

Free Speech Union briefing

# Not On Our Shelves:

Soft Censorship in Local Authority Libraries

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## Executive Summary

The Free Speech Union randomly selected 49 English local authorities with searchable online library catalogues and searched them for 10 books – five titles written from a gender critical (GC) point of view and five from a trans rights (TR) point of view. We found that the libraries in our sample stock more TR books overall and stock more TR texts than is justified by the low demand from members of the public to borrow these titles and not enough GC titles, given the much higher demand for them.

Gender Critical Book	Trans Rights Books
<a href="#"><i>Material Girls</i></a> – Kathleen Stock	<a href="#"><i>The Transgender Issue</i></a> – Shon Faye
<a href="#"><i>Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality</i></a> – Helen Joyce	<a href="#"><i>Trans Britain: Our Journey from the Shadows</i></a> – Christine Burns
<a href="#"><i>Unfair Play: The Battle for Women's Sport</i></a> – Sharron Davies	<a href="#"><i>Trans Like Me: A Journey for All of Us</i></a> – C.N. Lester
<a href="#"><i>Irreversible Damage</i></a> – Abigail Shrier	<a href="#"><i>The New Girl: A Trans Girl Tells It Like It Is</i></a> – Rhyannon Styles
<a href="#"><i>Time to Think</i></a> – Hannah Barnes	<a href="#"><i>Trans Global: Transgender Then, Now and Around the World</i></a> – Honor Head

### Libraries stock more TR than GC books overall

- More than two thirds of the 49 local authority library catalogues list more TR books than GC books. Less than 20% list fewer TR than GC books and 14% list the same number of each. Two local authorities, Enfield and Wigan, had no record of any of the GC titles in our sample while every library stocked at least one TR title.
- On average, local authorities bought 63% more copies of TR books than GC books.
- *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* by Helen Joyce was the most stocked GC title (83 copies overall) and *The Transgender Issue* by Shon Faye was the most stocked TR title (191 copies overall). Even

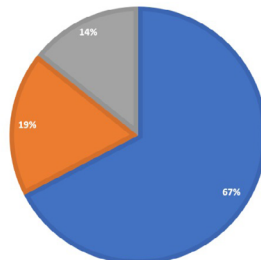
though the percentage difference between the number of TR and GC copies reduces to 34% when we exclude these two titles, the bias remains in favour of TR texts.

### Library stock levels favour TR books disproportionate to public demand

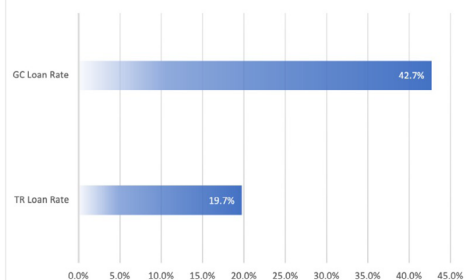
- At the time the data was collected, 43% of the GC titles were on loan compared to just 20% of the TR books. This suggests that library stock policies are more than matching demand for TR books, while potentially failing to meet demand for GC books.
- 51% of the copies of Hannah Barnes' GC title *Time to Think* were on loan at the time of sampling (the highest on loan rate in the dataset). Yet at 1.6, the average number of Barnes's title being held by each local authority was less than half of that for the most popular TR author, Shon Faye (3.9 books per local authority).
- Shon Faye's *The Transgender Question* was the most popular of the TR books with 34% of its copies on loan at the time of sampling. When *The Transgender Question* is excluded from the TR sample, however, the percentage of TR books on loan falls to just 9%.

DO PUBLIC LIBRARIES FAVOUR TR OVER GC TITLES?

■ Stock More TR ■ Stock More GC ■ Equal Stock



WHAT % OF PUBLIC LIBRARY STOCK WAS ON LOAN?



Based on September/October 2023 analysis of 49 local authority library catalogues in England; 5 most popular GC titles vs. 5 most popular TR titles  
GC = Gender Critical, TR = Transgender Rights

We conclude there is a clear bias in England's local authority libraries in favour of TR books and against GC books and the source of that bias is the [Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals](#) (CILIP), the professional association for librarians which has been captured by critical social justice ideology, and an LGBT activist group called Book 28. Like many of our institutions, these public libraries are losing sight of their original purpose – which was to serve the public in a politically neutral way – and embracing an ideology imported from the United States which prompts them to come down on one side of current political debates.

# Introduction

## Terminology

This report discusses current debates over gender and identity in the UK. Very broadly speaking, those debates concern whether society should treat a person according to their biological sex or their self-declared gender identity. In this report we use the term ‘gender critical’ (GC) campaigner to refer to people who believe that biological sex should determine things like access to single sex toilets, changing rooms and sports. We refer to people who believe that self-declared gender identity should take precedence as ‘trans rights’ (TR) campaigners.

In [August 2023](#) it emerged that Calderdale Council had removed books by GC authors from library shelves and put them in storage away from public view. Members of the public in Calderdale interested in contemporary debates about gender identity, biological sex and the rights of women and transgender people now needed to specially reserve books by the authors Helen Joyce, Heather Brunskell-Evans, Shiela Jeffreys, Kathleen Stock and Janice Raymond if they wished to read them. The arrangement meant that library users casually browsing the shelves would never encounter what these authors or their books. As a concerned Calderdale resident [wrote](#):

But many readers go to the library to browse and see what books there are, that they’ve never heard of before, and so widen their horizons. If they do this, they will no longer find any gender critical books on Calderdale Council Libraries shelves – as used to be the case, as I know from finding some myself in that way.

This neatly encapsulates the way public libraries, as repositories of knowledge freely available to all, play an important role in informing public opinion. Best practice industry guidance from organisations like the [Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals](#) (CILIP) and the [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions](#) has typically recognised the central importance of freedom of information and speech to the mission of publicly funded libraries and identified censorship

as intrinsically inimical to that mission. Particularly where issues of contemporary political importance are concerned libraries should seek to neutrally represent to the public the widest range of views possible. Limiting the range of views about the gender debate on library shelves by putting GC titles in storage clearly contravenes this commitment.

In response to a series of [Freedom of Information](#) (FoI) requests, events at Calderdale Council became clearer. In January 2023, the Council, a member of the [Stonewall Diversity Champions](#) scheme, had received a grievance complaining that local libraries were stocking GC texts that the complainant deemed transphobic. As the Council explained, “The decision was not made by the library leadership. The books were removed following a recommendation made by a senior manager as part of an internal HR matter.” Prompted by the considerable public interest in the issue, the Council went on to say that it was reviewing the decision to remove the books and in October 2023 it announced the titles would be returned to library shelves, [stating](#): “While it is understood that some of the content may cause offence to some readers, the books do not warrant removal.” It emerged later that some library staff had complained to their employer about the original decision, describing the removal of the GC books as “a departure from policy and professional ethics” and demanding their reinstatement.

Although their defence of free speech succeeded in getting the books reinstated, the Council review specified that the return of GC texts to Calderdale library shelves was to be qualified. Calderdale Council [recommended](#):

That the six book titles are replaced on the library shelves, in line with the current stock management policy. However, in doing so, the books should not be promoted, i.e., placed on a temporary display of similar related material.

This appeared to be a concession to guidance titled ‘Welcoming LGBTIQ+ users: advice for public library workers’ published by [Book 28](#), a group representing LGBT library professionals, and cited by Calderdale Council in its review. Without naming specific authors, the guide explicitly labels GC books as “transphobic” and advises library employees to conceal and downplay GC texts, only purchasing them if they are specifically requested by library users:

In the last year especially, there have been a few titles published which claim to be 'gender critical' and argue for removal of trans rights. These authors and their work can be labelled transphobic, and the writers themselves TERFs (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists). We, along with many in the LGBTIQ+ community, find these books offensive... We do not say you shouldn't stock these books or consider methods of censorship around them. Rather, we would recommend to be mindful of and not promote these books, and to think carefully about how many you want to buy, perhaps based solely on individual requests... You can interfile them in your general stock and those who want to seek out these titles can always do so via your catalogue without the risk of a LGBTIQ+ person coming across the book in a way that looks like it may be being endorsed.

The kind of 'soft censorship' of GC texts here recommended by Book 28, intended to restrict public access to books its authors disapprove of, seems incompatible with the strong defence of freedom of speech within the law seen in previous industry guidance from CILIP and MLA and also cited in the Calderdale review. This internal contradiction becomes more puzzling when we understand that the Book 28 guidance is now actively [promoted by CILIP](#), despite the fact that it appears to be at odds with their previously stated commitments to freedom of speech.

The incident in Calderdale prompted the FSU to look more closely at how the public library sector is approaching freedom of speech on controversial issues of interest to the public. In order to assess what kind of views about the gender debate a person might encounter while browsing a public library we took a random sample of 49 English local authorities with searchable online library catalogues. During September and October 2023 we searched the catalogues of these libraries for 10 books, five titles written from a GC point of view and five from a TR point of view. While our findings do not constitute a formal statistical study, we have identified patterns that suggest a bias towards TR over GC texts in English libraries. Our data shows that the libraries in our sample stock more TR books overall and stock more TR texts than is justified by borrowing demands from members of the public and not enough GC titles, given the demand for them.

Forty seven out of the 49 local authorities in our sample also answered an FoI request about their relationship with CILIP and Book 28. While only

14 of the 47 were organisational members of CILIP, a further 25 cited CILIP guidance in their policies, suggesting that its influence on the local authority library sector is significant. Forty three per cent of the councils that responded acknowledged using the Book 28 guide 'Welcoming LGBTIQ+ users: advice for public library workers'.

An FSU investigation suggests that CILIP's commitment to freedom of speech has progressively weakened since the publication in 2005 of its [Intellectual Freedom, Access to Information and Censorship](#) statement. The 2005 statement was a forthright defence of free speech within the law as the governing principle of the libraries sector. But CLIP's draft [Intellectual Freedom Policy](#) and accompanying [guidance](#) scheduled to replace it in late 2023 place greater emphasis on the restrictions on free speech that CILIP now deems allowable under its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policy. Seen in this context, CILIP's promotion of the 'soft censorship' recommended by Book 28 seems symptomatic of the broader erosion of freedom of speech as a first principle of the libraries sector. Rather than providing the public with a plurality of information about controversial issues so they can make up their own minds, library professionals following the guidance of their association now see it as their job to shield the public from information deemed 'offensive' or 'harmful' by their professional association, i.e., contain points of view the association disagrees with.



## Snapshot of Viewpoint Diversity in Public Library Catalogues

To assess what kind of views about the gender debate a person might encounter while browsing a public library we selected a random sample of 49 local authorities with searchable online library catalogues. Each local authority contained between five and 39 individual libraries, excluding mobile or home libraries. The average number of individual libraries in a local authority was approximately 19.

During September and October 2023 we searched the catalogues of these libraries for 10 books, five GC titles and five TR titles. Not all the 49 local authorities in our study stocked all 10 titles.

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We recorded how many copies of each book local authorities stocked in total, how many copies were out on loan and how many were available on shelves. We also recorded how many library catalogues held no record of or did not stock the titles in our sample. Nine of the local authorities in our sample also provided reservations information, meaning they listed the number of people who had requested to reserve a book when all of the existing copies were out on loan. Information about reservations applies

only to these nine local authorities.

It's important to note that this is a small sample and that the data may be distorted by timing issues, such as variance in publication date, or by spikes in the media of news stories about GC or TR issues. This is not a formal statistical study, but it does suggest a pattern of bias. Our sample suggests that, across the 49 local authorities we looked at, TR books outnumber GC books both in absolute terms (number of copies per authority) and relative to underlying demand.

### **Libraries stock more TR than GC books overall**

- More than two thirds of the 49 local authority library catalogues list more TR books than GC books. Less than 20% list fewer TR than GC books and 14% list the same number of each. Two local authorities, Enfield and Wigan, had no record of any of the GC titles in our sample while every library stocked at least one TR title.
- On average, local authorities bought 63% more copies of TR books than GC books.
- *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality* by Helen Joyce was the most stocked GC title (83 copies overall) and *The Transgender Issue* by Shon Faye was the most stocked TR title (191 copies overall). Even though the percentage difference between the number of TR and GC copies reduces to 34% when we exclude these two titles, the bias remains in favour of TR texts.

### **Library stock levels favour TR books disproportionate to public demand**

- At the time the data was collected, 43% of the GC titles were on loan compared to just 20% of the TR books. This suggests that library stock policies are more than matching demand for TR books, while potentially failing to meet demand for GC books.
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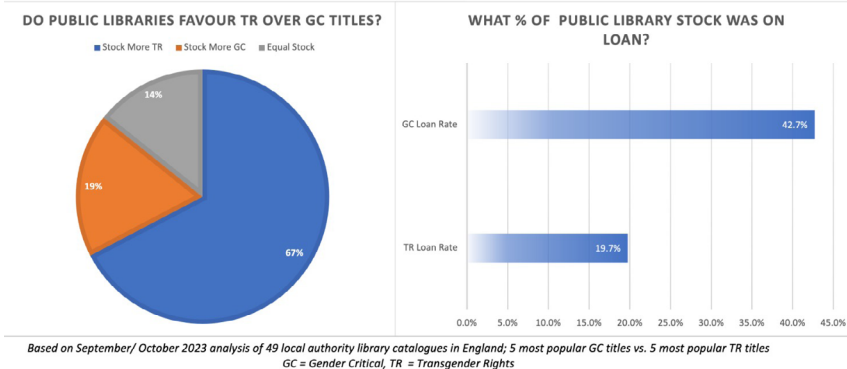
### Pending reservations suggest GC books are understocked relative to TR books

- There were a total of 29 reservations in relation to the nine local authorities that made reservations data available and, at 12 pending reservations, Hannah Barnes' *Time to Think* again appears to be the most popular title in the sample.
- It is notable that *all* the reservations relate to GC books. In the dataset that we collected no one had reserved any of the five TR titles.
- This is further evidence that the stock policies of local authorities are favouring TR books out of all proportion to underlying public demand.

### Local authorities in London nearly always stock more TR than GC books

- Fifteen of the 49 councils in our dataset were based in London.
- All but one of these 15 authorities stock more TR than GC books, suggesting that local authorities in London stand out as particularly skewed in favour of TR titles.

These findings suggest a relative bias towards TR books by local authority libraries and an understocking of GC texts on the part of some libraries. The FSU examined some of the factors underlying this trend.



# Influences on Freedom of Expression in Local Authority Libraries

## The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals

A number of organisations offer best practice advice to those in the library profession. In answer to FoI requests, the libraries in our sample mentioned collaborating with the [Museums, Libraries and Archives Council](#) (mentioned by seven local authorities), [Libraries Connected](#) (mentioned by seven), the [Reading Agency](#) (mentioned by two), [Arts Council England](#) (mentioned by one) and the [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions](#) (mentioned by one). But the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals ([CILIP](#)) appeared to have the most influence. Of the 47 councils who answered our FoI request, 83% either held CILIP membership, cited CILIP guidance or had carried out CILIP training in the last 12 months.

CILIP [describes](#) itself as “the leading voice for the information, knowledge management and library profession”. Both individuals and organisations can become CILIP [members](#) to gain access to resources and training. CILIP sets industry standards for the library profession, including an [Ethical Framework](#) and an [Intellectual Freedom Policy](#). In April 2022, CILIP launched a consultation to update the CILIP [Statement on Intellectual Freedom, Access to Information and Censorship](#) originally published in 2005. The updated Intellectual Freedom policy is due to be published before the end of 2023.

A distinct change of tone is evident between the 2005 statement and the [draft Intellectual Freedom Policy](#) and accompanying consultation [guidance](#). The 2005 statement is a forthright defence of free speech within the law as the governing principle of the library profession:

Access should not be restricted on any grounds except that of the law. If publicly available material has not incurred legal penalties then it should not be excluded on moral, political, religious, racial or gender grounds, to satisfy the demands of sectional interest.

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The legal basis of any restriction on access should always be stated... The provision of access to materials by a library or information service does not imply endorsement especially where the material may be thought to encourage discrimination.

By contrast, the draft policy and guidance due to be adopted in late 2023 strongly qualifies the right to freedom of expression and lists it as the third principle of the library and information profession, behind “defending human rights” and “equality and diversity”. Announcing the launch of the Intellectual Freedom policy consultation, an [article](#) by Martyn Wade, Chair of the CILIP Policy Committee, set the tone for the consultation by referring dismissively to “the so-called ‘war on woke’” and accusing the UK Government of “increasingly adopting the tone and language of... a ‘culture war’”. Wade claims that the Government is making “a direct challenge to the curatorial and intellectual freedom” of the information sector by promoting a policy of ‘retain and explain’ when it comes to contested historical texts and artefacts that are deemed offensive according to modern standards. But ‘retain and explain’, described by the [Government](#) as follows, seems entirely compatible with the intellectual freedom CILIP used to support:

Removing heritage assets risks limiting our understanding of the difficult parts of our history, and of actions people took in the past, even if they may not be considered acceptable today. The starting point for the guidance is for custodians to... keep assets in situ, but to complement them as necessary with a comprehensive ‘explanation’ which provides the whole story of the person or event depicted, so that a fuller understanding of the historic context can be known, understood and debated.

It is puzzling to see the Chair of the CILIP Policy Committee opposing a policy that seeks to provide *more* information to the public about the complexity of history. But Wade’s article is typical of CILIP’s new approach. This is evident in the tension between intellectual freedom and CILIP’s interpretation of “equality and diversity”. We drew on a number of sources to understand what CILIP means by “equality and diversity”.

CILIP’s [‘Managing safe and inclusive public library services’](#) guide was published in collaboration with Arts Council England in September 2023. The guide opens by condemning the “marginalisation of entire communities because of their identity”. Identity is treated by the guide as “intersectional”:

It is also important to be conscious that the challenges experienced by marginalised or minoritized people on the basis of their protected characteristics are intersectional – any individual may have experience of any combination of protected characteristics, which intersect with each other in highly specific ways.

“Unconscious” and “systemic bias” are identified as the root cause of inequality: “In addition to our personal biases, we must be aware of the systemic biases in our society which are beneficial to some people while marginalising or disadvantaging others.” Library staff are told that their role is to safeguard the “emotional, psychological... safety” of staff and the public, to be alert to “hate speech” and to “take some time to reflect on your unconscious biases”. CILIP presents libraries as sites of social activism, instrumentalising the information profession as a means of achieving equality by overcoming “unconscious” and “systemic bias”:

It is the ethical responsibility of librarians, library staff and decision-makers in libraries to be actively conscious of these biases and to work to correct them through the design and delivery of inclusive and welcoming services. Instead of being ‘neutral’, librarians and library staff should be aware of their biases, accountable for them.

Some of the goals of CILIP’s [Community, Diversity and Equality Group](#) (CDEG) further clarify the organisational approach to “equality and diversity”:

Providing a forum for progressive, socially responsible views on library and information issues... advocating on behalf of library workers who believe that libraries are agents of social change... Conducting campaigns and raise [sic] wider awareness of library and information activities that promote social justice... embedding diversity and equality across all aspects of CILIP’s work.

CILIP’s interpretation of “equality and diversity” could be seen as an attempt to mould the beliefs of the public, using libraries to create unspecified “social change” by advocating for those with views CILIP deems “progressive” to achieve “social justice”. None of these terms are defined and “social justice” means different things to different people. For TR campaigners “social justice” for transgender people requires that trans-identifying individuals be treated as identical in every conceivable

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respect to members of the sex they identify as, while for GC campaigners “social justice” for women demands that women are defined according to their biological sex. Some people believe that “social justice” for ethnic minorities demands reparations for past wrongdoing, while for others equality of opportunity is the best route to “social justice” for racialised groups.

None of these views are unlawful and the CLIP of 2005 would have regarded the librarians’ role only as cultivating a balanced collection of texts representing a plurality of views. But the [clarifying notes](#) accompanying CILIP’s new Ethical Framework seem to advise information professionals to take a more proactive role in bringing about “social change”: “Library and information professionals should stand for diversity and challenge prejudice wherever it is found in the information, knowledge and library sector.” Does this mean removing books that, while not unlawful, are regarded as bigoted by some librarians, as they were in Calderdale? And how are library professionals to interpret the injunction to “challenge prejudice” in light of other contemporary CILIP [guidance](#) that asks them to “provide materials that illustrate and illuminate different views on controversial issues so that users may develop under guidance the practice of critical reading and thinking”? People on either side of a “controversial issue” are liable to argue that their opponent is “prejudiced” and should be “challenged”.

The CILIP Intellectual Freedom consultation guidance does at one point recognise that intellectual freedom is occasionally incompatible with an activist interpretation of EDI, but the “solutions” it recommends are not clear:

The right of intellectual freedom may mean that there are tensions between views which are legally expressed and our professional commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. In all cases, you should tend towards solutions which promote the rights of the information user without compromising their safety or right not to be discriminated against, or the safety and right not to be discriminated against of others.

Applying this formula to events in Calderdale is instructive. TR campaigners would no doubt argue that the presence of GC titles “discriminated against” transgender people, while GC campaigners would argue that removing them was “discriminatory against” people who hold GC beliefs. Calderdale

Council ultimately resolved the issue with reference to the legality of the texts, in line with CILIP's 2005 statement, but the "solutions" to such problems suggested by the new Intellectual Freedom policy appear to complicate the issue. CILIP's 'Managing safe and inclusive public library services' guide compounds the problem by hinting that there may be texts that are lawful but still not appropriate to stock, without providing any concrete guidance as to how library staff should deal with these "harmful or offensive" texts:

However, the reality is that this simple formulation [stocking texts only according to legality] is not sufficient to guide libraries in the practical interpretation of their legal responsibilities. For example, there remains a risk that even though a piece of material or an activity may not be prohibited by the law, it falls into the category known as 'lawful but awful' (also known as 'legal but harmful'...) By way of illustration, books which include assertions that constitute 'Holocaust denial' may not be prohibited by law, but may clearly be either harmful or offensive to many library users.

In the absence of concrete examples of how to balance intellectual freedom with the objectives of EDI, some councils that answered the FSU's FoI requests evidenced a tendency to prioritise EDI:

- **Clapham Library, Lambeth Council** – We... are working on removing negative search terms in our catalogue, improving the diversity in our collections to reflect our local communities and withdrawing books that have a dated, inaccurate colonial bias.
- **Sandwell Central Library, Sandwell Council** – We actively seek to purchase book stock that promotes equality and diversity. We encourage displays of material to promote those areas of stock... we would not buy items that we believe increase inequality or are liable to have a negative effect in terms of equality or diversity... We have specifically purchased items that promote equality and diversity, both for child and adult readers. We host events that also promote equality and diversity.
- **Wandsworth Town Library, Richmond and Wandsworth Council** – The commitment to equal opportunities means that librarians that are choosing books will consider language, tone, illustrations, and content when taking selection decisions... Selecting librarians look out for and actively select material with positive images: Positive images



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are those which present individuals, groups or cultures in a way that illustrates their value, self-esteem and power of self-determination and encourages a sense of self-respect.

While “social justice” and “equality and diversity” may be admirable goals, “embedding” them in every part of CILIP’s work appears to have created irreconcilable problems with the library sector’s commitment to freedom of speech and to have unacceptably politicised a publicly funded service which should aspire to neutrally serve the public.

### **Book 28**

Of the 47 local authorities who answered our FoI request, 43% acknowledged using the Book 28 guide ‘[Welcoming LGBTIQ+ users: advice for public library workers](#)’. Book 28 is frequently referenced on CILIP’s [LGBTQ+ Network](#) webpage, the Book 28 guide is listed among CILIP’s LGBTQIA resources for library workers and Colette Townend, co-author of the guide, spoke on CILIP’s [LGBTQ+ Censorship Panel](#) in 2022. CILIP clearly endorses the work of Book 28.

Founded by Library Science graduate Isadore Auerbach George, Book 28 [describes](#) itself as “a group of library workers, researchers and [LGBTIQ+](#) people who want to see public libraries offering better service for queer users”. Book 28 understands the term LGBTIQ+ to refer to:

‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans[gender], Intersex, Queer/Questioning and Other.’ We do not police people’s identities and use a broad definition of queerness that recognises anyone whose needs might be underserved by public libraries because of their minority or marginalised gender identity and expression, or sexual orientation and practice.

The organisation, which is currently run by volunteers, also maintains a small LGBTIQ+ library in Clerkenwell in association with the [Outside Project](#), described as “London’s LGBTIQ+ Community Shelter, Centre and Domestic Abuse Refuge”. Neither Book 28 nor the Outside Project appeared to be in receipt of public funds at the time of writing. Both are registered with Companies House as Community Interest Companies, but no financial information is available for [Book 28](#). The Outside Project’s most recent [financial filings](#) show total current assets of £233,078 in November 2021, but give no information about sources of funding. As organisations that do not appear to be publicly funded, Book 28 and the

Outside Project are not obliged to uphold the same standards of public sector impartiality that would be expected in a local authority library. Book 28 in particular states very clearly that its goals are explicitly political. Its [Collection Development Policy](#) states:

Book 28 Library is not a politically neutral organisation. Rather, we advocate for the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, and believe some specific political policies of the UK's Government, such as Section 28 and Austerity, have been harmful to our community. We also recognise that some groups at certain intersections face further marginalisation with the LGBTIQ+ community, such as people who experience racism, and we aim to combat this.

Book 28's Collection Development Policy thinks of intellectual freedom as secondary to these broader political goals, which it aims to achieve by "listening to marginalized groups and providing material with diverse, positive representations". The Collection Development Policy outlines some "Evaluative Criteria" for the acquisition of texts that assigns points to a text under consideration according to the answers to a series of questions. A text with a higher score is more likely to be acquired by a library applying these criteria. A book containing "material derogatory or likely to be offensive or upsetting to a marginalised group" loses points, while texts about such groups that "have a happy ending or otherwise positive themes" gain them. Points can also be gained by texts that "centre the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people who also experience racism" or "homelessness" or "disabled and/or chronically ill LGBTQ+ people". Only one of the 20 evaluative criteria refers to literary merit as a reason to stock a book.

The Evaluative Criteria paint a vivid picture of the limited range of perspectives that Book 28 regard as politically acceptable on the topic of gender and sexual identity. As an organisation that does not appear to be in receipt of public funds, Book 28 is not under the same obligation to uphold impartiality in the delivery of a public service as local authority libraries. But CILIP, which is promoting Book 28 as best practice guidance to local authority libraries like the ones in our sample, is. Those local authority libraries are being advised to uphold a socially activist interpretation of EDI at the expense of intellectual freedom, without regard to the need for publicly funded services to be politically impartial. The incident in Calderdale exemplifies the tension between these two principles. CILIP's enthusiastic endorsement of Book 28 appears symptomatic of the broader

erosion of support for intellectual freedom and opposition to censorship across the libraries sector.

The FoI responses in the FSU's sample provide evidence of the adoption by some of the libraries in our sample of the 'soft censorship' tactics promoted by CILIP via Book 28:

- **Clapham Library, Lambeth Council** – We will not do promotional displays of material that could encourage people to target and discriminate those in our community who have protected characteristics.
- **Bournemouth Library, Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council** – BCP Libraries aim to be sensitive to all our customers. Texts judged to be likely to cause offence may be held on our shelves but wouldn't be used in displays or displayed front facing.

## Conclusion

In her book [How Woke Won](#), Joanna Williams argues that many of our public institutions have lost sight of their original purpose and instead adopted 'progressive' EDI goals that often conflict with their founding principles. Our investigation suggests that local authority libraries are at risk of falling into this trap. The public libraries professional association is promoting guidance on EDI issues at odds with what used to be a key principle of the library profession: intellectual freedom and public access to the widest range of information possible within the law.

This shift is exemplified by events in Calderdale. A single internal complaint that GC books were subjectively offensive to transgender people justified the removal from library shelves of entirely lawful views on a subject of great public interest. The principle of intellectual freedom within the law was obliged to give way to a particular interpretation of EDI. The FSU's investigation shows that CILIP's forthcoming Intellectual Freedom policy looks set to accelerate this slide towards censorship, moving away from the strong defence of freedom of expression in its 2005 'Statement on Intellectual Freedom, Access to Information and Censorship'.

Public sector libraries are far from the only institutions to discover that the embrace of social activism can be at odds with their historic purpose. The group [Critical Therapy Antidote](#) have warned that the promotion of socially activist EDI by professional associations like the [British Psychological Society](#) has the potential to infringe on clinical ethics in the therapy sector. The FSU is assisting law professor [Almut Gadow](#) to bring an unfair dismissal claim against the Open University, who fired her from her teaching role for questioning the compatibility of gender identity ideology with the ethics of the law profession. FSU member and former civil servant [Anna Thomas](#) was awarded £100,000 after she was unfairly dismissed by the Department for Work and Pensions for highlighting the tensions between civil service impartiality and the promotion of politically partisan EDI messages.

Reassuringly, in Calderdale it was frontline librarians themselves who protested the censorship of GC texts as a violation of their professional

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ethics. The responses of the libraries in the FSU's sample to FoI requests about the stocking of certain books also contain some encouraging statements in support of viewpoint diversity and intellectual freedom:

- **Sandbach Library, Cheshire West and Chester Councils** – In the interest of intellectual freedom, material should not be rejected solely because it is considered controversial. A good library should encompass controversial issues and different perspectives in the interests of democracy and discovery.
- **Camberwell Library, Southwark Council** – It is one of our stock objectives to provide information on a wide range of subjects, and from a variety of perspectives. In doing this the service will hold items which some individuals find challenging and controversial. Public libraries are increasingly finding that certain authors or titles are being challenged by individuals or groups holding specific political, religious or moral views. However, it is an important collection development principle that access to publications and ideas should not be restricted on any grounds except the law... We will provide a range of stock that covers different opinions and perspectives. We do not endorse or promote any one ideology, but seek to provide the materials that will allow our users to make their own decisions.
- **Bristol Central Library Collections Development Policy, Bristol City Council** – It is acknowledged that on occasion individuals may find items in LibrariesWest libraries offensive. However, we do not label items to warn customers of potentially sensitive content and would only restrict access to material to protect it from damage or theft, not as a form of censorship. In the interests of intellectual freedom material will not be rejected solely because it is considered controversial... Decisions will be made on the assumption that the adult reader can make their own critical and reasoned evaluation of views expressed in the content of the item.

These statements and the actions of library staff in Calderdale suggest that there is still an appetite among some front line staff in the libraries sector to uphold viewpoint diversity and intellectual freedom and to trust the public to make up their own minds on contested issues. It would be instructive to build on the findings of this report by reviewing the policies of local authority libraries in 12 months' time, following the implementation of CILIP's forthcoming Intellectual Freedom policy. Repeating the snapshot survey using texts on other contested contemporary issues would also be illuminating. Do local authority libraries stock a balanced range of views

on climate change, race, Covid-19 and immigration? Or do stock levels suggest a bias in favour of one point of view over another, as our findings show in relation to TR and GC books?

