

Lending Library: An Overview

What is a lending library?

Like a book library, but with things! Items are held in a central location, owned by the lending library and hired at low cost for local residents to use and return. The underlying principle is to help share more as a **community**. Sharing is good for **people** and good for the **planet**. A lending library not only embodies the sharing ethos, but creates a community hub for volunteering, learning and forging relationships.

Examples:

- Having a BBQ but don't trust the British weather? Borrow a gazebo!
- Want to make a cake for your child's birthday? Hire everything you need to keep costs down and keep your cupboards free from rarely used items.
- Need a shelf up, and don't know where to start? We'll lend you the drill and tools to complete the project (and probably share how to do it too!)

Terminology:

'Library of Things' can be used as a catch-all term to cover the many and varied ways to share items, but, in London, it tends to refer to the company providing an online system to access lockers located in high footfall areas.

As such, and to help avoid confusion, we tend to use the term '**lending library**' which refers to community-based, face-to-face exchange for sharing items.

You may also come across a '**tool library**' which tends to have a more specific set of items for hire, focusing on DIY or gardening tools rather than a wider range of household and domestic items.

Why a community organisation is a good fit for a Lending Library:

- Already offers resource sharing and brings people together.
- Often undertakes some element of reuse / waste prevention e.g. Collects items and furniture to redistribute, hold tabletop sales for fundraising.
- Adding a lending library will increase footfall to support other work.
- Space is available – can fit in alongside existing offer.
- Existing client base offers a starting point for new audience for the lending library.
- Supports wider sustainability ethos.

Which items does a lending library stock?

Most lending libraries will stock commonly used household items that are seasonal, specialist, or infrequently used. Each lending library will have a unique flavour based on the location, hirers, skillset and space available - "Grow in the soil you are planted" - Angela Bell, Letchworth Garden Shed.

Items range from practical items like **tools or mechanical items** to help with DIY projects or maintenance e.g. lawn mowers, electric drills or carpet cleaners, to **party items, games or hobby-related kit** such as a chocolate fountain, giant Jenga or a sewing machine. They might also span supportive **healthcare items** e.g. crutches or a wheelchair if someone has broken their leg.

It is rare to see items returned in a poor state or not returned at all. People tend to look after things if it is not their own item.

Safety of use is a key consideration, so each item will need maintenance before it is rehired. This checks each item is safe to use, has all parts present, and - for electrical items – will require PAT testing it.

A lending library might like to consider having a small stock of consumables available for customers to buy alongside their hire. This might include drill bits, nails, screw, facemasks, goggles, gloves etc.

Your local economic eco-system:

Aim to add to your local community and not detract from it or duplicate anything already there. E.g. Can you support local repair businesses? Collaborate and work with them. Invite them to offer workshops, do a drop-in session with them present, signpost hirers to their services.

Seek to create partnerships with local businesses. Builders Merchants / DIY shops often have a corporate social responsibility to fulfil and might be able to offer donations of goods or money. Edinburgh Tool Library get a lot of funding from local businesses, as a long-term business partner to ensure longevity of the library.

Use of hire fees:

ELWA / your local borough council may be able to offer seed funding to help set up the library and get it started (see set up document). The income from hire fees would then be used to reinvest into growing the library and keep it going in the longer term. In this way, the borrowing community are paying for the infrastructure to ensure the lending library is self-sustaining. Hire costs will be required to remain affordable and reinvested back into the business so it remains not-for-profit.

Volunteers:

Whilst it is important to value the skillset and time of your manager and maintenance person with a paid salary, your library will benefit from a range of voluntary roles e.g. Having additional people at busy times with knowledge about how the library works is useful to give confidence to hirers, or additional support with maintenance of items from retired mechanics or those keen to develop their fixing skills.

Opening hours:

You can choose your opening hours. The suggestion is to start with one weekday evening and one weekend daytime for people to collect and return items in, and one 'closed' session where maintenance takes place. Then you can expand as capacity and demand increases.

Other opportunities:

Once the lending library is established, with regular use by a good number of borrowers, you might find that additional activities can develop that your user base is keen to engage with. E.g. could use the space be used for ELWA events such as a clothes swap, Repair Café, 'how to fix' skills development events. See how the Letchworth Garden Shed has developed in their case study below:

Case Study: Letchworth Garden Shed

Actual shop on the high street. Open 4 days a week (Wednesday to Saturday). Parking outside. Rent and rates paid for by the Letchworth Heritage Foundation. 2 members of staff – part time Saturday manager and part time weekday manager. All others are volunteers. In 18 months, they have managed to sign up 955 members, have hired out 787 items, with 3501 loans. This has saved 52t carbon and offers £246,177 'value to members' (amount saved through not having to buy each item).

Letchworth Garden Shed also offer:

- The Big Fix (Repair Café) every 2 months
- Tool sharpening
- Lawnmower maintenance/ winter storage workshops
- Sewing skill sharing: invisible mending / getting to know your machine
- Badge making
- Thermal imaging camera sessions to help reduce heat loss in homes
- Attend community events, e.g. local eco fair, declutters group

Case study: Ampthill and Flitwick

Smaller library. Started as a conversation during Covid. Reached out to local Cllrs for funding. Accepted donations of items to get started. Totally volunteer run. Opens on Saturday mornings only. Set up as a CIO – Charity Incorporated Organisation (Charity able to make money). Seed funding from 2 council grants which covered 6 months' rent on the village hall they hired initially – where they kept items in a storage cupboard. They now operate out of a shipping container alongside a Biffa depot. A shed nearby is used to store the items. Now self-funded through the hires.

Closing thought:

"The more you give, the more you have"

- Angela Bell, Letchworth Garden Shed.