

# RE/IMAGINE

exploring the future of libraries



compiled by Elinor Lower for Rising Arts Agency



# INTRODUCTION

Running between March and July 2019, RE/IMAGINE was a **collaborative pilot** between Rising Arts Agency and the Bristol City Council Arts Development Team and Libraries Service. Initiated as follow-up to a citywide council-led consultation on the future of libraries, it was an exploration into models of youth engagement and the potential for public spaces to become more welcoming and functional to and for young people in the city (specifically aged 16-24).

**Rising Arts Agency CIC** is a micro-agency that exists to support and advocate for the wants and needs of young people. Led by young creative thinkers, the agency's mission is to empower people to collectively aspire provoke and mobilise towards radical cultural change.

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# PROJECT STRUCTURE

A small team of young people from Rising Arts Agency developed a programme of activity to initiate conversation with other young people (aged 16–24) across the city about their perspectives of libraries and public buildings, record ideas, and interrogate how to futureproof Bristol’s Libraries offer.

## Planned activity:

- Two **events** featuring supported networking, live performances and conversation
- Online **survey**
- **Social media** campaign (#RisingReimagine)
- **Photography** commission
- Writing commission (later dropped due to team capacity)
- Written **report** (this one!)
- **Short film**

## Main aims:

- Bringing young people **together** to socialise and have conversations about libraries
- **Claiming space** in libraries (and potentially bringing people in for the first time)
- Getting people **excited** about libraries and their potential!

The Southmead and Junction 3 Libraries were selected because Rising has recently worked in the two areas and therefore has a base of young people to get the word out. The plan had been to work in St Pauls library but under advice from Libraries Supervisor Shulah Palmer-Jones this was changed to Junction 3 for space reasons.

We hoped to involve frontline Libraries staff in the programme, but understood that stretched availability—amongst other reasons— meant that many weren’t able to attend. We were therefore particularly **thrilled** at the buy-in from Paul Walker, Lucy Austin, Denis Wise and Shulah Palmer-Jones across the two locations. To have Libraries staff integrally involved in the delivery of the two events lent expertise that was vital in facilitating a meaningful conversation about what the Libraries Service is now, and what it could be.

# THE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

The **#RisingReimagine** social media campaign ran between March and June to publicly ask **‘What If...?’** questions related to the libraries service. The provocations were devised by the young team, and included questions such as *“what if a library was a place to make art?”* and *“what if a library didn’t have any books?”*. This was a (successful!) way to kick-start dialogue and idea generation amongst young people and to promote the project more widely.

However, it also drew the attention of city library lobbyists known to the Libraries Service, and there was an intense (and distressing) online backlash against the young team. As a result, the campaign was pared down on Twitter and kept to Instagram, where the young user base was more focused, and the team could feel safer in their contributions.





# THE EVENTS

On the **14th May** and the **19th June**, Rising hosted two events in the Southmead and Junction 3 Libraries respectively. Each event was initiated and delivered by Rising's young team and run with the support of each host library's staff.

The programme of each, though loose, was as follows:

- Event runtime: 7-9pm (though both extended beyond this until approx. 10pm because the party couldn't stop yet!)
- Initial arrival period, free food and drink laid out, music turned on
- Networking/conversation, making sure everyone gets to meet everyone else
- Performances from young creatives!
- Wrap-up and thanks

Southmead attendance: 26

Junction 3 attendance: 53

*Notes:* In the timeframe we had, with the team capacity we had, putting on two events in areas where we'd only recently begun to work was ambitious. We're thrilled with the attendance and the valuable conversations and fun that we had. Numbers are approximate (gathered via headcount, since most showed up without registering on the Eventbrite).

## What The Events Taught Us

- **Food:** Providing good quality food and drink is KEY! It can casualise/formalise the vibe (depending on what you're serving), gives people something to do/talk about, and makes people feel welcome
- **Music:** Playing music makes it less awkward, fills the space, injects energy!! Even if it's just on a low level
- **Communicate:** Everyone feels more comfortable when they know what to expect at an event. Is there a structure for the night? Tell everyone, write it down, get it on a sign, say it over a speaker
- **Tech:** Going into different spaces to run events presents new, unique challenges each time—and they're almost always tech related. (See 'Potential Next Steps suggestion 2.')
- **Travel Costs:** Most people didn't take us up on the offer to cover travel costs to come to the event, but for those that did request it, it made a difference.





# THE SURVEY

The key exploratory element of RE/IMAGINE was the **Typeform survey** ([www.typeform.com](http://www.typeform.com)) which guided respondents through questions about designing their “perfect space”, whether they were library users, and what they thought about libraries, amongst other topics.

We referred to libraries as “**the space**” on several occasions to distance respondents’ current opinions about libraries from what libraries **could be** in the future.

## Profile of respondents

- Young people were aged between 16 years and 24 years
- **69%** described themselves as **library users** (a Yes/No question)
- **83%** said they **had** been taken to the library as a child
- The **libraries** that respondents said they used the **most** were **Central** (63%), **Bedminster** (10%), Junction 3, Bishopston, Fishponds, Redland, St George, Bishopsworth, Clifton, Henbury, Henleaze, Knowle, Marksbury Road and Wick Road
- When asked if there were **others** they used, several respondents said **UWE**, University Libraries, Bath and the ‘Arnolfini Library’ (**Arnolfini Front Room**)
- Postcode collection showed a **citywide** response, distributed as follows:
  - **BS1:** 6%
  - **BS2:** 6%
  - **BS3:** 16%
  - **BS4:** 3%
  - **BS5:** 16%
  - **BS6:** 13%
  - **BS7:** 6%
  - **BS8:** 16%
  - **BS15:** 3%
  - **BS16:** 6%
  - **BS41:** 2%

# THE FINDINGS

**‘What young people want’ isn’t radically different to what everyone else is looking for.** Sure, there are some differences, but broadly everyone, of all ages, is speaking to the same end: a more welcoming, inclusive space that invites you to spend time, and doesn’t charge you money for it.

- **The responses prioritised space:** a place to go, somewhere to be themselves, to work, to reflect, and to relax. For those that used libraries, their primary use was for “**study space**” (73%) and somewhere “**quiet**” (53%). Other popular responses included for access to books and somewhere free to spend time. Throughout all questions, respondents repeatedly noted that they feel an **absence of space** that they can access in their local area and across the city -- particularly **non-privatised space**.
  - **Q: What’s missing in your area?**
    - *“A space to hang out where you don't have to pay”*
    - *“A place I can go in the evenings, without having to pay money or consume alcohol. Somewhere that is versatile - that I can take ownership of.”*
    - *“Spaces that are free to use anytime. A place where things are happening that I want to go to. A space that feels welcoming and open to young people”*
    - *“A central hub for proactive and ambitious young people to host their own events and make a positive change in society”*
    - *“A free space that is comfortable and indoors that people are free to use for whatever purpose”*

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# THE FINDINGS

- **For those that didn't use the library** (31% of respondents), the **main reasons** were: "unwelcoming" (53%), "there's nothing that appeals to me" (47%), and "not open when I'm free" (32%). Text responses included *"uncomfortable, not enough plug sockets and spaces"*, *"I don't currently feel a reason to go there..."* and *"they're not on my mind. They don't seem accessible to me"*. A clear theme was the feeling that, even if the library is already offering everything that young people are saying they need, there is a **disconnect between perception and reality**, and a discomfort amongst young people to enter a space that **they don't feel is for them**. While the library service is notionally open to everyone, a lack (whether perceived or actual) of services necessary to young users is communicating a **sense of exclusion** to many respondents: a lack of "plug sockets", WiFi access that is dependent on having a library card, and *"waiting-room-style furniture"* that doesn't invite you to stay a while. This was the case for respondents that were both users and non-users.
- In imagining their "dream space", **the key themes were functionality and comfort**. In a time when more and more young people have 'portfolio careers' patched together of freelance work, zero-hours contracts or multiple part-time jobs—and where space across the city is at a premium—the young respondents have made it clear that what they lack is somewhere to piece all of these elements together that isn't their home. (73% said they needed this "dream space" specifically for "working".) With this in mind, the key wants from young people were:
  - **Free wifi:** 91%
  - **Lots of plug sockets:** 75%
  - **Space to eat & drink your own stuff:** 70%
  - **Desk space:** 69%
  - **Comfortable furniture:** 67%
  - **Space for collaborating:** 64%
  - **Quiet space:** 61%
  - There were also specific requests for natural light and a *"connection to nature"* through plants and natural surroundings. Basic needs were also emphasised in a write-in question, where suggestions included *"warmth"*, *"water fountains"*, *"large windows & natural light"*, *"to be welcoming to all"*.
- **The 'vibe' of libraries** was something that cropped up in almost every conversation we had at the events. As mentioned above, the **aesthetic of space** (*"I like comfy sofas and cool lighting, plenty of space"*) and the energy of the room (*"I can't emphasise chillness enough"*) has been really important in our explorations, viewed with the **current mental health crisis** amongst young people in mind. For many, there is an excitement around the potential for libraries to become spaces where anyone, of any age/lived experience, can go to **truly relax and decompress**, free from judgement. As one respondent summed it up, young people broadly want a place that *"feels like home"*, but where they can compartmentalise their work-life from their 'life-life'. When asked where they currently enjoyed spending time, examples given included the **Arnolfini Front Room** (very popular), cafes with free wifi, Wetherspoons, bookshops and their friends' houses. Reasons included *"warmer atmosphere as people are chatting and enjoying themselves"*, *"decor"*, and the presence of other young people.



# THE FINDINGS

- **Tech** is a topic always raised when **young people** are discussed. It's considered to be at the top of their list of 'wants'. From our exploration, we would like to emphatically contend that **this is not the case**. Yes, much of the technology in libraries is out of date and could do with modernisation (computers, WiFi, printers), but this is far from a priority for young people not currently using libraries. Only 8% of respondents considered "new tech" to be something important for their "dream space" (ie. a futureproof library) to have. Far more important to them was "free wifi" (91%), "lots of plug sockets" (75%) and "space to eat and drink your own stuff" (70%). While many young people don't have access to the latest technology, many now have phones, laptops or similar equipment of their own. **What they need now is table space and a plug socket so they can get work done, and maybe eat their own affordable food while they're at it.** Beyond this, those we spoke to had almost no interest in a library updating its tech provision. As one young person put it: *"tech moves so fast these days, it's impossible to always have the latest thing. It would be such a money drain for a libraries service to constantly be updating its kit"*.
- The last big finding was that **current opening times are totally unsuited** to the lifestyles of young people. With many working hours including daytime, Saturdays and evenings, many with irregular shift patterns (and others still in education), key asks were for opening times to include evenings, weekends and early starts (*"it's important that it's open in the evenings. There aren't enough spaces open till 8pm!"*, *"after office hours for those who work late /have school. All day on weekends"*, *"early mornings in the weekdays and afternoons till late"*). The call for 'all day, every day' openings also spoke to a desire for **consistency**. Many young people expressed a feeling of exasperation at irregular opening times, citing it as a reason they'd choose a dependably-open cafe or other building to spend time in. Many of the young people we spoke to were desperate for **somewhere to go** in the evenings where they didn't have to spend money, where they didn't have to drink, and where they could safely work or relax-- that wasn't their own house.





# POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS

Libraries are **perfectly placed** to become hubs for their communities, in a time when there is a growing need for cohesion and cooperation. Based on the survey and the two events, we have gathered the following potential next steps:

- **Co-creation** of any further activity with young people -- involving young people in the processes increases the likelihood of buy-in from their peers and others
  - *Note: Further development of how young people are engaged in work, and the frameworks in place to support them through any arising issues such as the online backlash against the RE/IMAGINE team.*
- Development of '**Event Kits**' and '**Info Packs**' for libraries, so that interested members of the public can easily make enquiries about using the space for their own events etc, and begin to see their local library as a space they have ownership of. 'Kits' could include small sound systems, mics etc. Many survey respondents expressed a desire to host **open mic nights, film screenings and more** in their local libraries -- let them!
- Explore pilot procurement of **other functional equipment and furniture** (big tables, plug sockets/comfy sofas) for library refurbishment with input from young people
- Invest in **social media and websites**. Young people are being marketed to 100% of the time (like everyone else!) and a lot of that is taking place on social media. Many young people said a key reason they don't use libraries is because they forget about them -- this is a key opportunity to engage young audiences **online**, and potentially create work opportunities for young people to lead on this. A greater web presence would also provide an accessible portal for finding out more about the services offered (beyond the existing Council website)
- **Partner with city organisations** in the arts, business, wellbeing (etc) sectors—any with clear offers to young people—to work across the city through libraries. Strategic use of these spaces could draw more young people into their local libraries, whilst also diluting the City Centre-focused concentration of opportunities

"what if...?"



# ISSIE TOVEY: REFLECTIONS



When hearing about **RE/IMAGINE**, I was instantly intrigued. I wanted to get more involved with creative opportunities for young people in Bristol and from a young age I was encouraged to read and go to the library weekly. Coming from a family of big readers, my parents were delighted that me and my sister would take out several books with each visit. But as I got older, I started using the library less and less. I only tended to go a couple of times a year, mostly during exam season. I found at the first session of RE/IMAGINE planning that a lot of the other young people in the project had similar experiences of the library services in Bristol; opening hours were weird, only certain types of people visit libraries, too quiet, too boring and had too many overdue book fines.

We wanted to make the project as a way of **dispelling those myths or changing the system** (as Rising does so well). We decided on running two events which could draw young people into visiting libraries. Both events went very well, with some great and interesting conversations about being young creatives in Bristol. The screenings of short films and spoken word worked really nicely in the setting, everyone was socialising and connecting in great ways.

One of the things from the events which stuck out to me the most, was one of the icebreakers. Euella [Jackson] split the room into two sections: those who had been to a library in the past 3 months and those who hadn't. **The majority of the room were on the side of those who hadn't.** As part of my involvement I shadowed staff in Junction 3 Library.

Whilst there, I brought up the issue of the lack of young people aged 16-25 in libraries. The librarians found that young people were using libraries to study, but not for anything else.



I think an **ideal library service** for young people in Bristol would work using extended hours. Somewhere where young people could come for free to hang out with their friends, bring food or buy food from vending machines. Somewhere where exhibitions, social groups, cinema screenings, after-hours nights could be held. Libraries are no longer what they once were for young people, they need to be constantly changing and evolving with young people.

Nothing is perfect. The library services have been under threat for the past few years, as many of the public services are. In 2017, 17 of the 27 libraries in Bristol were under threat from closure. Bristol Mayor, Marvin Rees promised to keep the libraries that were under threat open until the mayoral elections in 2020.

It's hard to know what the future of the libraries will be during this era of cuts and change. But what I have learnt from taking part in this project is that **our libraries are as important as ever**, they are a sanctuary for communities and learning.

And hopefully in the future, young people.

-Issie Tovey

# PHOTOGRAPHY COMMISSION



Young photographer **Olumide Osinoiki** was commissioned to make a **creative response** to the questions being asked by the RE/IMAGINE project. This was the result, which was first exhibited at the Junction 3 event on the 19th June.

## Donnell

(19, Law Student & Poet)

"I just want my library to be more comfortable, more welcoming, somewhere I'd actually want to stay for a while."



## Siddique

(23, Sports Agent & Student Experience Officer)

"I really feel like I'm stepping back in time when I go into the Central library, it's quite uncomfortable. Especially being a person of colour, that period of history wasn't great for us."

# PHOTOGRAPHY COMMISSION

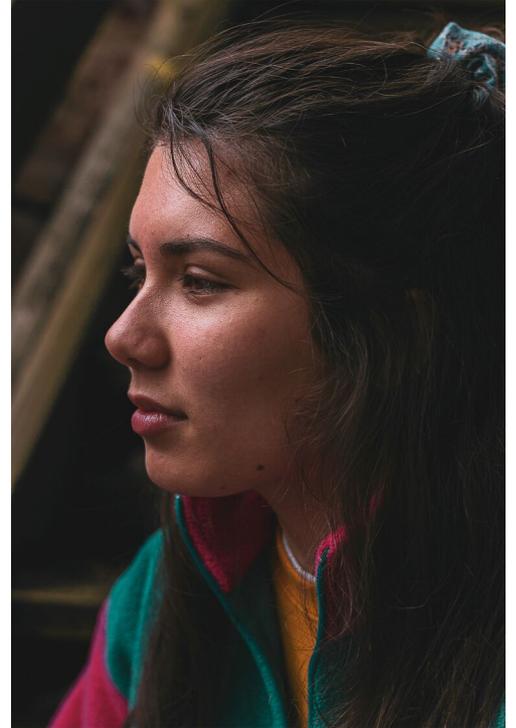


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## Sophie

(21, Artist & Community Activist)

“The Library just feels like it’s designed for children and adults who read regularly. Doesn’t really feel like I have a place here.”



## Posi

(23, Multidisciplinary Artist)

“My honest opinion is that the Library is a brilliant space, it’s just not open late enough for me to make use of. I wish the events were more publicly advertised too.”

## Anna

(20, Photography Student)

“University changed my perspective on Libraries. My Uni library is a communal space where people can’t talk openly, eat food and share ideas. I think the Library needs a space like that for young people. I would definitely be around more.”





# THANKS, AND THE REST

This project would like to acknowledge the hard work, talent and insight of the following people:

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Photographs on cover, pages i, 6,7, 10 — shot by Shamil Ahmed.

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**"what if...?"**