offer of a prize draw entry for a £100 book voucher. A target sampling frame was created for partners based on the scale of their events). The margin of error for survey findings (giving 95% confidence) is 8%.

Musician and author Corinne Bailey Rae at her *Look for a Book* winners meet the author event, Stockroom



2. Festival Outcomes

2.1 Outcome: *Creatively engage people with Greater Manchester's libraries*

Headlines:

- ⇒ A record **94.6k** people engaged with the Festival of Libraries in 2026
- ⇒ **40%** of event attendees made or created something themselves
- ⇒ Audiences and participants rated their overall festival experience on average at **8.7 out of 10**
- ⇒ 54% said they had gained new knowledge at their event
- ⇒ Around a third felt they had developed their skills or been given an opportunity to be creative

2.1.1 Record attendance to the Festival of Libraries

In 2026, just under 95,000 people attended a Festival of Libraries event - more people than at any previous festival.

The overall number of events delivered in 2026 was similar to the previous year, however a greater proportion of the

programme this year was made up of exhibitions in high footfall libraries. Between them, Bolton, Trafford, and Manchester libraries accounted for almost 92,000 attendees.

Whilst the overall picture is therefore one of growth, the number of festival attendees who engaged with events beyond these three exhibitions was much smaller at just over 2,500.

Total festival attendance 2021-25	
2021	485
2022	2,032
2023	5,120
2024	44,497
2025	21,547
2026	94,630

2.1.2 Consistently high-quality experiences for audiences and participants

The relatively small scale and capacity of most Festival of Libraries events mean that total attendance figures only give a partial picture of success. The festival is primarily interested in

engagement and therefore the depth and quality of the experience for attenders and participants.

Across 2026's programme of events, a high mean overall experience rating of **8.7 out of 10** was achieved. While marginally down on 2025's average of 9.2/10, this rating has remained consistent around 9/10 for the past four festivals.

Attenders and participants who gave more details of their positive experience tended to compliment the welcome they received and the warmth of their event hosts in particular.

Audiences

"The Books that Matter event was just lovely. The staff were really friendly and engaged and I was thrilled with my book swap."

"Such a powerful event - we conversed and danced and it was beautiful!"

"It was amazing and I'd love to come to more in the future."

"A fantastic event - very welcoming and positive."

"Thoroughly enjoyed it. Interesting stimulus and context. Warm nurturing facilitator and plenty of time to write and share."

"Very atmospheric library, staff very knowledgeable and friendly."

Parents of children attending family-orientated events also commented on the quality of the performers or facilitators and the depth of audience engagement achieved.

Families

"We all really enjoyed this event & it was amazing to meet a pop star!"

"My son absolutely loved the comic book workshop! He loved how interactive the session was and it gave him lots of new ideas and inspiration to make more comics."

"Excellent performer. Kids extremely engaged."

"The children thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to watch a live production and the interactive element meant children that usually wouldn't join in were participating."

"Gave my son an opportunity to learn about creating simple games on 'Bitsy' and how he can get more involved in creating video games."

Positive comments greatly outweighed negative feedback received. When audiences did report a compromised experience, this tended to relate to elements such as background noise (libraries are public spaces) or the format/age suitability of specific events.

Mixed/critical feedback

“The event was aimed at children finding books to attend however the event itself was a little bit long for young children. Whilst I enjoyed it myself as an adult, I think the event wasn’t suitable for younger children.”

“The space in Manchester Central Library needs to be more soundproof. It was hard to hear when there was noise from a demonstration outside.”

“Really interesting event, loved it. I just wish the set up of the venue had been a bit more ideal for the speaker. There was a lot of background noise that disrupted the event and the technology didn’t quite work for her PowerPoint slides.”

2.1.3 Enhancing knowledge, skills and creativity

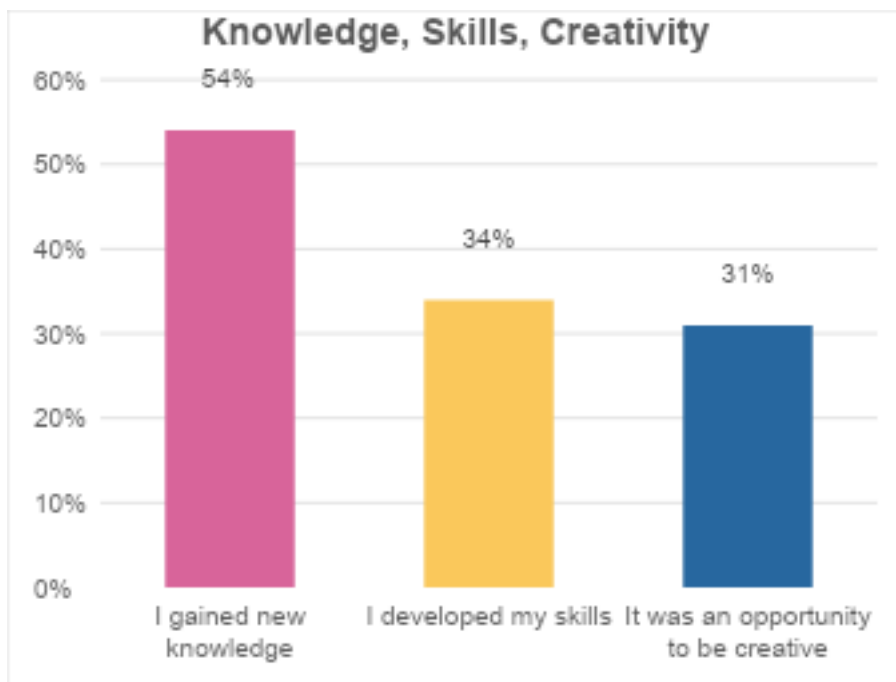
Hands-on participation, lifelong learning, and creative fulfilment continue to play a prominent role in the Festival of Libraries programme. This year, 40% of survey respondents said their event had involved making or creating something themselves (only a slight reduction from 44% in 2025 when

participation was the lead festival theme).

In their role as facilitators of Manchester, UNESCO City of Lifelong Learning, the work and skills team at the city council also contributed support and funding for creative skills-based events, hosted by their network of training providers. Seven taster events, ranging from DJ’ing and trying a musical instrument, to flower arrangement, attracted a combined audience of 500+.

Other interactive or learning/skills based workshops at this year’s festival included bookmaking, creative writing for wellbeing, an introduction to making video games, comic-writing, poetry, and jewellery-making.

- ⇒ Over half of survey respondents (54%) felt they had gained new knowledge from their festival event
- ⇒ Just over a third (34%) felt their event had developed their skills
- ⇒ Just under a third (31%) felt their event gave them an opportunity to be creative



#1 *The Quest for Planet P*, Knotted Hawk Productions

The Quest for Planet P is an interactive and immersive dance theatre production for children aged up to 11 years. The show follows aliens Ozmo and Orbo on their quest to find the perfect planet, which turns out to be closer to home than expected. Children are actively engaged in the story action and questions the show raises about looking after our own planet.



For Hawk Dance Theatre (collaborators with The Knotted Project on this show) touring to libraries and 'unconventional'

2.1.4 Case study events

With over 100 festival events to choose from in 2026, it isn't possible for this evaluation to explore all of them. Instead, the following two events are highlighted as examples (of which there are plenty more!) of creative practitioners responding to the particular opportunities libraries offer to connect with specific audiences.

venues has largely replaced theatres as their go-to model. They describe this way of touring as ‘hyper-local’. Instead of being booked at small theatres across the UK, often with long road journeys between venues, a library service might book the company for 5 local library shows in a week, allowing them to extend their audience reach with a smaller footprint

“We were finding more and more that people weren’t coming out to the theatres, and we want to reach the young people who need it the most. The logistics of touring to the theatres – tour schedules, transport, paperwork, large crews – were becoming too big for the scale of our company. Touring to libraries feels more sustainable – the whole show has to fit in the boot of a car!”

As well as enabling a deeper connection with a particular city or region, performing in libraries offers Hawk Dance Theatre a more direct connection with their young audience. Where traditional theatre layouts can sometimes create a barrier between performers and audience, library spaces often have a levelling effect.

“All our work is participative, so children don’t just sit as audience members they take part. That works really well when they are sit on the carpet a metre in front of us and they’re ready and willing to get involved.”

For the 2026 Festival of Libraries, the company performed The Quest for Planet P at Bolton Library and Levenshulme Old Library, where the production received positive feedback from families and library staff.

“The quality of performance of Quest for Plant P, the pace and the engagement with the audience was excellent.”

For the company, the experience of working with the festival team was also very positive, not least because they well understand the logistical challenges of working with libraries for whom dance performances are not a regular fixture.

“The team were super-organised. They took control of our schedule, all the bookings, and the liaison between libraries. For us as a company used to doing it ourselves that’s amazing! Everything was taken care of and under control.”



Looking ahead, the company would love to be part of the festival again and would like to extend their run across more libraries in their home city of Manchester.

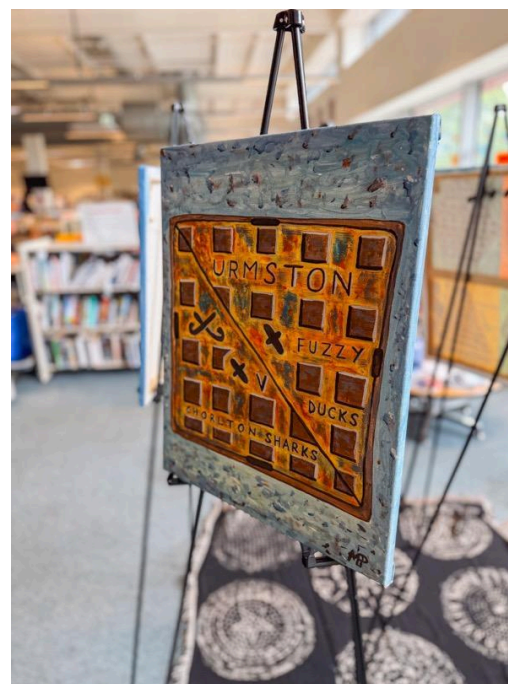
#2 Manc Holes and Beyond, Urmston Library

Manc Holes and beyond is an eclectic exhibition which celebrates the unexpected art and design of urban manhole and drain covers.

Presented by the Manchester Manhole Collective, a small group of creative enthusiasts, the exhibition accompanies a photographic book and was first shown at Manchester Central Library in 2025. Manchester City of Literature helped to facilitate its repeat showing at the Festival of Libraries in 2026 by storing the dismantled exhibition until it could be installed at Urmston Library. Additional, new, photographs and artwork for the festival run refreshed the exhibition and gave it a local connection.

The exhibition encourages visitors to seek out these overlooked urban art forms, engage their imaginations, be inspired, and join a community of enthusiasts. It also champions awareness that creative activities can help improve mental health and wellbeing and aims to fundraise for We are Survivors, a Manchester based charity supporting male survivors of sexual abuse.

Re-mounting the exhibition in Urmston Library was an economical way of enhancing the library and reaching a new audience for the work with a low environmental impact.



For the creatives behind the Manchester Manhole Collective, extending the life and reach of the exhibition created renewed interest in and exposure for their passion project.

"The exhibition really elevated the library space and turned it into a gallery. That went down really well and it was clear quite a few people hadn't expected to see that in the library"
Library partner



2.2 Outcome: *Stretch public perceptions of Greater Manchester's libraries as cultural hubs*

Headlines:

- ⇒ Almost all respondents (**98%**) feel libraries are an essential community service and only a small minority (5%) feel libraries aren't as important to the community as they once were
- ⇒ Almost **three quarters** of respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that the festival had made their library seem more connected to their community
- ⇒ **73%** agreed that the festival had demonstrated that their library had more to offer them than they'd previously thought
- ⇒ Over half (**61%**) agreed (or strongly agreed) that the festival had improved their view of Greater Manchester as a City of Literature

2.2.1 Festival of Libraries attendees see their libraries as essential, multi-faceted, services

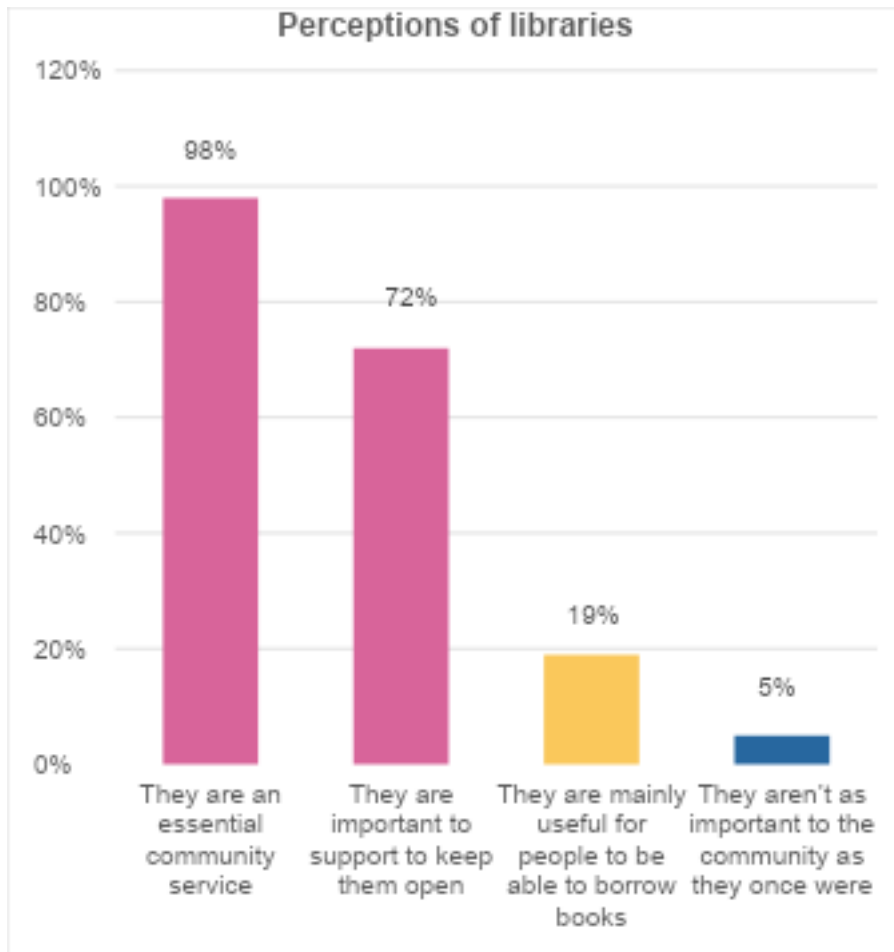
The Festival of Libraries has now run annually in Greater Manchester for five consecutive years. In evaluation conversations with library partners and creative practitioners it

is noticeable that their understanding and confidence around how to mount successful events in libraries has grown since 2021.

It therefore follows logically that (as the festival matures) the programming of multi-artform cultural events in Greater Manchester's libraries has become more normalised and expected by audiences.

Survey findings from the 2026 festival show that support for libraries and the perception that they are much more than simply a book-lending facility, remain as strong as in previous years. Almost all respondents (98%) feel libraries are an essential community service, and a minority of just under a fifth (19%) believe they are mainly useful for borrowing books.

Only a small minority (5%) feel libraries aren't as important to the community as they once were.



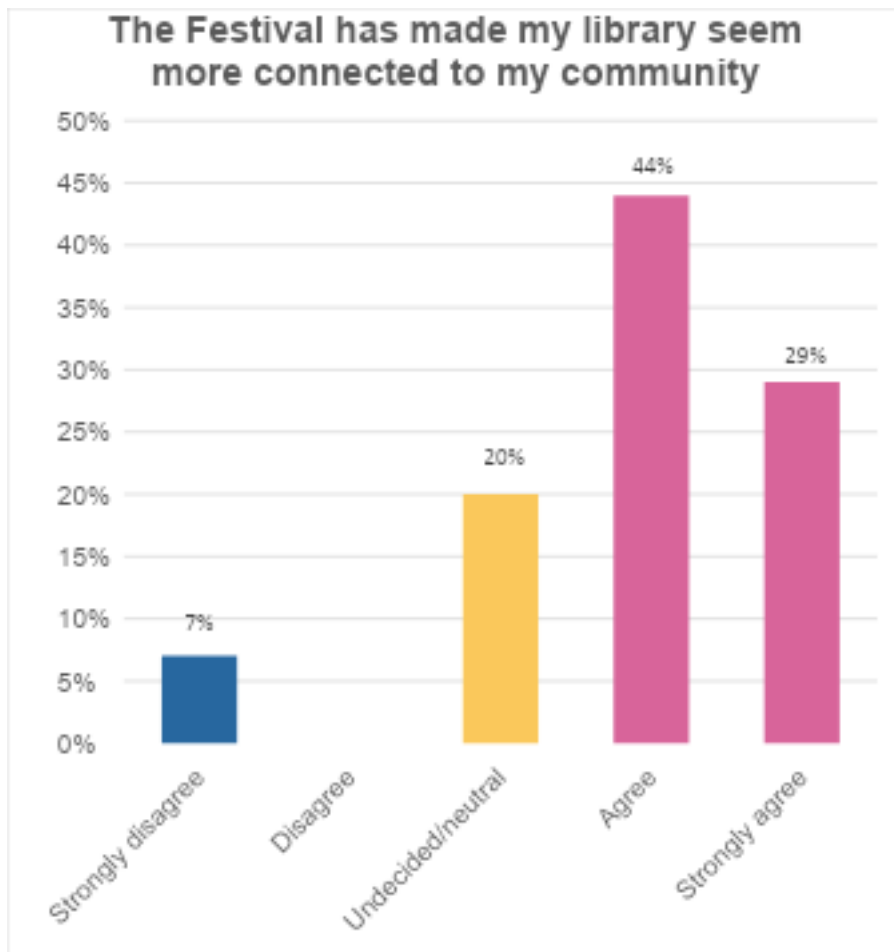
report noticeable shifts in their usual audience for festival events) but a clearer function of the festival is further developing the relationship existing attendees have with their library.

Almost three quarters of respondents (74%) agreed (or strongly agreed) that the festival had made their library seem more connected to their community. In addition:

- ⇒ 73% agreed that the festival had demonstrated that their library had more to offer them than they'd previously thought
- ⇒ 58% agreed the festival had made their library seem more relevant to topical issues and concerns

2.2.2 The festival promotes a deeper connection between libraries and their communities

Consistent with previous festival evaluations, the profile of survey respondents suggests the majority are already regular library users (60% visit their local library at least once a month). This isn't to discount the role of the festival in building new audiences (specialist independent libraries in particular



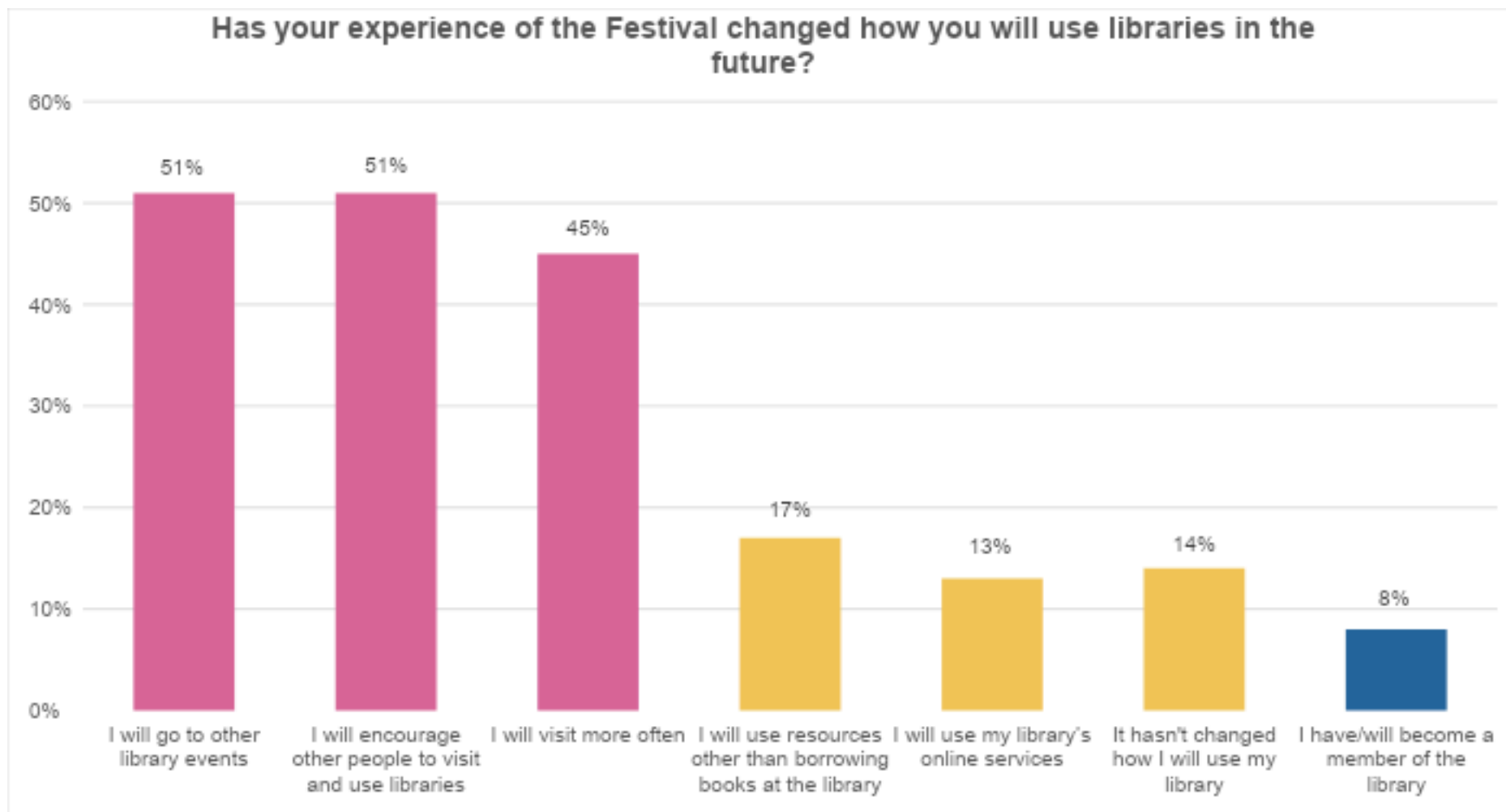
event had represented a coming together of communities in a shared space.

“Serge Sagna and Dawn French delivered a fantastic event which gave me increased pride in, and recognition of my Jamaican culture, language and heritage.”

“Our first visit to John Rylands library, it was so beautiful and we really enjoyed the Books that Matter book exchange event, would definitely come again!”

“Very engaging and interactive. Great to be with community members and global majority staff relevant to the topic in skills, specialism and heritage.”

This sense of connection was supported in respondents’ additional comments, which made clear that for some their



Engaging with the Festival of Libraries has consistently had a positive effect on audience intentions to attend other library events, visit their library more frequently, or encourage others to do so.

2.2.3 The festival supports the public perception of Greater Manchester's libraries as a uniquely rich asset

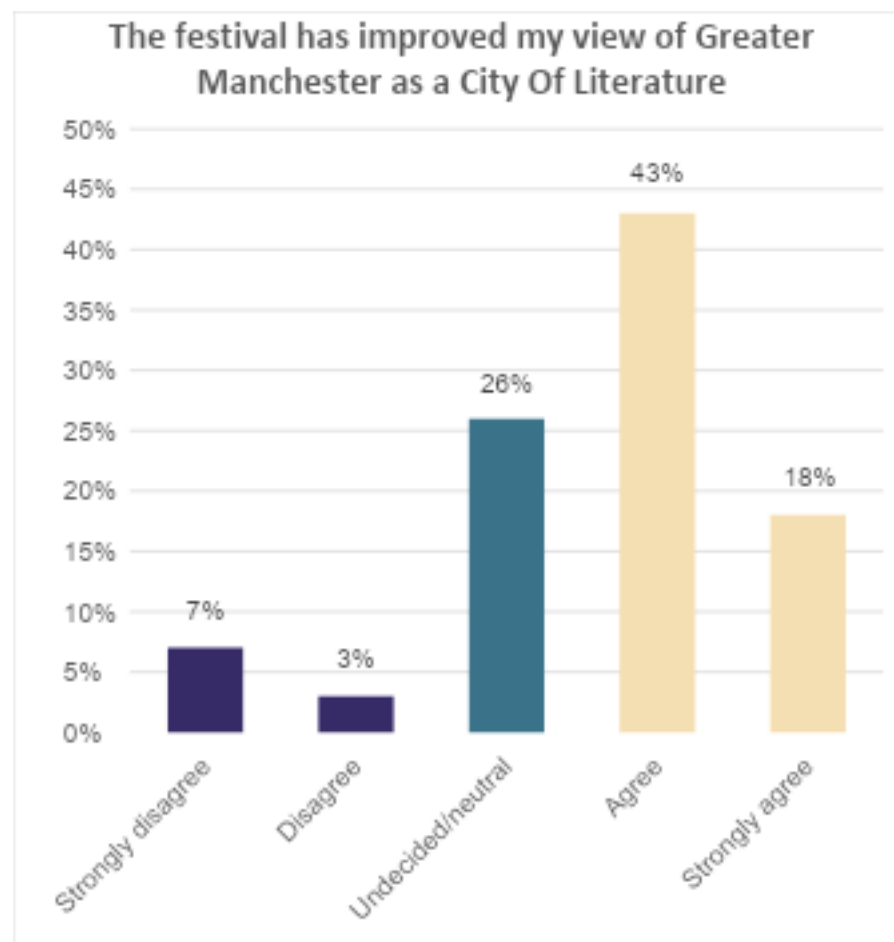
Feedback from library partners hosting the festival makes clear the value they place on coming together collaboratively to represent the collective strength of Greater Manchester's libraries and draw attention to its literary credentials.

"Most regular folk in Manchester might not know about it being a City of Literature. Things like the festival do a great job of showing people more about that and drawing in audiences who might not necessarily come into a library."

"I think we have a good thing going here (the Festival of Libraries) and something that's kind of unique to us because we have so many libraries, so let's keep that going."

"Everyone across the ten authorities thinks the festival is really important. It's the one time of the year when we all do things together so long may it continue." Library partners

This impact of the festival as a tangible and public demonstration of Greater Manchester's City of Literature status again shows up in survey respondent attitudes. Over half (61%) agreed (or strongly agreed) that the festival had improved their view of Greater Manchester as a City of Literature.





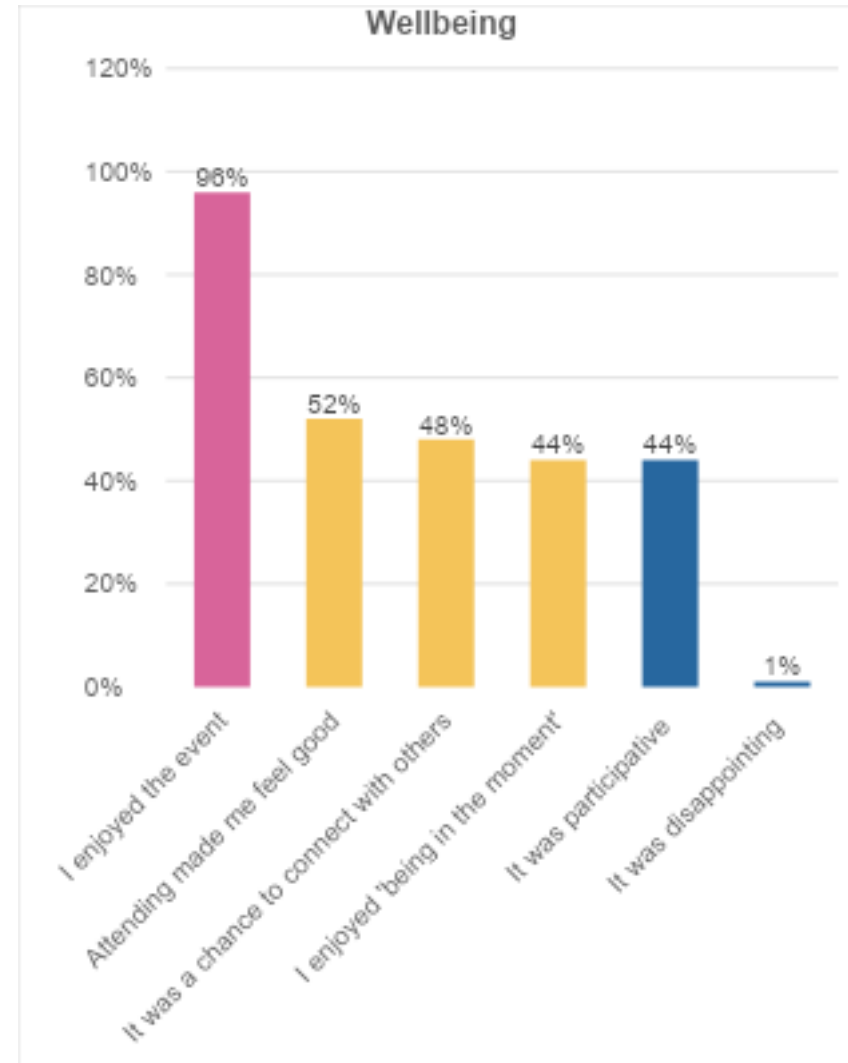
2.3 Outcome: *Positively impact on attenders' wellbeing*

Headlines:

- ⇒ **96%** of festival attenders enjoyed their event
- ⇒ Around half said their event had made them feel good or offered a chance to connect with others
- ⇒ **44%** said they had enjoyed being in the moment, or agreed their event had been participative

For the purposes of informing programming (and evaluation), the Festival of Libraries draws on the '5 ways to wellbeing' model widely used by the NHS and public health charities in the UK.

By focusing on actions which have been shown through research to contribute towards wellbeing, cultural organisations and events can better understand their distinct role and value. In particular, opportunities to keep learning, connect with others, and to take notice (or be 'in the moment' mindfully) are evidenced ways in which cultural attendance can contribute to wellbeing.



We have already seen (p.10) that festival attenders report positive impacts on their learning, in the form of knowledge, creativity, and skills.

The vast majority of attenders (96%) also directly reported enjoying their event and over half (52%) agreed that attending their event had made them feel good. Almost half of attenders (48%) also felt their event was a chance to connect with others.

“Thoroughly enjoyed it. Interesting stimulus and context. Warm nurturing facilitator and plenty of time to write and share.”

“An amazing opportunity to meet like-minded people.”

44% said they had enjoyed being in the moment, or agreed their event had been participative.

“We’re doing more each year on promoting wellbeing and combatting isolation as well, particularly age-related. It’s worth thinking a bit more around this theme as lots of libraries are now engaging with it.”

“Libraries can be such a lifeline for those people who have perhaps retired and are dealing with one of life’s biggest changes. You can either embrace all the opportunities or go

the other way and become quite low/depressed. Libraries can help with people’s wellbeing in that respect.”

Library partners



*Inspired by Libraries with Divina De Campo, Oldham
Library and Lifelong Learning Centre*



2.4 Outcome: *Achieve year on year growth as a major festival of local engagement with international reach*

Headlines:

- ⇒ Almost **95,000** people attended the festival, with high footfall particularly driven by exhibitions
- ⇒ The majority of attenders (**63%**) had travelled less than 5 miles to reach their event
- ⇒ **55%** of respondents used public transport, walking, or cycling to reach their event
- ⇒ **55%** of respondents were aware their event was part of the Festival of Libraries (similar to 2024-25)

2.4.1 2026 saw a huge leap in footfall to Festival of Libraries exhibitions

Festival attendance reached a new record of almost 95,000 people in 2026, largely driven by three high footfall exhibitions at Bolton, Trafford, and Manchester libraries, which received almost 92,000 attenders between them.

Other indicative metrics of growth, such as the total number of festival events programmed in 2026, remain broadly similar to 2025. This is consistent with the funding and resources context for the festival, which (after a two-year funding settlement covering 2024-25) this year returned to one-year



project funding support from Arts Council England (with no uplift from previous grants).

Manchester City of Literature's total website visits for April-June were 29,600, compared to 19,700 last year; a marked increase of 50.25%.

Our website hits were double what they were in June 2025 for June 2026, reaching 11,000. Q1 2026 has seen a 10,000 visitor increase compared to 2025, marking a clear increase in reach in the festival campaign for this year.

2.4.2 Festival of Libraries makes global connections through its programme and is predominantly attended by local residents

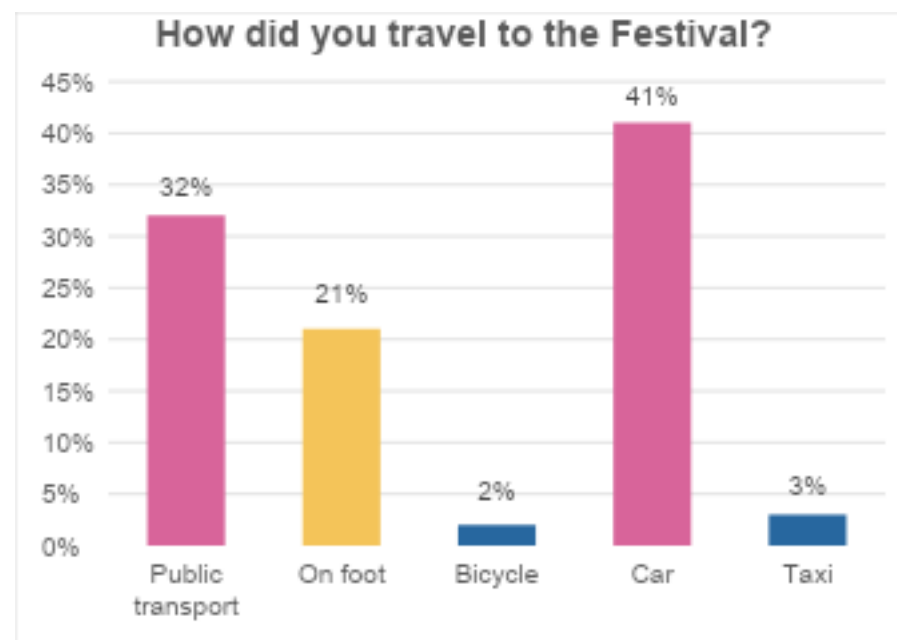
The distribution of festival attenders in 2026 remained consistent with previous years, in that the majority of attenders (63%) had travelled less than 5 miles to reach their event, including 20% who had travelled less than a mile. A minority of 17% had travelled more than 10 miles to their event.

While many of the creative practitioners who delivered events at this year's festival are Manchester-based, the programme also retained a strong international outlook, with contributions from Barcelona, Jordan, Denmark and Ukraine.

Modes of transport used to reach the festival also remain similar to previous years, with a total of 55% of attenders using public transport, walking, or cycling to reach their event. Encouragingly the proportion of attenders who reached their event on foot increased slightly to 21%.

Car use continues to be high (41%) given the local proximity of most venues, though it is difficult to identify many significant levers within the festival's control which might reduce car use (and therefore overall festival emissions/carbon footprint of events.)

"International reach is definitely something we're getting through the Festival of Libraries. We've had two international comic book artist exhibitions in consecutive years which isn't something we would do independently." Library partner



2.4.3 Brand awareness

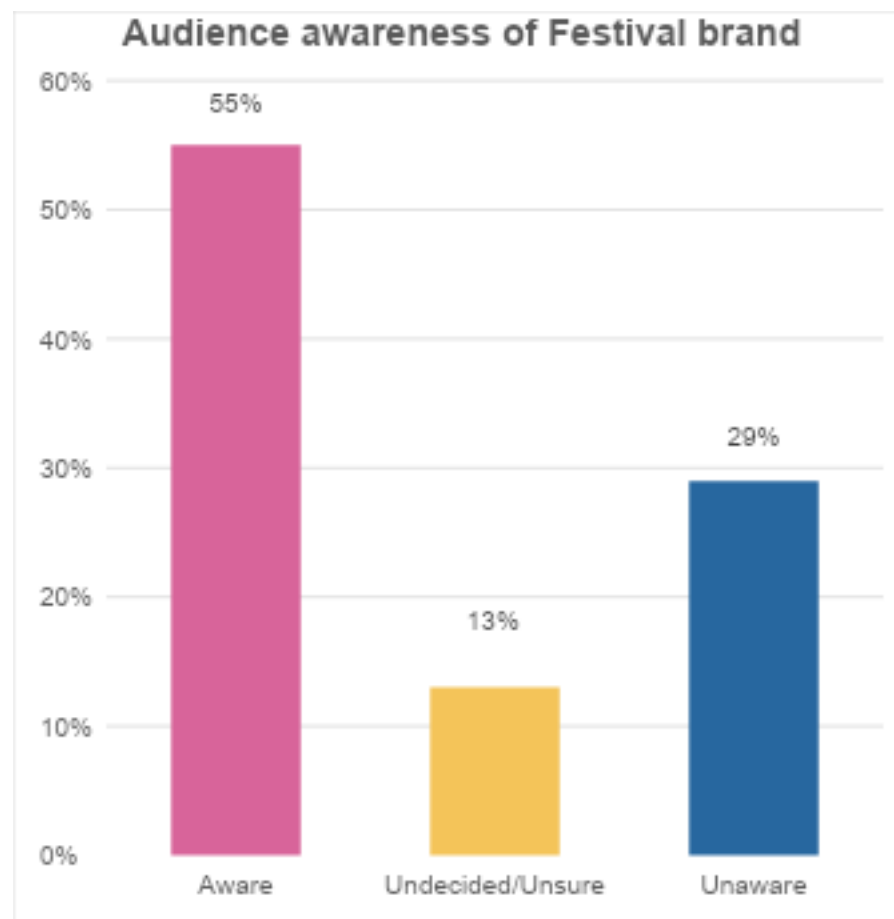
Brand awareness of the Festival of Libraries amongst attenders remained consistent with 2024-25. 55% of respondents were aware of the Festival of Libraries brand, while just under a third (29%) hadn't realised their event was part of a festival.

As in previous years, this partly reflects the local and devolved nature of the programme, which incorporates events of very different scales and a large number of local venues, some participating for the first time.

Year on year growth is a good thing to aspire to but it's hard to achieve on year-to-year uncertainty around funding. At some point the Arts Council will say no."

"People who are actively looking for something culturally interesting to do on a weekend know to look at the website of say Manchester International Festival or Bradford Literature Festival. I don't think Festival of Libraries has that attraction yet."

Library partners



Corinne Bailey Rae *Look for a Book* winners
meet the author event, Stockroom



3. Partner feedback

Headlines:

- ⇒ Partners felt the standard and quality of many of the Festival of Libraries events in 2026 was high
- ⇒ Some events, despite being relatively small scale, were felt to have achieved a significant impact
- ⇒ Partners complimented the festival team on their organising skills and liaison with partners
- ⇒ ‘No-shows’ by bookers of free tickets continues to be an issue, mainly for small capacity workshops/events
- ⇒ Looking to the future, partners want to see further consolidation of the established festival model

Feedback from library and non-library venue partners was gathered in two open invitation online group discussions which were attended by a total of 11 participants.

3.1.1 Partners rate the quality of many festival events (and the creative practitioners delivering them) highly

When reporting on their 2026 festival experiences, many partners stressed the quality of the events they had hosted. Regardless of the scale of event, from theatre performance to small writing workshops, they felt the standards being

reached were high.

“The Van Hulle dance performance in the centre of the library was incredible.”

“It was an amazing opportunity for the children, especially the See Myself in Books event, which was looking at diversity in children’s books and you could really see and feel the impact on those classes.”

“We had a really good event – people were coming out buzzing afterwards. People with aphantasia came along and it was almost like a support group. They’re actually now meeting regularly as a result.”

“The Creole language event at Old Trafford Library was really successful. Around 40 people attended that and it’s something we’d really like to do again with other languages from around the world.”

Library partners

3.1.2 Partners prioritised event impact over scale and reach

In reviewing their 2026 events, a number of partners talked about the depth of engagement from attenders. Sometimes these were small groups of people, however if the event had a profound effect on them this was felt to be more important than overall attendance numbers.

Examples cited included a creative writing workshop which has now formed the basis of an ongoing group, a community ‘takeover’ of Manchester Poetry Library, and a library staff team motivated by their comic book event to attend a Comic Con and learn more about the genre.

“We hosted Comic Creativity Galore, which was really good. On the back of that our staff got really interested and attended Comic Con which was held a couple of weeks ago.”

“We didn’t go for a lot of things this year but did go for quality and what we thought people would enjoy.”

“One of our creative writing workshop facilitators had hoped to form a new writing group on the back of their workshop event and has been able to do so, which is really good.”

“For the last three years we’ve tended to do a music-themed Inspired by Libraries, which has worked to help bring new people into the library and create a really good conversation about lyrics and poetry.”

Library partners

3.1.3 Partners speak highly of the Festival of Libraries team and their skills

Feedback from partners suggests strong trust in the festival team and a feeling that (in its sixth consecutive) year the

festival benefits from their cumulative experience and expertise.

Partners also particularly value the annual January programming meeting, where they come together to discuss festival creative commissions and the events which would best suit their venue/audience. As well as being a fair and considered way of distributing events across all partners, the meeting is seen as a rare opportunity to get together in-person with colleagues across the sector.

“I thought it was really well organised this year. The producer was really good at reminding me to do stuff!”

“The team are brilliant and really accessible. It’s really reassuring to know that they’ve got your back and aren’t going to let things slide as we (libraries) are programming this in alongside already busy jobs.”

“The team are very supportive and enthusiastic and work really hard. They’re also very responsive to feedback.”

“The programming event that happens in January is brilliant, especially as we all get together in person. We take off our geographical hats and try to look at the commissions on offer and where they might achieve the most impactful reach. It’s a

very fair and democratic process.”

Library partners

3.1.4 Looking to the future, partners want to see further consolidation of the established festival model

When asked what they would like the Festival of Libraries to be moving forward, many partners expressed a desire to keep working together and with the festival team on further consolidating an already successful model. There was some reticence about pursuing ‘growth for growth’s’ sake if that came at the cost of quality or depth of impact.

A few partners also wanted to see more opportunities for them and their teams to attend other festival events and network with colleagues. Whilst acknowledging the practical difficulties of achieving this in a particularly busy week, there was a sense that learning from other partners’ events by experiencing them first hand would be a valuable learning tool.

“I just love the fact that we (libraries) all work together on the Festival, because I don’t think we do that enough.”

“I feel like we’ve got a really good thing here with Festival of Libraries and it’s really unique. Maybe that could be shouted about a bit more now on a national or even international level.”

“It’s a really good model so for me there’s no particular big change required, it’s more of the same please!”

“I’m wary of growth for growth’s sake. I’d like us to keep refining what we do.”

Library partners

3.1.5 Learning from 2026

The following points draw on constructive criticism offered by partners to highlight issues in ways which might benefit future festival planning.

- ⇒ A number of partners once again reported issues with schools cancelling their scheduled event/performance attendance at the last minute. Whilst partners did everything they could to mitigate (including recruiting alternative schools and in one case sending the performers to the school which had cancelled!) some partners (and creative practitioners) questioned whether schools are fully aware of the knock-on effect to the event/organisers/performers of their late cancellation.
- ⇒ Some partners described events which had struggled to find public audiences. Two examples given were the *Inspired by Libraries: Bobby Seagull* event (switched to online due to low bookings) and an evening performance of *Census*, which only drew a handful of

attenders. Partners tended to cite lack of marketing cut through or wider factors such as hot weather as possible explanations.

"I think the weather played a role this year. We had 50 people booked on an author event and only 20 showed, but it was during the heatwave on a lovely day and I think people just didn't want to come into a non-air conditioned library!"
"I wish the event had been advertised more widely as attendance numbers were low."

"I still think we need to work on publicity and promotion, even further in advance."

"We could have had the social media assets earlier. I don't think we can start too early in terms of promotion. With more time we can do a lot better in terms of event sales."

Library partners

- ⇒ Whilst it is difficult to cite numbers, general feedback from partners in 2026 was that *Look for a Book* was less successful than in previous years. Possible contributory factors highlighted included the very hot weather and the chosen author (whilst a high-profile musician) not being very well known as a children's author.

"Look for a book went smoothly operationally this year, but seemed to fall flat with the public this year. We had a lot of

books unclaimed. We did everything exactly the same as last time but it just didn't seem to generate the interest."

Library partner

- ⇒ The 2026 theme (Bound together, Connected through stories) didn't really register with partners, in as much as they don't feel annual festival themes as having a significant impact on their planning, which is more influenced by the core festival target outcomes.
- ⇒ Whilst the annual programming meeting in January is highly valued by partners, some expressed concerns that anyone not attending this meeting was at a disadvantage and risked having 'whatever was left' programmed at their venue. This was felt to be exacerbated this year by the increased number of commissioned creative practitioners who (it was felt) needed matching with host venues.

"I love the January programming meet, but there is the danger that if you're not there on that day then your preference sort of disappears. It can be a case of there being some 'unloved' events that end up at libraries which weren't at that meeting."

Library partner

SNE Studios Showcase, Manchester Central Library



4. Creative practitioner feedback

Headlines:

- ⇒ Creative practitioners rated their overall experience of the Festival of Libraries a high **9.2 out of 10**
- ⇒ Practitioners also prize impact over scale
- ⇒ Practitioners value the opportunity to work in libraries highly
- ⇒ Some practitioners felt their events would have benefitted from more targeted marketing and audience development

‘Creative practitioner’ is used to denote the diverse range of people delivering events and performing in the Festival of Libraries and includes artists, writers, actors, academics, dancers, poets, and more.

This year’s festival saw just under 100 creative practitioners (more than in any previous year) involved in delivering events, either commissioned directly by the festival or in a voluntary capacity.

In addition to a short evaluation survey (12 responses) nine practitioners were interviewed for this evaluation, representing a cross section of disciplines from theatre to academia.

When asked in the survey what they most hoped to get out of participating in the Festival of Libraries, practitioners tended to suggest either engagement and connection with communities, or professional profile-raising and contacts.

What were the three main things you were hoping to get out of participating in the Festival of Libraries this year?

Exposure
Profile
Contacts
Sharing knowledge and expertise
Sharing research
Experience
Working in a new region
Professional connections
Connecting with new audiences
Great engagement
Community building/connections
Chance to engage with more potential readers
Community reach
Connecting with people in the community

4.1.1 Many creative practitioners enjoyed successful events and rated the festival team’s skills highly

In the evaluation survey, creative practitioners rated their overall experience of the Festival of Libraries a high 9.2 out of 10.

Positive feedback tended to relate to the connections made with audiences and participants, and to the professionalism of the team organising the festival.

"I couldn't have asked for a better school. The kids were really engaged, they got stuck into everything and produced some lovely poems by the end."

"My experience was superb."

"The team were friendly and accommodating. We would have liked to have delivered more performances as initially planned, but I understand bookings aren't always as easy to secure."

"It was a really lovely experience."

"The team's communication was on point! We work with promoters and presenters all over the country and they were FANTASTIC."

"It was a really wonderful experience. I felt well supported the onboarding was good. I had a good relationship with the festival and the library workers. I was able to get on with being creative, left to my own devices apart from the appointments I needed organising for me. I was inspired by the building and conversations with people in it."

Creative practitioners

4.1.2 Creative practitioners also prize impact over scale

In common with many of the festival partners, practitioners interviewed tended to be motivated more by the depth of engagement and the broad demographic profile of audiences they can reach in libraries, than by reaching large numbers of people. Examples given included writing and video game-making workshops, which though only reaching a few participants were felt to have been worthwhile and influential on those who did participate.

The leaders of these workshops felt the festival connected them with participants who they wouldn't usually come into contact with at the specialist interest events they ordinarily appear at. This was a rewarding exchange for the practitioners as well as participants.

"We programmed seven events aimed at inspiring and learning, which attracted over 500 members of the public. It's more about who we reach and what it means to them but we were really happy with that."

"I had one participant who got so engaged with it and was planning all the stuff he wanted to do when he got home. It was nice to see people getting genuinely invested in what we were doing."

"Mine was a small group, but that did mean we could have quite intensive conversations and it was all quite personal."

"I had a small group, but it was booked out very quickly. Everyone there was very engaged and I would love to do a similar workshop again."

Creative practitioners

4.1.3 Practitioners value the opportunity to work in libraries highly

Creative practitioners involved in the Festival of Libraries comprise a mix of those with previous (sometimes extensive) experience of working in libraries and those who doing so for the first time in 2026.

As the festival matures, it follows that there appears to be a growing body of more experienced practitioners, who in turn have a good understanding of both the challenges and opportunities of delivering events in these spaces. For those individuals participating for the first time, feedback was often that much had been learnt and they hoped to put this learning into practice by participating again in future.

"We have been working in libraries over the last two years and always enjoy being able to perform in such a magical and diverse place. We would love to do more!"

"It confirmed that it's something that I can do in libraries and get very good reception from. I already suspected this, but it

was very nice to see that it was and to get the opportunity to do that."

"It helped me understand how to work co-operatively with a small local library in order to create an exhibition that works for the library and it's community."

Creative practitioners

4.1.4 Some practitioners felt their events would have benefitted from more targeted marketing and audience development

Some practitioners were disappointed with low turnout at their event and felt more could have been done by their host library to directly publicise it with visitors using the building in the run up to the festival.

For others, more work was felt to be needed in reaching out to specific communities (or partners with access to these communities) who might not consider a festival of libraries event as being 'for them'.

"Maybe there is an aim to reach different audiences but a reliance on the same regular channels to try and reach them? Instead, I'd suggest teaming up with others who are maybe experts in reaching their own demographic or their own cultural pocket in Manchester."

“There wasn’t enough promotion within the libraries themselves. I’m sure they’re spinning lots of plates but it’s disappointing as they could be letting their users know what’s coming up in their library.”

“The event was quite disappointing as not many people came along. There wasn’t much footfall where we’d been located and we did ask if we could move to another part of the library but were told we couldn’t.”

“Communication with the library wasn’t great. This was a tiny part of what my contact does, so everything (like the Eventbrite) page was quite last minute, making it harder for me to push it within my own network, and it wasn’t advertised within the library at all.”

Creative practitioners

“Maybe just have slightly bigger budgets, which is always the hardest thing to do!”

“More marketing.”

“A longer lead in time. It took a couple of weeks to get my first meeting at the library.”

“I saw my event this year almost as a first test case. I’d happily do another next year, knowing I need to create a longer lead-in time and do more of the promotion myself.”

Creative practitioners

4.1.5 Suggestions for improvement tended to focus on marketing and promotion

When asked what they thought could improve the festival next time, practitioners who had enjoyed well-attended events tended not to feel much could be done to improve their good experience. Those whose events were less well-attended suggested greater marketing resources or specifically a longer lead-in time to promote events as potential improvements.



5. Future Direction

2026 saw a record number of people in Greater Manchester engage with the Festival of Libraries, with the high footfall mainly being driven by an expanded exhibition programme.

In other aspects, this year's festival saw further consolidation of a now well-established model, with a wide range of creative events across many artforms and subjects, often with a participative focus. This consolidation was sensible given that the funding and resources underpinning the festival did not expand this year, but it is also the direction many partners feel is the most sustainable. Rather than seek expansion for its own sake, partners (and many creative practitioners delivering events) want to refine a 'less is more' approach and focus on fewer but outstanding festival events.

Festival attenders, partners, and creative practitioners continue to place a high value on the festival and the outcomes it champions. They appreciate the collaborative effort needed to deliver the festival, and the way it positions libraries in Greater Manchester as a united sector within the cultural landscape. The team at Manchester City of Literature are highly regarded for their skills and experience, bringing leadership and organisation to the process and ensuring the festival is delivered year after year.

As has been the case in previous years, the extensive and wide-ranging nature of the festival programme remains both one of its unique assets and a risk in terms of branding and consistency of experience. While the breadth of the programme (across multiple libraries) demonstrates the vast potential for libraries to function as cultural hubs, it can also lead to poorly-attended events which may have 'got lost' within the extensive programme.

Often, the most successful festival events appear to capitalise on a host venue's informed understanding of their own audience development goals alongside a willingness to market and promote event to the specific audiences they wish to engage.

The festival team can bring a discerning curatorial strength to the programme and broker connections between creative practitioners and partners, but for events to consistently succeed and reach audiences, library partners themselves need to be active festival champions. Centralised marketing and audience development resources for the Festival remain scarce and unlikely to achieve the kind of mainstream cut-through which partners might like to see across Greater Manchester.

Creative practitioners who have contributed to the festival value it highly and as it matures there is a growing cohort of experienced creatives who understand how to effectively

deliver events in libraries. Whilst refreshing the festival programme and inviting new practitioners to participate are important considerations, a sustainable programming strategy should also draw on the existing pool of experienced creative professionals, especially if successful practitioners from previous festivals can be programmed again at different libraries across the city region.

Appendix 1: Participating Partners 2026

42nd Street
Bolton Libraries
Brighter Sound
Bury Libraries
Chetham's Library
Community Arts North West
Creative Manchester
Elizabeth Gaskell's House
Europeana
First Story
Fox Lane Books
HOME
Instituto Cervantes
John Rylands Research Institute and Library
Levenshulme Old Library
Manchester Cathedral
Manchester Council
Manchester Histories
Manchester Libraries
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester Poetry Library
Muslim Social Justice Initiative
Oldham Libraries
People's History Museum
Pinsent Masons
Read Manchester

Rochdale Libraries
Roundview
Salford Libraries
SNE Studios
Spinningfields
Stockport Libraries
Stockroom
Tameside Libraries
The Portico Library
Trafford Libraries
Transport for Greater Manchester
UNESCO Manchester City of Lifelong Learning
University of Manchester
Unlimited
Wigan Libraries
Z-arts