Prison library provision in England and Wales

Findings from a national survey of prison library staff

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The University of Sheffield
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Introduction

I'm very pleased that we have been able to support this national survey of prison library staff. It's been 11 years since the CILIP Prison Libraries Group carried out the Big Question Report, and much has changed since then, so we felt it was a timely opportunity to have another look at what is happening inside our prison libraries.

In the last few years there have been some significant contract changes, with some Public Library services having to withdraw from prisons due to funding shortfalls, and some new providers taking on prison libraries. We wanted to see how these changes might be affecting prison library services.

The survey also gives us a great opportunity to get a general picture of current issues affecting prison libraries, and where we need to focus our efforts to improve prison library services and support prison library staff. We know that prison library staff are working very hard, in often difficult situations, so the results of the survey are an important spotlight on what is really happening across the country.

Thank you to all of the prison library staff who took the time to answer the questions - your input has been very valuable and is much appreciated.

Thank you especially to Dr Jayne Finlay and Giulia Neri from the University of Sheffield for all their hard work creating the survey, disseminating it, and analysing the results for this report.

Victoria Barnett
Chair, CILIP Prison Libraries Group
May 2025

Executive Summary

- The survey received responses from 57 prison sites across England and Wales, including 3 women's prisons, 1 YOI and 53 men's prisons across all categories.
- While most prison libraries (68%) represented in this study are run under a Service Level Agreement between the prison and the local Public Library Authority, 18% are run by their Prison Education Provider and 14% are run by a VCSE.
- Only 53% of library staff felt that staffing levels are adequate in their library.
- Approximately half (54%) of library staff felt that prisoners had sufficient access to libraries in their prisons. Barriers to access include staffing shortages, low priority afforded to the library within the regime, timetable clashes and the location of the library in the prison.
- While almost all library staff (95%) felt that prisoners valued the library, fewer (67%) felt the library was valued by senior management and only 32% felt that prison officers valued the library.
- Three quarters (75%) of prison libraries collaborate with public libraries to enhance service delivery. Libraries run by a prison education provider or VCSE are less likely to collaborate with public libraries than those contracted to local authority libraries.
- Just over half (51%) of libraries have PCs for prisoner use, and 25% of libraries provide access to some kind of intranet, such as Virtual Campus.
- 44% of libraries use a standalone Library Management System (LMS), while 40% use the LMS of their local public library authority, and 16% use a manual issue system.
- Most library staff (84%) felt supported in their role.
- Less than half of library staff (47%) currently have opportunities for library-related professional development, and 80% said they would value increased opportunities for professional engagement and networking. Suggestions were put forward by library staff on training needs.
- Over half (58%) of library staff had received neurodiversity training, and most libraries provided examples of specific resources and support they offer to neurodivergent library users.
- Only 22% of library staff surveyed were members of a professional body such as CILIP, the UK's library and information association.
- The final pages of the report celebrates both what is going well across different prison library sites, and identifies challenges facing prison libraries.
- Recommendations are put forward which aim to ensure increased consistency in levels of provision and access to library services across the prison estate.

Background and context

This report is based on findings from a scoping study conducted by researchers in the Information School at the University of Sheffield, with support from CILIP Prison Libraries Group.

The study aimed to provide a contemporary overview of how prison library services are delivered and managed across England and Wales.

Prison libraries are a statutory service in the UK[1], meaning that every prisoner should have access to a library and its resources. Information about the management, staffing and delivery of prison libraries in the UK is sparse. In 2014, the CILIP Prison Libraries Group (PLG) conducted a survey (the *Big Question Survey)* among prison library staff in England and Wales to gain an insight into prison library provision at that time.[2] In the 11 years since this survey took place, there have been numerous changes in the delivery of library services across the prison estate. Most notably, there has been a recent shift in models of service provision away from the long-standing model of working under a Service Level Agreement with local Public Library Authorities. Many Local Authority library services have found that the funding is not sufficient to run a cost-neutral prison library service, so some have not been able to continue with their contract, and others have only signed a temporary extension. Library contracts are being picked up by other suppliers, and as yet there is no specification in place to ensure the same level of service is provided.

Challenges facing the wider prison service, including increased levels of violence and self-harm alongside decreasing budgets and reduced operational staffing levels, impact on all areas of service provision within the prison regime.[3] Taking into account these challenges, alongside changes in service providers, we felt it was important and timely to capture current models of library provision and to identify key issues affecting library provision and access.

As well as seeking to better understand how library services are managed and delivered, this survey also sought to understand the professional experiences of library staff and identify any potential professional development and engagement needs among staff. The prison library profession can be an isolating one, due to the siloed

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[1] As per The Prison Rules 1999, Section 33: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1999/728/article/33
[2] CILIP Prison Libraries Group. (2015). *The Big Question Report.* https://seapn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/PrLG-Big-Question-Report.pdf#asset:755:url
[3] See https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Winter-2024-factfile.pdf

nature of working in the prison environment, feelings of disconnect from the wider library profession and limited opportunities for professional networking and engagement.[4] Findings from this part of the study will inform ongoing plans to support prison library staff (and anyone involved in the delivery of prison library services, including public library staff) through increased professional development opportunities and avenues for wider professional engagement and collaboration.

Objectives

The survey therefore had the following main objectives:

To get an up-to-date overview of how prison libraries are managed and delivered across England and Wales

To understand some of the key issues impacting upon library access and provision, as perceived by library staff

To identify professional development and engagement needs and opportunities for prison library staff
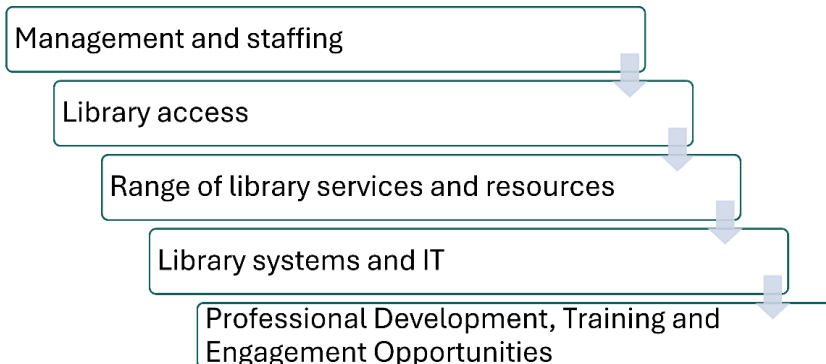
Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through an online questionnaire, created using Google Forms. Researchers sought input from both the CILIP Prison Libraries Group and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) during the initial stages of questionnaire design. With permission from the PLG, the wording of some questions was informed by their previous *Big Question Survey* distributed in 2014. The questionnaire was piloted with prison library staff for feedback on the wording and relevance of questions asked and adapted based on their feedback.[5]

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[4] Finlay, J. (2022). Staff perspectives of providing prison library services in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 56(1), 57-70. https://doi.org/10.1177/09610006221133834
[5] A PDF of the full questionnaire is available at this link:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gVKEfXkg4cCRgZ5gXOEDp9lLEHeZHhas/view?usp=drive_link

The final questionnaire was divided into six sections. The first section collected demographic information about the specific prison site, and the remaining sections were split into the following topics:

- Management and staffing
- Library access
- Range of library services and resources
- Library systems and IT
- Professional Development, Training and Engagement Opportunities

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to express their views and add additional textual information to explain their answers. Analysis of this qualitative data provided rich insights into both the successes and challenges associated with working in prison libraries, and direct quotes are used throughout this report to support and explain statistics where relevant.

The questionnaire was open for responses between mid-July to late August 2024. It was distributed online via the JISC Prison Libraries Mailing List[6], CILIP mailing lists and Libraries Connected mailing lists as well as being sent directly to existing prison library contacts known to members of the project. A Word Document version was also distributed for staff who were unable to access the online version. The data returned in this format was then transferred by researchers to Google Forms for analysis.

It is challenging to reach staff working in prison libraries, as email addresses are rarely publicly available and there is no central mailing list. While it would have been ideal to send a paper copy of the questionnaire to every prison site, the small timescale of this project and limited funding did not allow for this.

We requested one response from each prison site and noted that the questionnaire could be answered by any member of staff working in the library. We made clear that all responses would remain anonymous and that individual prison sites would not be named in this report. The study received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield.

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[6] This is a JISCMail list which is subscribed to by prison and public library staff to share information and good practice: https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/PRISONS.html

Statistical data is presented alongside qualitative data in this report, where open-ended responses help to expand upon or qualify the quantitative data. Together, they present a valuable insight into contemporary prison library provision across England and Wales.

Overview of prisons represented

Responses were received from 57 prisons[7]. This indicates a response rate of just under half (47%) of the total number of 122 prisons in England and Wales at the time of data collection. Findings are therefore not representative of the whole prison estate, but still provide valuable insight into provision across different categories of prisons.

Responses were obtained from:

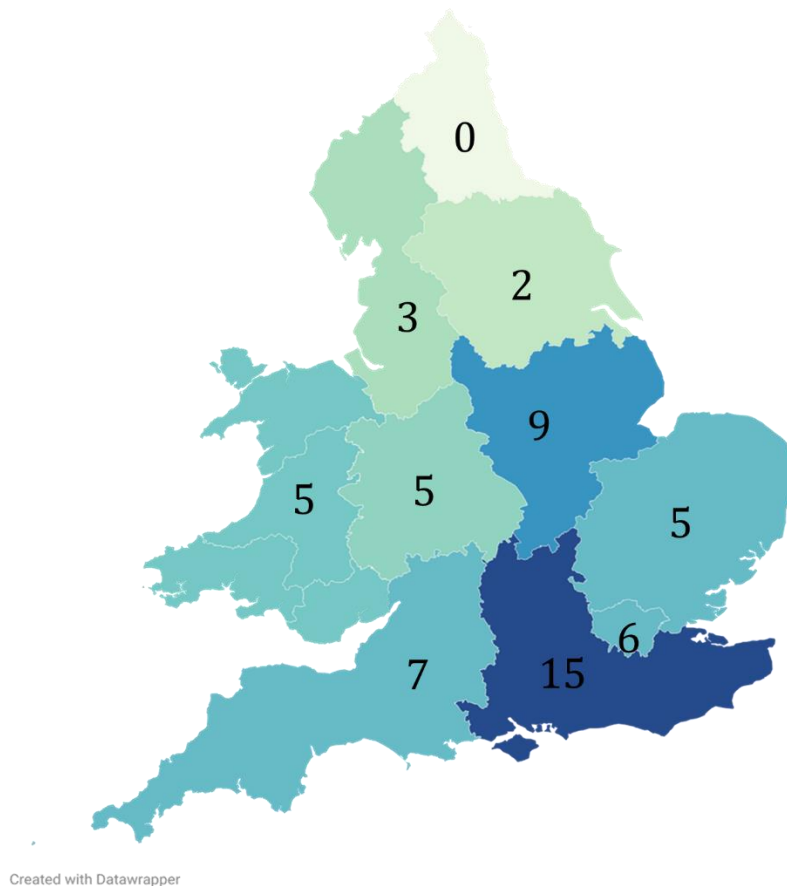|	
3 women's prisons	16 Cat B
1 YOI	4 Cat B/C
1 Cat A	23 Cat C
1 Cat A/B	8 Cat D

Five of the prisons represented were private prisons. We received responses from 5 of the 6 prisons in Wales, while the remaining 51 responses were from prisons in England. While responsibility for the criminal justice system in Wales rests with the UK Government, it is worth noting that learning and skills provision and libraries in Welsh prisons has been devolved to the Welsh Government since 2009.[8]

The map below shows the regions represented in the responses. This allows us to see where stronger effort is needed to reach library staff in certain regions in the UK. For example, we did not receive any responses from prisons in the North East of England.

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[7] 61 responses were received overall, but from across 57 prison sites. We removed duplicate responses from our dataset to ensure each prison was represented only once (all 61 responses are considered in the final section of this report about professional experiences and needs of library staff).
[8] https://www.gov.wales/better-learning-better-chances-prison-learning-and-skills-provision-html

Number of prisons

0 ⟶ 15

Created with Datawrapper

Number of prisons represented by region

Service delivery, management and staffing

Model of service provision

Thirty-nine prisons in the study (68%) work under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with their local Public Library Authority (PLA) to deliver prison library services. Of the remaining prisons, 9 (16%) are run by a prison education provider and 8 (14%) are run by a voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE)[9]. One library is run in-house.

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[9] This includes Greenwich Leisure Limited, who are also responsible for delivering public library services in their local communities.

39 libraries are run under a SLA with their local PLA

9 libraries are run by a prison education provider

8 libraries are run by a VCSE (including GLL)

1 library is run in-house

Staffing

Staffing levels and structures vary widely across prison sites. This includes single staff models (or two librarians working part-time under a job share) and small team working with input from casual library assistants, supply staff and volunteers.

98%

of libraries have orderlies working in them

Library orderlies (prisoners who work in the library) are also part of the library staffing structure. All but one library has at least one prisoner working as a library orderly. In 79% of prison libraries, more than one library orderly is employed.

Open-ended answers provided further insights into the experience of having orderlies work in the library. Some staff noted positive examples of working and building rapport with their orderlies, and one example was provided from a Cat D prison about orderlies having the opportunity to work in a nearby public library. Other staff noted challenges with retaining orderlies due to high turnover (particularly in remand prisons) and in managing their relationships with their orderlies.

53%

of staff feel that staffing levels are inadequate in their library

We asked staff if they felt the staffing level was adequate for their library. Just over half (53%) felt their staffing levels were adequate, while 32% did not and a further 16% did not feel strongly either way.

Liaison with line managers

We asked staff how often they meet with their line managers, including either a line manager within the prison and/or within the PLA or alternative service provider. The most common response was monthly (42%), while 23% met weekly and 6% met daily. A further 35% chose the 'other' category, with answers ranging from *'maybe once or twice a year up to now', 'supposed to be monthly but rarely happens'* to *'as needed'*. One respondent noted, *"We have a great relationship with our manager in the prison, and can call/speak to her anytime."*

84%

of staff feel supported in their role

Most respondents (84%) said they felt supported in their role, while 16% did not feel supported.

There were strong links between those who felt unsupported and those who felt staffing in their library was not adequate. Those who felt unsupported also liaised less often with their managers, with most meeting only monthly or less.

Open-ended answers later in the survey revealed other possible reasons for feeling unsupported:

- Lack of experience among prison staff: *"The lack of experience amongst a lot of the uniformed staff means you do not always have the expertise to guide you as in the past."*
- Communication issues: *"[there is] a huge lack of communication between library staff, library providers and prisons."*

The place of the library within the wider regime

Library opening hours and space

Just over half (54%) of libraries are open outside of core activity times. Among these libraries, 73% are open during the weekend, two thirds (67%) are open in the evenings, and 20% are open at lunch time.

Each prison has one main library, or more than one if there is more than one site at the prison. Additional library or reading spaces across the prison include:

- Shelves or 'book corners' on wings. Dedicated prisoners often ran these 'wing libraries'
- Reading areas in prison workshops, the chapel, education classrooms and in staff areas
- Satellite libraries for those unable to access the library ie. vulnerable prisoners (VP) and those in healthcare units
- Book trolleys or satellite libraries in the first night centre

One librarian shared an example of their prison's plans to expand bookshelves on the wings to *'Reading rooms with books (converted cells)'* which are to be run by prison officers.

Open comments were shared about the physical space of the library, which again varies across sites. Some felt the library space was inadequate:

- *'The library space is too small. Many of our books are inaccessible and in storage.'*
- *'Need more library space for books groups and Storybook Dads, over 60s etc'*
- *'[the library] is institutional in appearance with tired fittings, too hot and cramped'*

Others noted more positive aspects of their library space:

- *'The Main Library is a large, light space with two rooms (fiction and non-fiction rooms).'*
- *'a quiet, airy and light space'*

Library access and outreach

54%

of staff feel that prisoners have sufficient access to library services at their site

Just over half (54%) of staff felt that prisoners had sufficient access to library services at their site, while 46% did not. When asked about barriers to access, most answers were regime-related and specifically about the impact of officer shortages. The most common barriers are summarised below. Many staff reported a combination of these issues affecting library access in their prison.

- **Staffing shortages.** The most frequent answer related to officer shortages which impacted on prisoners being escorted to the library.
- **Apathy of prison staff.** Respondents noted an *'apathy'* among some prison staff or *'lack of support/acknowledgement of the importance of the library'*. Where this was true of senior management, it was perceived that the feeling then *'cascaded down to officers'*.
- **Low priority of library within prison regime.** Staff felt that the library was not highly valued or prioritised within the prison regime, noting for example that *'work and education is prioritised over library access'*.
- **Timetable clashes.** Prisoners taking education courses or working during the day are often unable to visit the library. Sessions scheduled outside of core activity times to facilitate wider access are often unable to run due to a lack of officers to escort people to the library.
- **Prisoners unable to mix.** The fact that certain wings or populations within the prison are not allowed to mix with each other makes library timetabling difficult.
- **Location of library.** The location of the library sometimes presents a barrier to those with accessibility needs e.g. '*It is poorly located at the top of a hill a long way from the houseblocks and workshops. It is difficult for the elderly and those with mobility'*, *'problems to access as they can't walk that far or recover in time for the walk back.'*
- **Insufficient time *in* the library.** Another barrier to sufficient library access is the length of library visits, which some staff reported as inadequate, especially if prisoners want to use reference material or IT facilities. One staff member noted, *'78% of prisoners in a recent survey have indicated that they would like more time in the library'*.

Not all prison libraries are facing such challenges to library access. One open question asked respondents to name three things going well in their library (see page 29), and some staff specifically mentioned opening times, access to the library and engagement with library services. An improvement in library access was linked to the library being valued by the Governor or other senior management staff, valued by education staff and being promoted well within the prison.

95%

of libraries provide outreach services to prisoners

Almost all libraries (95%) provide outreach services, including services to those in segregation and ICU, those who are working and cannot attend library sessions and those with accessibility needs. The main type of library outreach is having a 'request and delivery service' (both physical and digital). Staff reported increased use of these services since the pandemic. Deliveries are made either by library staff or library orderlies, although this is hindered whenever orderlies do not have their bands to visit different areas of the prison. If there is only one professional member of staff working in the library, then they cannot leave to provide outreach elsewhere in the prison: *"We don't always have enough staff to run a library and do outreach."* Respondents also referred to the satellite libraries on different wings as a form of library outreach.

The library's standing in the prison regime

We asked library staff how they felt the library was viewed and valued by others in the prison. Almost all staff (95%) felt that prisoners valued the library, 90% felt that education staff valued it, 67% felt the library was valued by senior management and only 32% felt that officers valued the library.

Open ended responses here and elsewhere in the questionnaire provide clearer insights into these statistics and are discussed below.

95%

of staff feel that prisoners value the library

It was clear that library staff believed prisoners to value their service. They gave examples of feedback surveys they had run within their prison and noted positive feedback from library users and a sense that prisoners would like to spend more time in the library.

"The prisoners provide feedback to us that they value the library service, and that it has helped to improve their mental health, a place where they can research and a break from thinking about their sentence."

"Some prisoners express their gratitude for library services and this is appreciated."

"the library is always well received and we get great feedback from the men who use it regularly"

67%

of staff feel that Senior Management value the library

Two thirds of library staff (67%) felt that the library was valued by the Senior Management Team in their prison. Open comments suggest that there has been an increased interest in the library since the introduction of local reading strategies across prison sites[10]:

"Following the introduction of the reading strategy the library has more recognition for its role in supporting the wider prison aims."

"The Reading Strategy is forcing the Senior Management to take an interest in the Library, but it feels like box ticking."

Library staff also felt that when the Governor or SMT shows interest in the library, this has a positive impact on library access. Conversely, if SMT does not value the library this attitude *'cascaded down to Officers'* which has a resulting negative impact on library access.

32%

of staff feel that prison officers value the library

Less than a third (32%) of library staff believed the library to be valued by officers:

"I feel that some officers do not value the library and think it is a luxury the prisoners don't deserve. There are some prison officers who don't think like this, but the few that do can limit my ability to reach people."

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[10] Following a review of reading education in prisons by Ofsted and HMIP in 2022, all prisons are now required to have a local Reading Strategy in place.

"There is a lack of care from most officers who are unaware of our existence. They fail to understand the importance of returning books handed in, delivery of books to prisoners and clearance of cells before leavers depart (mostly they take library books with their property)."

"The officers aren't incentivised to bring learners to the library."

Only half (51%) of respondents felt the library was valued by other staff in the prison.

Frustrations were expressed by some library staff about the lack of priority afforded to the library:

"I get very frustrated about the lack of care and priority. Just one book to a prisoner can reduce self-harm, violence and is also good for mental health. I just wish others could see how important the prison library and it staff are."

"I have worked [here] for 12 years and over that time I have seen the library treated as a complete afterthought. Reading is so important, the library should be a hub of the community in prison as it is on the outside!"

Provision and promotion of library services

Library resources and services

All libraries provide access to books, including graphic novels, easy reads and books in different languages. All libraries also provide access to PSIs, prison rules and other legal material. Most libraries offer audiobooks (95%) and DVDs (81%), while 65% of libraries offer CDs. 79% of libraries provide board games and puzzles to play, including jigsaws, while fewer libraries (18%) provide videogames. Additional material noted by library staff includes magazines, newspapers, activity sheets, colouring material, 'distraction packs', 'wellness packs', maps, flags and matchstick model and origami how-to guides. Respondents also specified access to accessible reading material, including dyslexia friendly books and the opportunity to order resources in braille.

In all but one prison, the library was also open to prison staff members to borrow resources.

Almost every prison (98%) has a process in place for prisoners or staff to request books and other items.

As well as the resources available in the library space, we asked about additional library services available to prisoners. Most libraries (90%) run reading groups and facilitate family reading initiatives (74%). 63% offer creative writing workshops, while just over half (53%) facilitate author events and 33% offer poetry workshops.

When asked to note further examples of additional services, answers included:

Reading initiatives: LGBTQ+ reading groups, emergent reader book groups, Books Unlocked[11], 10x10[12], Reading Ahead[13], book and chat sessions for individuals with low reading levels, over 60s club, staff book group.

Family reading initiatives: Raising Readers[14], Children's Book Project[15], Storybook Dads[16], family days

Other: Weekly film study evenings, quizzes, games night, competitions, manga drawing workshops, health workshops, pop up art and craft class, debate group, visits from outside chess groups, origami club, puzzle club, PAS (legal advice sessions).

Provision for neurodivergent prisoners

We asked specifically about library provision for neurodivergent prisoners, and 88% of staff provided a response. The range of resources, services and support offered are outlined below.

Library stock

- Accessible reading material, including: easy readers, dyslexia friendly books, large print books, Shannon Trust books
- Audiobooks
- Comic books and graphic novels
- Stock about neurodiversity, both to raise awareness and to facilitate understanding.

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[11] https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/books-unlocked/
[12] A 100 word writing competition, run by Loud and Clear Productions: http://loudandclearproductions.co.uk/
[13] https://readingagency.org.uk/get-reading/our-programmes-and-campaigns/reading-ahead/get-involved-with-reading-ahead/
[14] https://prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/raising-readers/
[15] https://childrensbookproject.co.uk/receive-books/receive-books-prisons/#:~:text=OUR%20PROGRAMME%20FOR%20PRISONS,and%20have%20them%20posted%20out
[16] https://www.storybookdads.org.uk/

Reading aids

- Reading pens
- Magnifying sheets
- Coloured overlays
- Reading glasses
- Offering to print on yellow paper for library users

Other resources and initiatives

- Distraction packs
- Stress items including fidget spinners
- Ear defenders
- Digital timer
- Small reading groups
- Origami sessions

Accessible promotion materials:

- Accessible posters and leaflets e.g. written on yellow paper in dyslexia friendly font and colour
- Large print copies of library booklets
- Whiteboard in library

Library space

The library space itself was noted as a quiet, light and airy space for neurodivergent library users:

- 4 prison libraries noted having timetabled quiet sessions in the library
- One library held individual library inductions with neurodivergent prisoners
- Delivery of resources to prisoners who felt unable to visit the library

Support from library staff

- General provision of support and advice from library staff (including library orderlies). In two libraries, it was specified that this support came from library staff and orderlies with lived experience of neurodiversity
- Staff running 'neurodiversity surgeries' – working with neurodivergent library users to identify needs. One example was provided of a librarian running a wing-based session.

Collaboration with Neurodiversity Leads

28% of respondents specifically mentioned close collaboration with Neurodiversity Leads in the prison, for the following reasons:

- Prisoners are assessed and identified by Neurodiversity Leads
- Neurodiversity Leads provide guidance for use of items e.g. reading aids or stress items
- Neurodiversity Leads suggest accessible reading material
- Regular emails from Neurodiversity Leads with 'tips and hints' or a librarian reaching out directly for advice
- Neurodiversity Leads providing information about neurodivergent conditions and support
- Liaising with Neurodiversity Leads about specific individuals and how to provide tailored support
- One example of a Neurodiversity Lead running a monthly drop-in session in the library.

58%

of library staff have received neurodiversity training

58% of library staff had received neurodiversity training, while 42% had not. Neurodiversity training for library staff was provided as a suggestion for professional development later in the questionnaire.

Promotion of library services

70%

of prisons include library visits during the induction process

We asked staff how library services are currently promoted to prisoners. In 70% of prison sites, a library visit is included in the induction process.

Other ways of promoting library services included:

- Displaying posters and leaflets throughout the prison
- Membership packs providing information about what the library offers
- Having 'first night books' in induction wings
- Via in-cell technology or kiosks
- TV adverts
- Via staff in the education department
- Word of mouth (library staff visiting wings, library orderlies, wing reps)
- Inclusion in prison newspapers or magazines
- Library newsletter
- Podcast

Open answers in other sections of the questionnaire revealed the importance of collaboration in order to promote the prison library. This includes:

- Collaborating with other departments to promote library services and events
- Running prisoner-staff reading groups
- Enlisting the help of officers: *"we encourage staff to register as borrowers to promote our books"*
- PID workers[17] promoting library use
- The library taking part in other events within the prison e.g. family days in the visits centre.

Collaboration

Many of the services mentioned in the previous section are provided in collaboration with others, including other departments within the prison (most often the Education department), outside agencies and organisations, and public libraries.

Collaboration with other prison staff

Findings revealed close collaboration with other staff members such as chaplains, education staff and healthcare staff. Two thirds (67%) of library staff said they liaise daily with other staff and a further 14% do so weekly. One respondent said 'never'.[18]

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[17] Prisoner Information Desk (PID) workers manage PIDs in each wing, providing information about the operational arrangements in the prison and support services available.
[18] This respondent worked in a library run by the prison education provider and also noted that they felt unsupported in their role.

Reasons for liaison with other staff members in the prison fell within the following categories:

- Education and training support (40%)
- Operational and administrative tasks (35%)
- Project collaboration (33%)
- Prisoner welfare and support (28%)
- Promotions and outreach (26%)
- Resource management (12%)
- Strategy and planning (12%)

The importance of working with others in the prison was highlighted in open responses e.g. *"Building positive relationships with all staff is immensely beneficial to the service as a whole and often generates valuable partnership working."*

The challenging nature of working with others was also highlighted: *"Reaching out to other staff in the regime to provide partner services can be challenging due to time pressures and lack of staff networks. Communication is not always transparent."*

Collaboration with externals

Most respondents (80%) noted that they collaborated with external organisations. These include: Shannon Trust, The Reading Agency, National Literacy Trust, Prison Reading Groups, Kestrel Theatre Group, National Prison Radio, Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT), Storybook Dads, Give a Book, Borderline Books, CILIP, Bang Up Books, Philosophy in Prisons, Haven Distribution, Books for First Nights, Koestler Arts, David Kendall creative writing, the Phoenix Prison Trust, the Advocacy People, as well as other local reading, literacy and spoken word groups. One library mentioned collaborating with the Autistic Society in their effort to support neurodivergent library users.

Collaboration with public libraries

75%

of libraries collaborate with public libraries to provide services

Three quarters (75%) of libraries collaborate with public libraries to enhance their service delivery. Ways of working together include:

- Interlibrary loans
- Public libraries offering withdrawn stock and donations to prison libraries
- Providing books for reading groups
- Providing staff cover
- Offering training
- Sharing ideas and information
- Funding author events
- Running public library exhibitions within the prison
- Provision of library cards on release

An example was also provided of a mobile school library bus attending Family Days in prison.

Working in collaboration with public libraries was more common in the prison libraries run under a Service Level Agreement with the local Public Library Authority. Only 1 of the 9 libraries run by their prison education provider noted working alongside public libraries.

Library Systems and IT

We asked staff about their use of Library Management Systems (LMS) in the library as well as access to computers and internet or intranet for prison library users.

Library Management Systems

44% of libraries use a standalone LMS, while 40% use their local PLA's Library Management System. A further 16% have a manual issue system in place.

The table below offers an overview of the various LMS used across prison sites.

Name of LMS	Public library LMS	Standalone LMS
Spydus	7	1
Eclipse		6
Simple Little Library System		4
Softlink Alice		3
Heritage Cirqa		3
Workflows		2
Liberty		3
Soprano	2	1
Alto	1	1
SirsiDynix	1	
Axiell Spark	1	2
Axiell Galaxy	1	
Talis	1	
Built by prisoner (bespoke system)		1

We asked library staff who was responsible for maintenance of the LMS. In most cases (91%), this was the responsibility of the library provider i.e. the local Public Library Authority, the prison education provider, or a VCSE. Only two respondents noted that this was the responsibility of the prison, and in both cases these were libraries provided under an SLA with their local Public Library Authority. Three respondents were unsure about where this responsibility lies.

Those who worked with a manual library system provided more details as to how this is done, including the reported challenges associated with using a manual system:

- *There is a folder for each wing, which contains an account sheet for each person where we note the title, item type, and date of issue. This has been in place since our computer broke a year ago as senior management have not been able to resolve who is responsible for sorting it.*

- *The LMS has been out of action for 6 years. We took a manual stock take and use a spreadsheet to keep updated.*
- *We use the Brown box system which is unreliable and pedantic. Errors and mistakes are commonplace.*
- *Hard to keep track of stock and issues. Not able to run reports or gather borrowing data.*
- *Spreadsheet used to note any items taken out, then deleted when returned. Records are kept for each month this way*
- *We have a paper system, which is a little long and laborious.*
- *Spreadsheets created for use specifically in the library. The LMS was removed by the education provider in 2019 due to a security concern*
- *We lost access to our LMS system 3 years ago. We therefore returned to a brown card system. Neither the Prison or Library provider accept responsibility for the system or computers!*
- *Charge card for each book borrowed and held in prisoners ticket filed in library.*
- *Brown issue system*

Access to computers and the internet

Most library staff (80%) are able to access the internet within the library for their own work purposes (13% of these staff members noted specifically that they access it only in a separate staff office within the library), and 16% have to go elsewhere in the prison to access the internet. Others noted using the internet in the local public library or from their work laptop at home.

Just over half (51%) of libraries have PCs for prisoner use, while the remainder (49%) do not. Of the 28 libraries with PCs for prisoner use, 15 have access to an intranet, such as Virtual Campus (26% of all libraries represented in the survey).

Only 19% of libraries have Coracle laptops[19] and of these 11 libraries, 7 are able to issue Coracle laptops for prisoners use (12% of all libraries represented in the survey).

When staff were asked later in the survey to explicitly note three things 'not going well' in their library, IT-related issues were a common response (see page 30). This included a lack of IT and limited access to the internet, as well as issues with existing IT equipment e.g. '*It's a constant struggle to get equipment that works (PC, printer etc)*'.

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[19] The Coracle Inside system provides access to in-cell digital technology: https://www.coracleinside.com/

Professional Development, Training and Engagement Opportunities

We were interested to find out more about library staff experiences of training and preparation for their role, as well as opportunities for ongoing professional development and engagement with others in the prison library sector. The findings presented in this section includes data from all 61 responses we received, as they relate specifically to the experiences of individuals rather than representing library provision at a specific site (see footnote 7).

The chart below shows the numbers of years' experiences held by library staff who responded to the questionnaire.

Length of time working in prison libraries

■ Less than 1 year   ■ 1 - 5 years   ■ 6 - 10 years   ■ More than 10 years
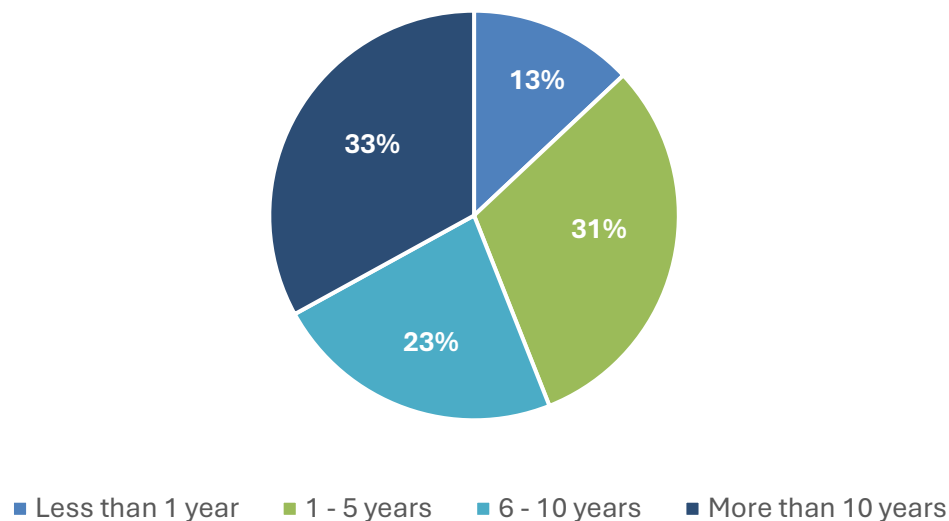
Professional qualification and training

Most respondents (82%) felt that, in general, they had received sufficient training for their role.

Only 23% of staff held a library and information studies (LIS) qualification, while 74% did not and a further two respondents (3%) are currently studying for their LIS qualification.

For those who do hold a LIS qualification, there were mixed responses as to whether this helped to prepare them for working in a prison library. Less than half (47%) felt that

it did, while a further 32% were indifferent and 21% stated that it did not prepare them for working in a prison library. A follow-up free text question offered further insight into these responses. Many noted their years of previous library experience which helped to prepare them for the role. There was agreement among some that, while the LIS degree is valuable to learn the fundamentals of working in a library setting (*"No matter how old the qualification I believe the fundamentals remain the same ie. the ethical framework, enquiry work, standards of stock, fair access for all"*), it does not prepare you specifically for working in a prison environment:

- *"There could be more / better "prison training" for sure!"*
- *"Yes, in terms of running a library; not so much in terms of learning how a prison works"*
- *"I have a Masters degree and my learning has not included knowledge or training in prison library services. There is no explanation of the PSI's or understanding of the prison regime."*
- *"Library degree does not prepare for prison environment"*
- *"There was no module on prison libraries."*
- *"I have a PGDip in Information and Library Studies which prepares you to work in a library but there was no information on Prison libraries as part of this training so having to learn about things like PSOs/PSIs was a little difficult to begin with."*

One person noted that nothing can prepare you for working in a prison environment: *"I had worked in a library for 34 years, but I don't believe anything prepares you for working in a prison."*

Engagement with professional bodies

Most respondents (78%) were not affiliated with any professional library association. Only 20% of respondents are members of CILIP, the UK's Library and Information Profession. Of those respondents, 6 hold CILIP Chartership and 6 are currently working towards it. One staff member was also a member of IFLA (The International Federation of Library and Information Associations and Institutions) and one a member of the Medical Library Association.

Some staff offered feedback on how they had benefited from being a member of CILIP Prison Libraries Group, particularly from attending their annual Prison Libraries Training Day and networking with other prison library staff. Some respondents were critical of the Group, noting that it was a shame that it was only open to paying CILIP members and another respondent questioned the value of their membership and the extent of support the Group provides for prison library staff.

Professional development and networking opportunities

Less than half of respondents (47%) state that they currently have opportunities for library-related professional development and training, while 53% do not.

The graph below provides an overview of where staff currently access professional development opportunities, although it was noted by one participant *"I am saying yes, however training is very rare and far between."* These included opportunities within their local library authority, GLL, CILIP events, in-house training and other agencies, including Libraries Connected, the Reading Agency and Prison Reading Groups.

Professional development opportunities

Providers of training opportunities (by number)

We asked staff about their opportunities for engagement with public library staff for advice and support, and their engagement with other prison library staff. 72% had opportunities to engage with public library staff, while 28% did not.

In terms of engagement and communication with other prison library professionals, this was mostly via email (70%), including the JISCMail Prison Libraries mailing list (43%); the annual CILIP Prison Libraries Training Day (40%) and other in-person events (40%); and virtual events (24%). Other less common examples included visits to nearby prison sites (5%) and via telephone (2%).

When asked if they would like to have *more* opportunities for professional engagement and networking, the majority of library staff (80%) said yes. Suggestions included:

- Support regarding legal information and legal research techniques
- Stock management: bespoke stock management, discussions around potentially unsuitable stock
- Neurodiversity training
- Graphic design
- Planning and funding events and activities
- Learning about best practice in other prisons
- Sharing of email addresses to more easily get in touch with others
- Opportunities to share experiences and exchange ideas
- Site visits to other nearby prisons
- Meeting with others in same category of prison

Underpinning the open text responses was a desire for increased opportunities to simply meet with other prison library staff, share ideas and learn from good practice elsewhere. These responses also indicated the isolating nature of working in prison libraries:

"We do a lot of single staffing so I would say the only real negative is the isolation we feel whilst working alone as we are a 'Partnership Agency' so not fully included in the Prison Regime and we also sometimes get missed with any upcoming changes."

"Working in the prison can be professionally isolating."

Successes and challenges in prison libraries

We asked library staff to name up to three things they felt were going well in their library, and three things they felt were not going well. The open responses to this question gave a valuable insight into the successes and challenges in libraries across prison sites, and highlighted the inconsistency of access, provision and level of priority afforded to the library within the wider regime. Some of the responses have been noted throughout this report, where they have helped to clarify statistics in certain sections. In this final section, we have tried to summarise the responses to these two questions, in a way that allows us to celebrate the positive things happening in prison libraries and that also makes us aware of the very real challenges affecting library staff working to provide access to their services in a difficult environment. In some cases, examples fall in both categories e.g. for many libraries 'access' is a main challenge, while others noted 'improved access' as something going well in their library. This further serves to highlight ongoing disparities in both the provision of services and the experiences reported by library staff.

1) What is going well in your library?

Reading initiatives

Book groups (in library and on wings)
Family reading initiatives
Emergent reader initiatives

Library events

Author events
Art classes
Manga drawing workshops
Creative writing events
Slam poetry
Philosophy club

Stock

Diversity of stock
Tailored provision
Low stock loss
Interlibrary loan service

Library space

Safe space for reading and relaxation
Friendly, welcoming environment

Prisoner engagement

Positive feedback from library users
High level of engagement
Positive rapport with library users
Library as supporting mental health
Orderlies working in local public library

Perception of library

Changing attitudes of prison staff
Increased awareness of library services
Support from Senior Management
Governor encouraging library use
Education staff encouraging library use

Promotion of library

Library visits included in induction
Promotion through TV ads
Wing reps promoting the library

Access

Improved access
Increased visits to the library
Better opening times
Outreach initiatives

2) What is not going well in your library?

Access

Impact of regime on access
No library access outside core hours
Cancellation of visits
Library not accessible to those in education classes
Library not included in induction
Not enough time to browse or read

Stock

Stock loss and stock damage
Items not returned on time
Stock delivery is a lengthy process
Security withholding deliveries
Expense of books in different languages
Difficulty acquiring DVD and audio book stock (inc. cost)

How library is valued

Low attendance figures
Library is undervalued in the prison
Officers not incentivised to bring people to library
Officer attitudes are 'demoralising'

Library space

Limited library size
Can only accommodate small numbers of users at one time
Building is mouldy with water damage

IT equipment

Lack of IT equipment
Equipment (printers, PCs) not working
No Library Management System
No access to the internet

Staffing

Staff have no time to facilitate additional or enhancing activities
Lack of training opportunities for staff
High turnover of orderlies
Managing orderly relationships

Communication and collaboration

Lack of communication and miscommunication within prison
Poor communication with officers
Irregular collaboration with other departments
'hit and miss' liaison with the prison's Reading Specialist

Budget

Staff reductions
Reduced opening hours
Unable to buy stock
Unable to run events

Summary and recommendations

This report highlights many positive aspects of prison library provision across England and Wales. It is evident that prison libraries are highly valued by those who use them, reinforcing their vital role in supporting the wellbeing and rehabilitation of people in prison. Encouragingly, the introduction of local reading strategies appears to have raised the profile of prison libraries among senior management. However, the findings also reveal a significant lack of consistency in both the level and quality of provision across different establishments. While some library staff report adequate levels of access for their users, others note the multiple barriers that limit meaningful use of the library. The following recommendations are informed by survey findings and are aimed at supporting more equitable and accessible library services across the prison estate.

These broad recommendations are intended to be a catalyst for further dialogue and more targeted actions to inform future improvements in prison library provision. We welcome further discussions with HMPPS, prison library service providers and other stakeholders about these findings and suggested recommendations.[20]

Recommendation: Establish national standards for prison library provision

To address current inconsistencies in library provision and access, we recommend the development of clear national standards for prison library provision. These standards should be co-produced with experienced prison library staff, the CILIP Prison Libraries Group and other stakeholders with direct knowledge and expertise in the field. They should define the minimum expectations for service delivery, access, staffing and resource provision. Mechanisms for regular review and evaluation should be built in to ensure ongoing consistency and improvement across all sites.

Recommendation: Strengthen partnerships between prison and public libraries

Findings suggest that the growing shift toward alternative service providers for prison libraries risks weakening established partnerships with public libraries. This leads to reduced professional support for prison library staff and fewer opportunities for collaborative initiatives between prison and public libraries that benefit both prisoners and their families. Where possible, prisons should retain the model of working under a Service Level Agreement with their local Public Library Authority, which is widely recognised as best practice in global prison library research.[21] In cases where prison

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[20] Please contact Dr Jayne Finlay at jayne.finlay@sheffield.ac.uk
[21] See, for example: Krolak (2019). *Books beyond bars: the transformative potential of prison libraries*. *UNESCO* Institute for Lifelong Learning. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000369835; Finlay, J., Hanlon, S. & Bates, J. (2023) An Evidence-Based Approach To Prison Library Provision: Aligning Policy and Practice, *Journal of Prison Education Research,* 8(1). https://doi.org/10.25771/mb9y-t716

libraries are already managed by education providers or other organisations, proactive efforts should be made to establish partnerships with local public library services.

Recommendation: Invest in fit-for-purpose Library Management Systems

A functioning Library Management System (LMS) is fundamental to the effective operation of any library service. 16% of libraries in this study had no access to an LMS, requiring staff to rely on manual processes that are time-consuming and inefficient. This not only negatively impacts on core library functions such as stock management and lending, but also limits the capacity of library staff to deliver additional educational and cultural activities for library users. All prison libraries should be equipped with a reliable and fit-for-purpose LMS and this should be treated as a priority across the prison estate.

Recommendation: Integrate library awareness into prison officer training and development

Prison officers play a key role in facilitating prisoner access to the library. Less than one third (32%) of survey staff felt that prison officers valued the library and noted how this negatively impacted upon prisoner access to the library space. We recommend that information about prison library services be embedded into officer training – both at the initial induction stage and as part of their ongoing professional development (including the current Elevate programme). This echoes findings from a recent Arts Council England project about raising the profile of prison libraries.[22] Library staff should be regularly included in all-staff training days to promote library awareness.

Recommendation: Prioritise strategic ways of increasing access to prison library services

Access to a library and its resources is a legal entitlement under The Prison Rules 1999, yet only 54% of library staff surveyed in this study believed that prisoners at their site had sufficient access to library services. A local approach must be taken to identifying and overcoming barriers specific to each prison site, although access improvements may be supported by implementing the actions outlined in other recommendations listed here. It is vital for prisons to have dedicated library officer where required and to make library access more of a priority in the regime staffing management. Library visits should be included in all prisoner inductions to raise awareness of the library and what it offers.

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[22] Based on a study carried out by Arts Council England in 2024 entitled 'Raising the Profile of Prison Libraries'. Report findings yet to be published.

Recommendation: Strengthen cross-departmental communication and collaboration

There was some evidence of effective collaboration between prison departments to support people in prison, especially between the prison library and education department. However, levels of communication and collaboration were inconsistent across sites and many staff noted the need for improved communication across departments to support more integrated services for library users. We recommend that library managers be included in key meetings (Reducing Reoffending, QIG, Reading Strategy) to help raise awareness of the library's role within the prison and to foster more joined-up working practices to benefit both staff and prisoners. Library staff should be included in the development of local reading strategies, and attendance at Reading committee meetings would help to facilitate this.

Recommendation: Commission a comprehensive review of prison library provision

While this study offers valuable insights into prison library provision from the perspective of library staff, its scope is limited. To inform more targeted, evidence-based improvements we recommend that HMPPS commission a comprehensive review of prison libraries in both England and Wales. A recent national review conducted in Ireland in 2021 provides a useful model[23]. A similar approach in England and Wales would help to identify best practices, systemic gaps and opportunities for innovation – supporting a more consistent, effective and equitable library service across the prison estate.

Recommendation: Expand training and professional development opportunities for prison library staff

The majority (80%) of participants noted they would like more opportunities for professional development and engagement and noted their specific training needs. Responsibility for training lies across several stakeholders, including HMPPS, contracted prison library providers, and the professional body for library and information professionals (CILIP). We also recommend liaising with university departments that deliver professional qualifications in library and information science to ensure that these courses equip students with the skills needed to work in prison settings. Academics in this field can also play a role in shaping and delivering ongoing professional development for prison library staff.

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[23] https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/education/our-research/current-research-projects/review-of-prison-libraries-in-ireland The full Review report can be requested from jayne.finlay@sheffield.ac.uk

Principles of Principle Library Provision

Below are ten principles highlighting good practice in prison library provision. Originally developed as part of the previously mentioned Review of Prison Library Services in Ireland, these principles offer valuable guidance for decision-makers in other global contexts who are involved in shaping prison library policy, strategy and service delivery.

Principles for prison library provision in Ireland

1. **Policy-driven:** Prison library services are underpinned and guided by a national policy of prison library provision.

2. **Universal access:** All persons in custody have the right to access library services and, where possible, the library space while in prison.

3. **User-centred:** Library services are user-centred, designed around the needs of specific populations at individual prison sites.

4. **Professionalism:** Prison libraries are managed by professional library staff, supported by prison staff and volunteers from within the prison population.

5. **Partnership:** Prison library services are provided in partnership with public libraries, and work with other prison departments and external organisations.

6. **Range and scope of provision:** In addition to borrowing services, a broad range and format of stock, programmes and activities are available.

7. **Community:** Prison library provision reflects, as much as possible, what is offered to communities by local public libraries, including access to digital resources.

8. **The Library as support while in prison**: Libraries support health and wellbeing, information access, reading, self-development, learning, and social engagement in library programmes and activities.

9. **The Library as a stepping-stone to re-entering society:** Libraries provide support in preparing people in custody for release and life in the community.

10. **Review and evaluation:** Prison library services are reviewed on a regular basis to monitor and evaluate the implementation of strategic priorities, the provision of library services and how they support user needs, to ensure effective delivery both locally and nationally.

Principles of Library Provision in Ireland (Finlay et al., 2021 – see footnote 23)

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