

**explore**

Libraries and Archives



# Explore Together

Annual Review 2021/22

# Chair's message



I know we say this every year but what an extraordinary year this has been. A year where we have seen once again that Explore has outstanding people doing really important work in so many areas and so many places. People who were here for you when the world turned upside down in 2020 and were here for you in 2021 as we emerged from the pandemic into a world full of new challenges and new opportunities.

We have had much to celebrate this year with British Empire Medals in recognition for services to libraries for two of our senior staff. Barbara Swinn received an honour in June 2021, and Fiona Williams, our Chief Executive was honoured by the Queen in January 2022. Fiona was instrumental in setting up Explore and after a long and distinguished career, she took early retirement in July 2022. She will be missed. We also celebrated new investment in libraries for Clifton, Haxby & Wigginton, and Acomb.

We were sad to say goodbye to Frances Postlethwaite our longstanding children and young people's librarian. Her passion for igniting imaginations, opening up worlds of opportunity to children through the joy of reading and activities has left a strong legacy on which we will continue to build.

Through 2021 Explore has always been here for the people who live in or visit York. We have been bringing people back together, connecting people and place, sharing the joy of reading with little people and big people, innovating in our creative programmes and our amazing Archives, challenging imaginations and providing safe and welcoming places at the heart of communities. In these social spaces, community spaces, family spaces, creative and cultural spaces, learning spaces, Explore continues to support well-being and to listen, learn and work with communities so that together we can be even better.

The future is challenging, but together we can continue to make a difference. Explore gets some of its funding from our contract with City of York Council, but we need to raise extra money to do more of the things you've told us you love. It matters now more than ever. You can help us raise extra through using our cafés and our shops, attending our events and by donating directly. Thank you to everyone who is helping us continue to make that difference.

No one could have predicted how the world has changed, but I want to thank everyone who has helped us manage the unprecedented challenges we have faced: my fellow directors, the amazing strategic team, our wonderful staff, community members, friends groups and volunteers. Together, we're looking forward to writing the next chapter in the Explore story.

**Chris Edwards,**  
Chair of Explore



# Deputy CEO's message



During 2021 we well and truly bounced back and showed how we were there for the people of York. Like the rest of the country, we couldn't wait to get back to doing what we do best – flinging open our doors, bringing people together, welcoming customers old and new and continuing to build and grow and make a difference in our communities.

And grow we did. We listened to our customers and brought back more and more of what they told us they wanted to do in our spaces from rhymetimes and readers groups to events and knit and natter groups. All these were opportunities for people to come together and just be, whether formally or informally.

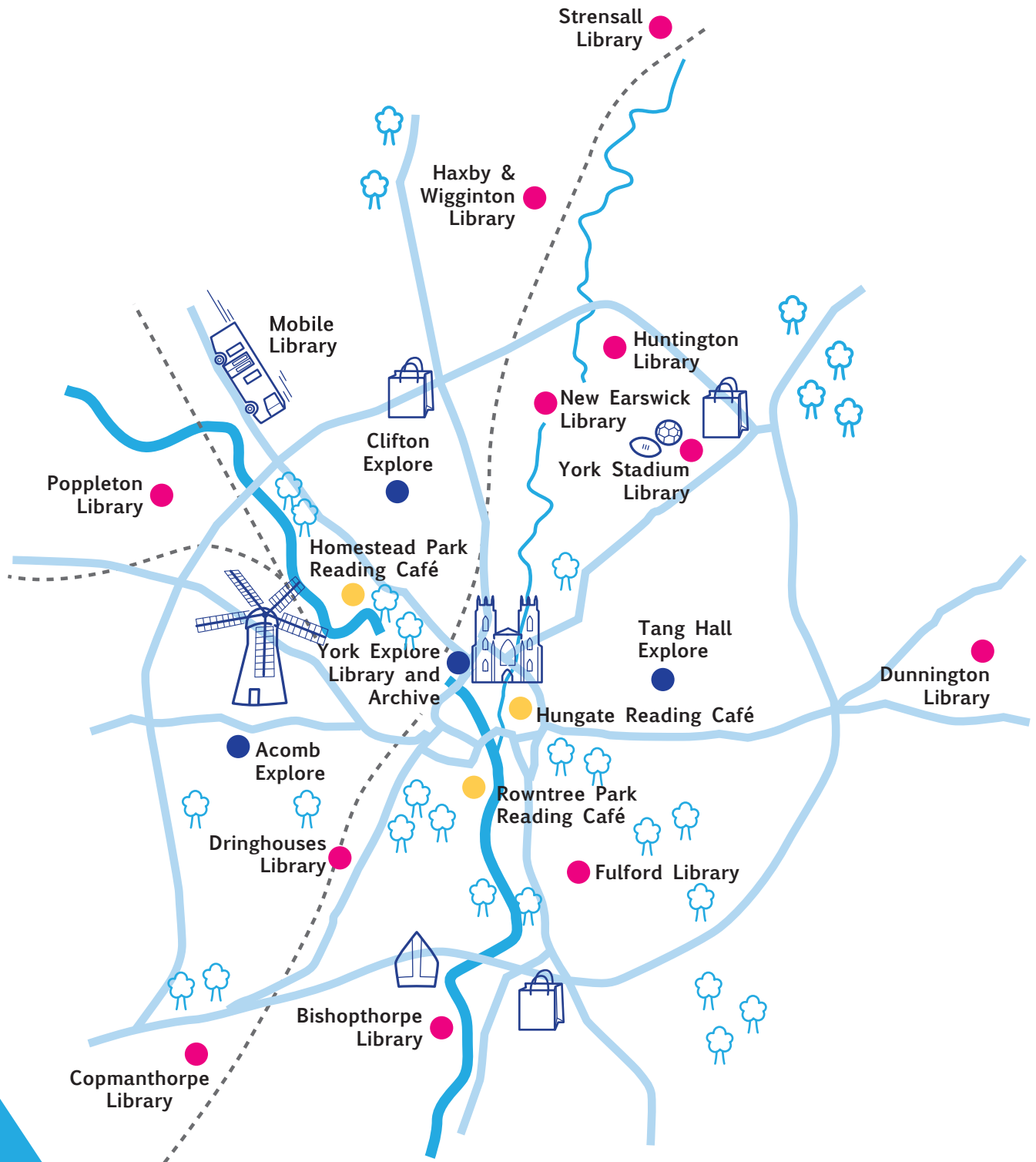
Our fantastic team of staff and volunteers welcomed everyone in with open arms, helping people to navigate our spaces safely again as we all worked hard at getting back to relative normality. The future of three of our libraries was secured with a significant £7.7m investment thanks to City of York Council.

We are looking forward to a strong future and a future which sees us finally open a new library for the communities of Haxby & Wigginton, a new Explore Centre in Clifton and an extended Explore Centre in Acomb. Then we can do more of what we do best: being safe, welcoming, accessible spaces where people can just meet up, spaces where they might come for one thing and leave with much more. We are looking forward to a future of doing more with our communities.

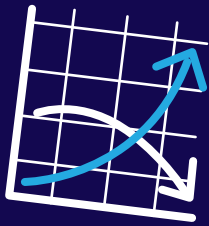
**Sarah Garbacz,**  
Deputy CEO



# Our Libraries, Archive and Reading Cafés



Ahead of the national trend!



e-library and physical book borrowing are holding up well



By March 2022 visits to our buildings had recovered to

76%

of pre-pandemic

The number of items borrowed is up by

24%

We added

24,180

items of new stock

Volunteers are back to

59%

of pre-pandemic

Volunteers gave us

15,299

hours over the year

Press Reader

22,500

uses per month  
750 per day  
3-4p per use



e-newspapers and e-magazines



We held

1,303

public events

8,787

new members joined the library

“Libraries really are the gates to the future.”

NEIL GAIMAN

explore  
Libraries and Archives

Library Card

explore  
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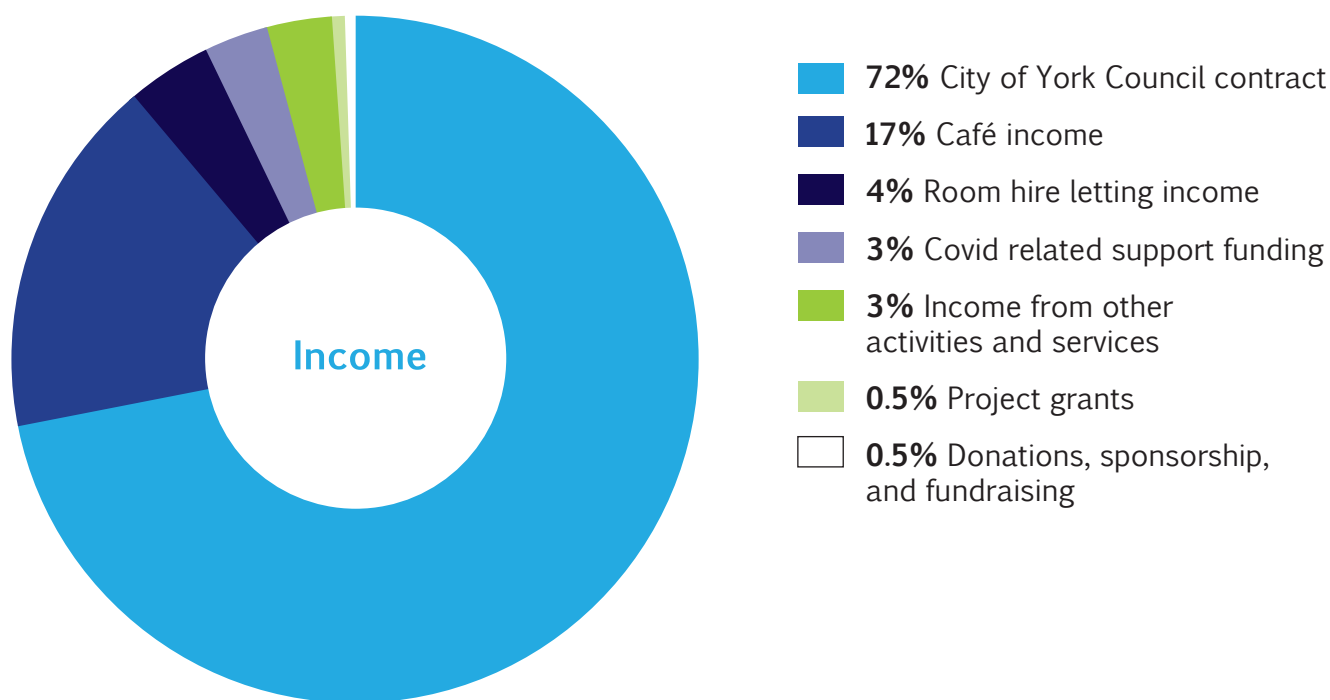
Library Card

with a total of 14,907 attendees

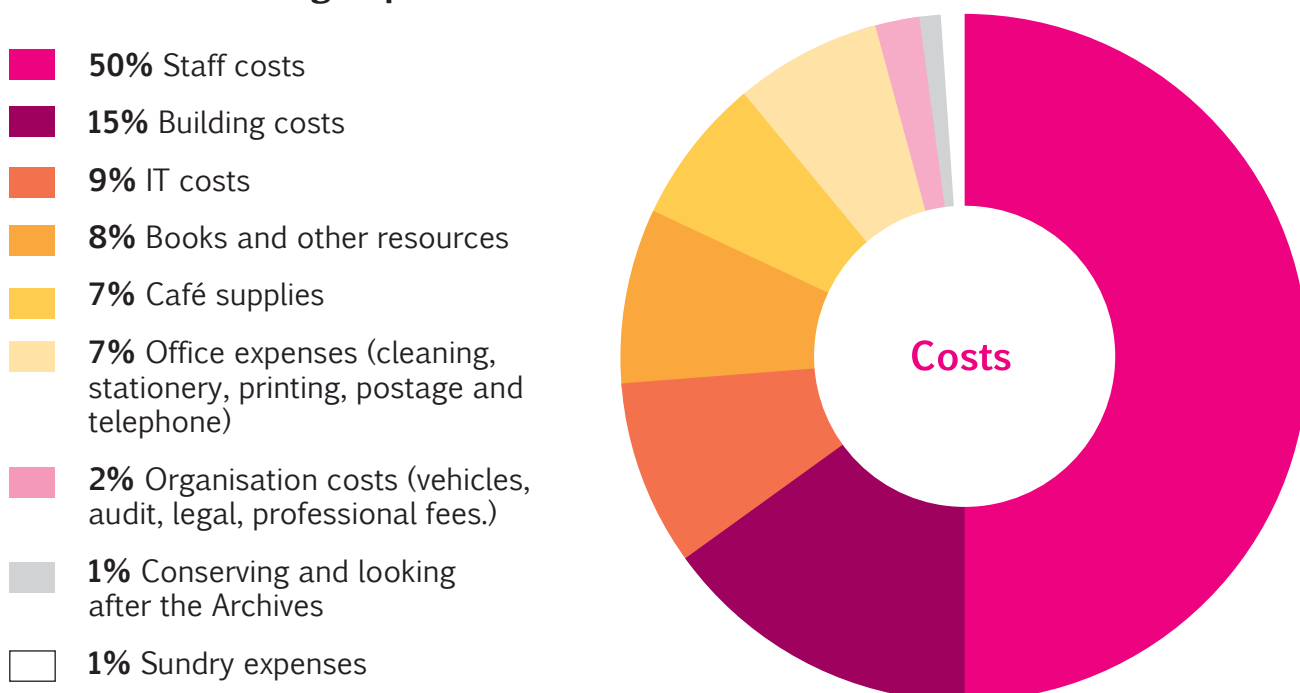


# Explore's funding and spending

Explore is funded by:



The costs of running Explore are:



Explore gets some of its funding from the contract with City of York Council, but we need to raise extra money to do more of the things people tell us they love.

Disadvantaged families were able to enjoy a Christmas pantomime when Hoglets Theatre brought a performance of the Snow Bear to libraries and schools in York's most deprived areas. The performances were supported through grant funding.



Reading cafés make a significant contribution to our income, and every penny spent in them is invested back into Explore.

Our reading cafés are welcoming, affordable, family-friendly spaces where people can meet, borrow and return books, get involved in activities, or just sit and relax with a cup of coffee and a cake. For many people, our cafés are like a second home, with friendships being formed and people feeling part of a wider community. Cafés are located in our main Explore Centres and in standalone venues at Rowntree Park and Hungate, with a summer pop-up at Homestead Park, and we will be opening a café in autumn 2022 at the new library in Haxby & Wigginton.



Thank you to everyone who supported us. Our funders, sponsors, everyone who used our cafés or dropped a coin in our donation boxes, together we have made a difference. As costs rise, it matters now more than ever.



Number of coffees sold in the year

87,613



Number of slices of cake sold in the year

15,030





98%

of people who responded to the Public Library User Survey said our customer care was good or very good

“Thank you so much for all you do. As a mum with a disability leaving me with poor mobility I am limited in where I can take my children. but I know we can always come to the library and have a great time.”

“I very much appreciate the help I have had from library staff in using the computer facilities which have been invaluable.”

86%

of staff are proud to work for Explore

92%

believe their job is worthwhile

96%

believe their work has a beneficial impact on the lives of customers

## Here for You

In 2020, the year the world turned upside down, Explore was here for the people of York and in 2021 our commitment to enriching the lives of everyone in the city, and strengthening communities by creating an inclusive sense of place grew deeper and stronger.

Despite the enormous challenges we all faced, Explore proved to be flexible and innovative, able to respond to the needs of our communities. We listened and they told us what they loved most about Explore: it is a place to connect to each other, and a place to belong. Last April, as we emerged from the final lockdown, our challenge was to continue to adapt and innovate to bring people back together.

People told us they feel safe in our spaces and see them as a way to escape isolation. We heard powerful stories from customers, volunteers and partners about the positive impact of using Explore in all its many forms.



## Freddie's story: how a lockdown baby found fun and new friends at the library

New mum Katie and her son Freddie have become firm friends with all the staff at Clifton library. Freddie loves coming to the library and has made new friends at the Tuesday storytime. Katie says it is great to have such a safe welcoming space to drop in.



“We have visited since my son was a tiny baby after lockdown. He used to just like looking at the colourful books, lights and listening to me read in a different place to home. We still regularly visit now, to borrow and read a good range of children's books, for storytime and for him to just explore the nice space. As a family, we enjoy events like the Christmas crafts fair and the free play sessions on Wednesday mornings.”

## A volunteer's story: getting back to normal after the pandemic

“When the first lockdown ended, I realised I was going to find mixing with other people very difficult. When Andy rang to ask if I would be interested in helping out again, I was initially unsure, but I agreed to give it a try and felt comfortable and safe. Once people were allowed back into the library to browse, the covid secure measures meant I still felt safe, and this built up my confidence and slowly enabled me to re-start some of the activities I had done in the past. It's been great to have the company of the staff and other volunteers and see the regular library users again. Volunteering in the library since lockdown definitely helped my mental health by giving me activities to focus on. I will always be grateful to have been asked to help when I was, as it allowed me to do something useful, and which helped me tremendously.”

## Information and Digital Support

### Getting the right answer at the right time is important.

During lockdown we supported communities by providing quality information on our website. In 2021 we were able to invite partner organisations to come back for pop-up information sessions to support communities, ranging from i-Travel, Cycle Safely and Wilberforce Trust to National Careers Service and North Yorkshire Police.

Once again, staff were able to support people to use the computers, building digital confidence.

### A digitally inclusive city for all

Many organisations, community groups, volunteers and charities in York share an ambition for everyone in the city to have the opportunity to be digitally confident, have connectivity and devices they need, and to get support when they need it. In partnership with City of York Council, Explore is leading 100% Digital York a collaborative approach to achieve this ambition.

£ Funding from City of York Council for a co-ordinator post will support the vital work of 100% Digital York.

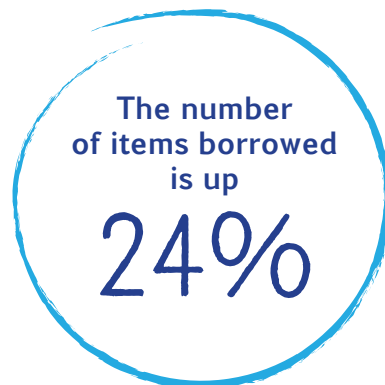


# 100% DIGITAL YORK

Confidence | Connection | Choice

# Sharing the joy (of reading)

Our welcoming spaces provide opportunities for eager readers of all ages to explore the joy of reading together.



## Borrowing

In 2021 people showed that they were keener than ever to borrow. This was true for the physical items on our shelves and loans are nearly back to pre-pandemic levels, with children’s fiction and toys being borrowed more than before the pandemic.

Borrowing from our e-library has grown steadily. During the pandemic loans more than doubled, and have held up well this year.

Press Reader remains very popular with around 22,500 uses per month, or around 750 uses per day. People who use the service log on most days, and read for around 13 minutes, opening two publications during the session.

## National Poetry Day at Hungate Reading Café

We celebrated National Poetry Day in October with York Stanza at Hungate Reading Café. As this was the first in-person poetry reading since lockdown, the audience was limited to 30 and the event was fully booked.



## Finding the Words: making poetry accessible online

Explore is a natural home for poetry, and our monthly Finding the Words sessions have been running in real life since 2015, but during the pandemic we had to move online. We listened to our audience and took advice from a poet who lives with a life-limiting condition about how being online makes the event more accessible to people who cannot attend in person.

There are many advantages of an online event, not least the wider and more diverse range of readers and attendees. Running a zoom session means we can generate optional subtitles, and poets may share their work on screen so that the audience can read the poems as well as listening. These changes were welcomed by both readers and audiences.

“It was so interesting and a lovely location. I’m not a poetry writer but I really enjoyed hearing people’s work and getting an insight into the world of poetry. What a talented group!”

“I can’t get out to similar live events so just being there is fantastic! It feeds my soul.”

“Mum said how much she had enjoyed some quality time reading with her son and that she was going to continue this every night as her baby daughter sat engaged with it also. Result.”

## Summer Reading Challenge 2021: Wild World Heroes

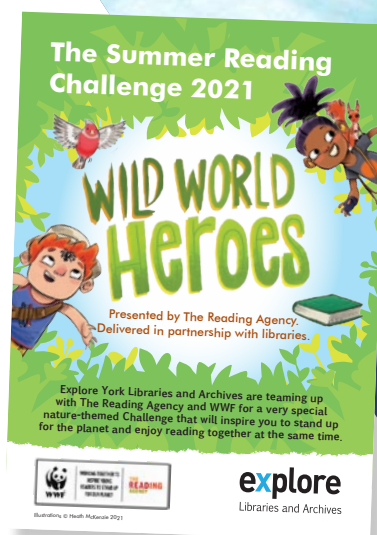
We hear from parents and children alike how the Summer Reading Challenge sparks an excitement to read that can be difficult to find at school. We planned a hybrid Challenge in 2021 with a mix of in-person sessions at libraries, outdoor events in parks with reading cafés and online activities. We were alert to the effect of the pandemic on literacy, and offered extra support to children at risk of falling even further behind. We worked through York’s Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) summer scheme to reach 120 disadvantaged children. Each received a bag containing Summer Reading Challenge materials as well as a fiction book. HAF settings also got certificates and medals for children who completed the challenge. Nurseries with a high number of disadvantaged children received a visit from a storyteller, sets of Summer Reading Challenge materials, and contact with their local library. As a result, parents read more with their children and children’s reading skills, concentration and confidence improved.

£ The programme of free Summer Reading Challenge events and support for disadvantaged children was made possible by funding from York Children’s Trust, The Victoria Wood Foundation and Freemasons Charity Yorkshire North and East Ridings.



2,344  
children and young people took part in the challenge

Children who took part in the challenge in libraries came back and told us about  
7,067  
books



“Parents and children were very enthusiastic at receiving the packs. A lot of the families said that their children were more excited to read because they wanted to complete the challenge.”



**“Utterly compelling, thought provoking, beautifully written and brilliantly acted.”**

**“Thank you for organising this, it has been wonderful to have been able to afford to bring my children to a Christmas show and it was so good! I hope you do it again next year.”**

# Challenging Imaginations

**Our commitment to enriching the lives of our communities remains strong, by creating opportunities that challenge imaginations and enable endless exploration together.**

## The Snow Bear: affordable live theatre for families and schools

285 adults and children - including refugee families, children in foster care and families on low incomes- attended seven performances of The Snow Bear by Hoglets Theatre at Acomb, Clifton, Tang Hall and York, libraries which are in the wards with most disadvantaged families. Explore worked with Local Area Co-ordinators, York Learning and Social Workers to identify families. Carr Infants and Tang Hall Primary Schools, which serve disadvantaged families, also enjoyed free performances.

£ York Children's Trust funded performances of The Snow Bear and provided additional funds to buy a book for every child attending.



## Northern Girls: drama writing workshops for young women


Participants working with professional writers and Pilot Theatre created eight monologues which were rehearsed at York Explore and performed to audiences on Library Lawn in October. The performance was professionally filmed and edited for screening, and was shown to an audience at Acomb Explore in February 2022, introduced by writer Hannah Davis, who led a Q & A with lively discussion about feminism and female identity after the screening. The film is available on YouTube.



Photos © Matthew Storm-Cooper

# Connecting Communities

Exploring together enriches lives and breaks down barriers. At the heart of every community, our libraries and archives create an inclusive sense of place where people can connect to each other and know they belong.

A blue speech bubble with a white outline, pointing towards the bottom right. It contains a quote in white text.

“The participants... seemed to enjoy every activity, they mentioned that this makes them feel that they can connect ... which I believe had a huge impact on them, as most of them mentioned to me that they find it really hard to get engaged and to meet new people and that they felt isolated most of the time.”



## Virtualising the Archive: a prototype archives storytelling tool

We developed an archives storytelling tool with Bright White – a leader in the field of heritage interpretation, innovation and experience design – and showcased the approach at York Festival of Ideas to an online audience of academics, teachers, artists, and professionals from the tech, archive and museum sectors.

Evaluation sessions with local residents and with researchers and academics provided Bright White with high quality feedback to develop the tool further. An unexpected outcome of the sessions was the way the tool facilitated social interaction, connecting people to place. The National Archive featured the project in the Year in Archives published December 2021.

£ *Project supported by The National Archives Testbed Fund.*

## Soap Box York: creative sessions for Sanctuary Seekers in York

Sanctuary seekers attended sessions led by Stand and Be Counted Theatre who work with people who are new to the UK. Attendees could try crafting, art, movement and writing, while practising English in a relaxed setting and making new friends. Workshop leaders were creative professionals, some with lived experience of seeking asylum or migration.

£ *A collaboration with Pilot Theatre and Explore York and funded by York City Council and Arts Council England.*

## The Covid Times: helping children make sense of their pandemic experience

Children attended a workshop based on the 200-year-old Gray Family Newspapers created by archivists and artists as part of the Summer Reading Challenge. They thought about who they would want to communicate with in quarantine, what they would tell them about and how. The children created their own pandemic newspaper which will form part of the City Archive and create a snapshot of life during the pandemic in York, just as the Gray family newspapers are a snapshot from 200 years ago.



## Bringing together York's diverse communities

Our City Hub festival in Spring 2021 brought together diverse communities of York in the safe, welcoming space of York Explore, a space for everyone. The festival included tents and performances on Library Lawn, community information stands, films, discussions and a chat café. Following the success of the festival, Our City Hub now takes place at York Explore every Saturday and is a place for migrant communities to access information, translation support and signposting to helpful organisations, as well as English classes and community activities.





# Supporting Wellbeing

The pandemic had a negative impact on so many people's wellbeing by isolating them from each other. In 2021, we responded by bringing people together to explore new experiences, enriching and transforming their lives.



"The library is a life-saver as it affords me a place to socialise via the craft club. As someone with a long-term health condition I can struggle with getting out and about so this is good for my mental health."

"After Covid 19 with deaths of friends and isolation, this class has been essential for my mental and emotional well-being."

"One man had lost his wife during the pandemic, was visually impaired, and would not leave his house. His relative spoke to staff at Acomb who suggested he sign up for Reading Together. He attended the sessions and enjoyed them. Then he joined weekly bocchia and was warmly welcomed. Now he regularly meets up with one of the bocchia players for coffee and dominoes. He has gone from being completely isolated to enjoying an active social life in his community."



## Reading Together: sharing stories to improve wellbeing

At this book group with a difference, facilitated by writers Fiona Shaw and Daisy Hildyard, participants listened to a book read aloud over several weeks and after each session shared their thoughts about the book. Three groups met at Explore Centres each with a different target audience.

Acomb Explore supported people to re-connect and reduced isolation.

York Explore's group was made up of people who were new to the city from Hong Kong, Romania, Spain, Italy, Syria, Korea and Japan. At Tang Hall, people living with dementia and their carers from nearby Mossdale Residence got together to read poetry and short form fiction.

£ Project funded by Libraries Connected Yorkshire and Humber.

## Creative Cafés: supporting people to explore creativity together

Sessions were held at Acomb and Tang Hall Explore Centres with two artists enabling people to explore creativity together. Attendees said the sessions helped them make new friends, learn skills, and improved their wellbeing. Afterwards some continued to meet, signed up for other activities or became library volunteers.

£ Project funded by York Social Prescribing.

**"Mary\*, has continued to use the library, coming to craft group and the café with her support worker. Mary's relative is very keen for her to have a safe place with things happening and has said how wonderful the Reading Together project has been for Mary, who is one of the youngest residents at Mossdale. Coming to join in with activities gives her something to look forward to and has introduced her to people closer to her age."**

*\*name changed*

**"The new skills and new friends helped me. Hope to join more classes at the library – they are life savers"**

**"I like this group because I've an opportunity to talk more English with them and after every class go together to drink coffee or eat lunch and practise more English. Everything is very good."**

# Your Explore: Future libraries shaped with you

**Our vision is of Explore Libraries at the heart of communities, where people come in wanting one thing, but go out with so much more: flexible, friendly, accessible, safe spaces, where everyone belongs.**

Communities also have a vision for libraries shaped by their needs. Through consultations and focus groups we are listening to library users and residents at every stage, so that future libraries are truly shaped with the people who will use them.

In 2021 City of York council invested £7.7 million in our libraries. The investment means a new library for the communities of Haxby & Wigginton, a new Explore Centre in Clifton and an extended Explore Centre in Acomb.

## Haxby & Wigginton

Residents told us when they want the library to be open, what kinds of events and activities they want to see and their ideas about internal layout and external signage.



Autumn 2022 sees the opening of a beautiful new library and reading café with more books, free Wi-Fi and computers, and an exciting programme of events and activities for all ages. Upgrades to the building include new automatic doors, new windows and flooring, updated lighting, and improved public toilets. Thanks to the communities in Haxby and Wigginton and our partners at Oaken Grove Community Centre for sharing their vision. We are looking forward to an exciting future together at Oaken Grove Community Centre.



**Please just get on with it! We've waited a long time since the old building had to be closed. Plan sounds brilliant.**

**I think the new plans are excellent. I would love to have a coffee and meet friends there**



## Clifton Explore

Our plans to move the current Clifton Library to a new site will transform the library for the community: we'll be able to do more of the things we are good at, in a bigger space, and for longer opening hours. Since summer 2021 we have been talking to the people in Clifton and to our partners at City of York Council, Snappy and Accessible Arts and Music. They are developing and sharing their vision for their new Explore Centre. Here are some of their suggestions:



A Library with more books and space for family friendly events and activities

Flexible space which transforms into a performance area

A Reading Café

Outside space with areas for play and a garden for reflection

Enough parking space to minimise the impact on local streets

A building designed with as many sustainable elements as possible

Bespoke area for teenagers, and designed with them

Healthy air flow with windows which open and good ventilation

## A brand new library for Clifton

explore  
Knowledge and Ideas for Everyone



Tell us what you think



## Want to find out more?

Visit [www.exploreyork.org.uk](http://www.exploreyork.org.uk) or pop into Clifton Explore library



Conversations will continue as we co-design the new Explore Centre with the community and our partners in Clifton. A planning decision is expected in autumn 2022, and we hope to open the new Explore Centre in 2024.



CITY OF  
**YORK**  
COUNCIL





Volunteers gave  
**15,299**  
hours over  
the year

Volunteer  
numbers are back to  
**59%**  
of pre-pandemic

# Your Explore: making a difference

Explore's friends groups and volunteers are integral to our vision.

## Friends Groups

Explore now has Friends groups at all but two of our smaller gateway libraries. Friends actively shape what we do. They get together for social events, lend a hand and give feedback, and support us through fundraising for refurbishments and activities. The pandemic meant a hiatus in Friends' activities, but during 2021 fundraising activity restarted with some groups able to host Christmas events, while others planned a full programme starting in 2022. A new Friends group launched at Strensall in February 2022.



We want to thank our Friends for all that they do for Explore. For the invaluable connection they give us to local voices and local concerns, for their loyal support and advocacy, and for the money they raise to improve and beautify their libraries and to support activities for children and families.

## Volunteers

Some volunteers join Explore to gain skills to get back into work, others want to share a talent, or just love libraries and archives. We do not use volunteers to replace our paid staff, but they are invaluable to help us grow new projects and enhance the work we do in our libraries and archives.

Volunteers returned to all libraries from April 2021 to support the return of in-person browsing. There were new roles at the Community Stadium and work experience opportunities for school students. Volunteers came back in large numbers for the Summer Reading Challenge, and gradually increased by March 2021 to 59% of pre-pandemic levels, though concern about covid still kept some away.

In 2022 we will be recruiting more volunteers and increasing student opportunities. Our City Hub will recruit volunteers from York's migrant communities.

We recognise the importance of volunteers' contribution to Explore, so we have decided to apply for Investing in Volunteers accreditation which will be developed next year and submitted in 2024.

**We want to thank all our volunteers for their time and talents and all they give to Explore.**

**Work experience at York Explore has given me some new skills like punctuality, people and communication skills, increased maturity and being able to work long hours. It was a good starter to the world of work and has increased my confidence.**

Jon our new volunteer is recovering from a stroke and is taking small steps towards getting out and about on his own and regaining a sense of normality, doing something for himself. He is shelving with us on a Thursday afternoon. He is doing great and every week is finding it that little bit easier and is able to do more. He is becoming more confident and is starting to chat more to staff and able to engage with customers.

## Acomb library garden: If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need.

John Gwilliams and his wife Carol are volunteer gardeners at Acomb Explore. They have spent many hours lovingly tending the garden so that it is always colourful and attractive, and have transformed it into an oasis where customers can sit and read or enjoy a coffee outside. This was especially important for people who were nervous about being indoors because of covid.



# Shaped with you: people at the heart of Explore

Explore is a different kind of public service – a mutual society owned by members of the community and by the staff who work here, and governed by a board of directors who are all local people rooted in York.

Our staff tell us how proud they are to work for Explore and they believe they make a real difference to the community. Volunteers made a difference by giving 15,299 hours of their time over the year to support Explore. Our welcoming spaces, and passionate staff and volunteers are what make our libraries and archives special. Collaboration is at our heart.

Thank you to everyone who got involved, made a difference and helped to shape Explore in 2021.

## Our board of directors

Explore's directors help shape the future for libraries and archives in York. They oversee the way we work, monitor our performance and help set our strategy and yearly plans and budgets. All directors are volunteers, they serve for up to six years on the board and give their time for free.

In 2021 we agreed to increase the number of places on the board and four new directors will join us from September 2022. Two will be elected by existing board members, and two will be elected by our community members, further strengthening the voice of local people at board level.



## Community members

We have around 800 members now, but we want more. Anyone over 16 can join Explore as a community member. This is different to library membership, as a community member you are a joint owner of Explore.

In 2022 we will be changing the way we work with our community members and offering more ways to have a say. We believe our libraries and archives are better when, rather than being something we provide for you, they are shaped and made with you. With more people from our communities involved as members we can be more responsive and better able to understand what people want.



## Join us as a community member

Get more involved in shaping your libraries and archives now and into the future and join us as a community member. If you love Explore, our libraries, and our work we want to hear from you.

Are you a champion for accessibility, sustainability, or diversity?

Do you have ideas about digital inclusion, improving literacy, or fundraising?

Do you love Explore libraries and archives and see their potential for achieving even more for our community?

Whatever your passion, be part of our next chapter.

Join us [explore.york.org.uk/community-membership/](https://explore.york.org.uk/community-membership/)  
Your Explore – Shaped with You



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Libraries and Archives

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