

Libraries are asking young people how to make them feel more welcome

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Libraries are changing - and a new national initiative is helping ensure children and young people are at the heart of that shift.

National charity Libraries Rising, previously known as ASCEL, has launched SparkSpace, a first-of-its-kind free training platform co-created with children and young people to support library professionals and volunteers to work more confidently and inclusively with younger generations.

The training supports library teams to meaningfully engage children and young people as active partners in shaping library spaces and services, moving beyond assumptions about what young people need, towards services designed with them, flipping the usual model of adults deciding what is best for children and young people.

The launch comes at a time when free community spaces for children and young people are shrinking across the UK. As a result, libraries are some of the last accessible, safe public spaces where young people can spend time, connect and feel part of their community.

This is reflected in recent findings from The Children's Society Good Childhood Report, which highlights that children and young people want more opportunities to be involved in their communities and to have a say in the decisions that affect them.

As the UK looks ahead to the National Year of Reading 2026, Libraries Rising highlights a vital point: for young people to experience the joy and value of libraries, they need to feel they matter and that they belong.

Libraries are widely recognised as inclusive community spaces, particularly for children and families. However, SparkSpace recognises that welcome cannot be assumed, it needs to be actively built, through listening, trust and shared ownership. With this in mind, SparkSpace supports library teams to create environments where young people feel valued and heard - places they are part of, not just visitors to.

The platform includes short learning modules, videos and practical activities that support library staff and volunteers to better understand the needs of children and young people and why it matters. The training also looks at how to create more inclusive spaces including for children and young people with SEND, communicate more confidently with young people and encourage their involvement and use outreach and social media in relevant and creative ways that directly engage children and young people.

Rather than being designed without young people's input, SparkSpace has been shaped directly by children and young people themselves. Young contributors shared honest experiences and shared what they need to feel they belong.

Developed in collaboration with youth engagement specialists Participation People, SparkSpace has been led by children and young people from the very beginning.

They were involved at every stage - identifying what library staff need to understand, shaping content, providing feedback and ensuring the training feels relevant, authentic and grounded in lived experience.

One young person who participated was fifteen-year-old Will, who found the experience empowering. He said: "I've never done something like this before, but it was amazing," he said. "As a young person, it's great to be involved in these changes."

The result is a practical, confidence-building platform that equips library teams with the tools, skills and understanding to engage young people in meaningful ways and embed participation into everyday practice.

Tabitha Witherick Macaulay, Chief Executive of Libraries Rising, said: "Co-creating this training with children and young people has been absolutely key. If we want young people to engage with libraries, they need to feel they are spaces where they truly belong.

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“By embedding participation into everyday practice, SparkSpace will help libraries strengthen their role at the heart of communities and create environments where young people feel genuinely included. For public spaces to work for young people, we have to work with them, not just develop spaces for them.”

SparkSpace is free to use, thanks to funding from The Foyle Foundation, ensuring cost is not a barrier for libraries at a time when budgets remain under pressure.

SparkSpace reflects a wider shift in how libraries are evolving - positioning them as collaborative, youth-inclusive spaces that respond to the realities young people face today.

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