

## Policy Brief

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# Strengthen the Social Role of Libraries

# Introduction

The authors of this policy brief are contributors to the research project *Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT)*. ILIT's objective is to examine public libraries' role in this era beset by social challenges such as segregation, discrimination, austerity measures, and unemployment. ILIT began conducting research in three urban communities in 2022: Malmö, Sweden; Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and Vienna, Austria. The project will conclude in 2025.

ILIT's research explores three principal themes: community librarianship, the politics of the library, and local involvement. This policy brief addresses the theme related to ILIT's study of the politics of the library. The central thrust of our study comprises an attempt to understand libraries as social infrastructures. Infrastructure is defined as a fundamental structure that plays an important role in maintaining a well-functioning society. The term is often used to refer to physical infrastructure, such as conduits for electricity, water, and Internet cables, and transportation networks for cars, trains, bicycles, and pedestrians. Publicly funded libraries are an infrastructure providing access to information and culture. For many people, libraries are the place to turn to for advice and support on many of life's important questions and decisions. This is especially true for people in vulnerable situations. In Sweden, the Swedish Library Act stipulates that each municipality must provide public libraries for its residents.

By describing public libraries as social infrastructures we emphasize their social function, in which library staff play a key role. Libraries contribute to a community's well-being through the support they provide to individuals in their everyday lives, which includes serving as meeting places. Library staff play a crucial role in enabling libraries to fulfill this role. Notwithstanding, we observe that this social function of libraries is currently under threat due to cutbacks and austerity policies. In light of these developments, we wish to draw attention to the value of libraries and their staff as an asset in maintaining a well-functioning, sustainable, and robust society (see also our other recommendations available on the project website [www.transforminglibraries.net](http://www.transforminglibraries.net)).

In this policy brief, we address policy makers and present our recommendations aimed at strengthening the social role of libraries. These recommendations can be used to advocate in favor of granting public libraries greater resources to use in support of their cities and local residents.

# The ILIT research project

Brief overview of the project:

- ILIT began in 2022 and is scheduled to conclude in 2025.
- Research conducted as part of the project is being carried out in a total of three public library organizations in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria respectively.
- The project's research group consists of seven researchers and one designer working in the field of social design.
- In Sweden, regional administrative body Region Skåne is involved in the project as a professional partner.
- ILIT receives funding from the EU via the framework program ERA-NET Cofund Urban Transformation Capacities (ENUTC). The Swedish contribution to the project is funded by Formas, the Swedish research council for sustainable development, and the Swedish Energy Agency.
- ILIT's research group is multidisciplinary in nature.
- The project makes use of a combination of qualitative research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and critical policy analysis.
- ILIT has developed a participatory research method it calls "zine-making workshops." This method involves organizing workshops in which participants create simple publications called "zines." Librarians, library management, library users, decision-makers, and other stakeholders were invited to take part in ILIT's zine-making workshops. Participants were tasked with jointly investigating how libraries can function as social infrastructures and also further develop their role in this respect.

## Aim of this policy brief

ILIT considers that the potential exists to further strengthen public libraries' role as social infrastructure in their local communities. This policy brief relates to the theme we call the politics of the library, where we addressed politicians and officials in management positions. The recommendations are directed at those who have influence over libraries. These recommendations are based on 1) the fieldwork conducted by the Swedish members of ILIT during the fall of 2023 and spring of 2024 at two public libraries managed by local municipal department Malmö Public Libraries and 2) discussions and reflections that eventuated in subsequent dialogs with library staff and representatives from the offices of the regional administration, Region Skåne.

# Terminology

**Public library** – Sweden’s public libraries are funded by its respective municipal governments, which have a statutory obligation under the *Swedish Library Act* to provide access to library services. Public libraries in Sweden must be universally accessible, and the Act stipulates that libraries must give individuals with functional impairments, national minorities, persons with a native language other than Swedish, and children and youths special consideration as prioritized groups of library users. (*Swedish Library Act*, 2013:801)

**Social infrastructure** – Infrastructures are basic structures that support important public services. Physical structures such as roads, power grids, water mains, and Internet communication systems have long been described as “infrastructures.” When ILIT refers to libraries as “social infrastructures,” this designation includes physical elements such as the library space, but also the nonphysical connections and networks that a library’s operations facilitate.

**Policy documents** – Municipal operations need to be carried out according to a variety of laws and regulations. In this text, we define policy documents as those texts that regulate the activities of a public library specifically because they are public libraries. This includes international manifestos and ethical guidelines, the national Library Act, and regional and municipal library plans.

## Issues & challenges

In our analysis, we have identified three tensions that have a major impact on the ability of libraries to fulfill a social role.

### **1) Libraries are guided by local, regional, national and international policies, while local autonomy is at the heart of their operations.**

Policies and budgets present both obstacles and opportunities for public libraries. It is important to strike a balance between national policies that provide guidance while allowing local autonomy. Local government policy has the greatest influence on public libraries because libraries are funded locally. This means that resources can vary greatly between different municipalities, but also within a municipality. In some municipalities or parts of municipalities, libraries are given more resources and support, which facilitates their work as social infrastructure. In other municipalities, libraries receive significantly less resources and, in some areas, residents have a long way to the nearest library. At the same time, the Library Act stipulates that everyone should have access to library services. This preamble can be difficult to fulfill due to differences across the country. However, not all differences are negative. Our study shows the importance of the librarianship profession itself, in dialog with the residents, having the space and confidence to formulate the operations according to the needs of the local community.

“ [---] there should be equal access for all to library operations. And that’s the starting point, and that’s why you have a Library Act because, well, it’s municipal autonomy. But in order to ensure this equality, you try to regulate it. ”

**2) There is robust and strong support for libraries as an essential part of society’s infrastructure, but funding is short-term.**

Our study shows that decision-makers at different levels view libraries as an essential part of society’s infrastructure. Despite this, short-term project grants are crucial for some library operations. For example, the national ‘Strengthening Libraries’ (Stärkta bibliotek) grant has helped municipalities to develop their operations. It has been a way to reduce the problem of unequal access to library services. Now ‘Strengthening Libraries’ has come to an end. This shows the negative consequences of the fact that basic societal functions such as libraries are often dependent on short-term, project-based funding to carry out necessary development work.

“ Much more targeted money would be needed. But without it just being project money. Because projects are good, but it’s a long run-in, a lot of resources go into writing project applications, and then they must be carried out, and then it has to be completed and then it’s expected to be implemented and then you don’t have the money for it. Because many librarians say that ‘this takes too much time, we would like to have it in general’ but that’s not the case. ”

**3) One consequence of financial cuts is that libraries are being given responsibility for more and more social tasks. At the same time, libraries are used as political pawns in cultural policy debates because of their strong symbolic value.**

Many societal functions have been scaled down and moved from physical offices to digital services. With their statutory democratic mission, public libraries play an essential role in ensuring that everyone can access these services and have the knowledge to use them. These new tasks require accompanying resources. The statutory work of promoting democratic development and reaching priority groups has placed libraries in the middle of a cultural policy debate in which they are used as political pawns because of their strong symbolic value. Politicians must refrain from direct control of library operations, and library staff need confidence, support and tools to deal with various forms of conflict that take place in the library space or that affect library operations.

**“ But if we perhaps stick to public libraries then, over time, there has been a lot of focus from our side too, at arm’s length. And where we’ve seen worrying tendencies of this kind, in municipalities, where they’ve, so to speak, gone in in a way that was never relevant before. And it is important that libraries are strengthened in their ability to respond to this and know what they are up against, in order to be able to play their independent role. ”**

“ ...[we need] to continue to develop the idea of what kind of democratic arena a library is today. Somewhere along the line, we must address these conflicts and how they can be expressed in libraries. You can't take a step back and protect yourself from this, but you have to take a step forward and see how we can embrace these social debates and deal with them, even in the arena that is the library.

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## Recommendations

Policy makers and other stakeholders at different levels that we have interviewed emphasize the important role of libraries in contributing to cultural experiences, community and education. At the same time, representatives of library operations tell us that the social role of libraries risks becoming invisible. They emphasize that governors at local and national level must see how libraries can contribute to democratic development, culture and education so that the activities can also meet such goals.

Based on our study and the tensions presented above, we would therefore like to highlight the following points as important for strengthening the role of libraries as social infrastructure:

- **The broad and statutory mission of public libraries requires national funding.**

Public libraries have a national mission formulated in the Library Act. Due to the highly variable tax base in Sweden's municipalities, supplementary government funding must target libraries directly, to ensure equal access to library services for everyone throughout Sweden.

- **Match the strong support for public libraries as an essential part of society's infrastructure with robust and long-term funding.**

The task of providing social infrastructure for society requires long-term funding.

- **Politicians should set the conditions and objectives of the operations but not control the content.**

The library profession has the knowledge to put the policy documents into practice in collaboration with users and considering local needs.

## THE ILIT RESEARCH PROJECT

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*Social infrastruktur som gör skillnad: Folkbibliotekens transformativa kapacitet i ett åtstramat stadsliv* is the name given to the ILIT project in Sweden.

Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT) is the project's name in English.  
Infrastructuring the Social: Public Libraries and Their Transformative Capacity in Austerity Urbanism

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### PERIOD

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### WEBSITE

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