

March 10, 2023

Hon. Karina Gould, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Families, Children and Social Development
Employment and Social Development Canada
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Dear Minister Gould:

We are writing in response to Canada's National Review on Sustainable Development Goals being conducted by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). The Canadian Urban Libraries Council/Conseil des Bibliothèques Urbaines du Canada (CULC/CBUC) has responded to the questionnaire in relation to this consultation and provides this letter to provide further context in relation to the role libraries play in achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

CULC/CBUC's mission is to facilitate advocacy, collaboration, and research that strengthens and promotes the value of Canada's urban libraries as integral to a vibrant democracy, a strong economy, and thriving communities. We are committed to the strengthening of vibrant urban communities through building the capacity of Canada's urban libraries. Our members collectively serve more than 8 million active users who annually visit our 721 locations and virtual services.

In 2019 CULC/CBUC members loaned over 200 million items, and had more than 560 million users in person and online. More than 12,000 library workers are employed by CULC/CBUC member libraries and more than 75% of all Canadians are served by a CULC/CBUC member library. The activity in CULC/CBUC libraries comprises more than 80% of Canada's public library activity.

Inclusion

Our public libraries offer access to more than 12,000 public computers with internet access as well as free Wi-Fi, and programs to support digital literacy. Through these services, public libraries address the digital divide for people living in poverty who do not have access to computers and internet, and support equitable access to digital resources and services for everyone in Canada. Equitable access to information, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and privacy are central to individuals' independence. Public libraries help to reduce inequality by providing safe, civic spaces open to all, in both urban and rural areas across the world.

Our public libraries foster community engagement and citizen participation through local programmes and partnerships with other civil society organisations and local governments. They are a lifeline to marginalised groups, who may struggle to access information, skills or support elsewhere.

In research conducted by the Toronto Public Library (TPL), 58 per cent of respondents who used technology at a library indicated that the library was their only access to the internet. TPL research also indicated that 78 per cent of these same respondents increased their level

of community engagement via their library with 11 per cent of libraries offering classes on how to use government resources. Additionally, 61 per cent of libraries said their patrons use online library resources that guide them to information on how to become a Canadian citizen.

Literacy and Learning

Libraries are at the heart of schools, universities, and colleges in every country around the world. All libraries support literacy programmes, provide a safe space for learning, and support researchers to access, apply and reuse research and data to create new knowledge.

Hands-on computer classes, after-school support, and programmes addressing subject areas with high failure rates are just a few examples of how libraries respond to local needs and take action to improve education. Libraries also act as facilitators in their communities, setting up local learning centres to support learning.

Canada's public libraries deliver more than 245,000 programs per year related to learning and literacy for all ages, reaching more than five million people. We are responding to the need for early literacy skills that build school readiness through storytime and early literacy programs, intended to introduce a love of reading and a foundation of early literacy skills for children. Nationally, the public library is the only public institution that responds to the needs of children before they enter the school system, and public libraries are a vehicle for sharing best practices in early literacy.

Research has found that children exhibited an increase in school readiness behaviours; more engagement with and motivation towards books and stories; and heightened interest in print, words, letters, and phonics as a result of attending early literacy programs at the public library. Regina Public Library found that 96.7% parents/caregivers reported that, four to six months after an early literacy program ended, they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they are using what they learned at home, and Vancouver Public Library found that 95% of parents/caregivers felt more confident helping their children learn.

In recent years, Canada's largest public libraries are investing in physical infrastructure to support school preparedness for ages 0-6 through early literacy spaces. Evidence shows that children learn best through play, particularly in the critically important developmental stages of ages 0-6. Opportunities for deep learning through play require access to safe, accessible, and developmentally appropriate spaces that prompt independent exploration and caregiver engagement. These spaces also serve as a place where parents and caregivers can feel comfortable, safe, engaged, and connected with each other, while interacting with their children and learning how they can help their child in their educational journey, regardless of their financial situation.

The Challenge and Opportunity

CULC/CBUC members are predominantly municipally funded. Funding rarely increases with increasing population size and inflationary impacts, which results in less per capita support. This provides a significant challenge in meeting the needs of our community and continuing to meet SDGs.

Canada's federal government can illustrate how strong investment in public libraries supports implementation of the 2030 agenda and meeting the SDGs, particularly in relation to addressing poverty, education, and climate change. Federal investment in libraries related to internet connectivity, capital infrastructure, and programs for digital literacy would increase Canada's capacity to meet the SDGs through already existing public services.

By sharing the story of how Canada's public libraries contribute to the SDGs, particularly related to digital inclusion and early literacy, Canada could inspire recognition of the role of public libraries in reaching the SDGs internationally and help to catalyze investment in libraries in countries where they are under-resourced.

We would be happy to further discuss the important role CULC/CBUC members play in meeting the SDGs in Canada with yourself and your officials.

Yours sincerely,



Åsa Kachan, Chair

Canadian Urban Libraries Council / Conseil des Bibliothèques Urbaines du Canada

cc:

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