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Legal deposit libraries' contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Introduction. All types of libraries have a key role to play within the sustainability agenda. This paper mapped the main activities of legal deposit libraries in the UK to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to reveal how these libraries contribute to the sustainability agenda.

Method. A list of activities of legal deposit libraries was defined from a review of the literature. A mapping exercise was carried out to align these activities with corresponding SDG targets using the global indicator framework.

Analysis. Activities with direct and indirect contributions were identified and simple quantitative analysis reported on the extent to which legal deposit libraries help meet the goals and targets.

Results. The data shows that legal deposit libraries contribute directly to 12 of the goals, through 18 targets. They contribute indirectly to all 17 goals, through 71 targets. Overall LDLs relate to 89 specific targets, supporting progress in 53% of the targets and 100% of the goals.

Conclusion. Legal deposit libraries contribute significantly to the SDGs, mostly through providing access to data, information, and resources, through supporting research, and preserving culture and knowledge.

Introduction

Sustainability is one of the most urgent global challenges we currently face. It is well understood that libraries can play a key role in the sustainability agenda (Bradley, 2016). As information and data are essential for sustainable development, libraries are in an optimal position to enable progress. Until now, research has focused on public, school, and academic libraries, with the contribution of the lesser-known legal deposit libraries yet to be examined.

Legal deposit libraries (LDLs) collect, preserve, and provide access to a nation's published output. In the UK, The Legal Deposit Libraries Act allows these institutions to collect and preserve every book, magazine, newspaper, journal article, printed music, government report, map, dataset, and webpage, and make them available to all. This supports research, learning, business, and government, and preserves a record of culture and knowledge for future generations. The legislation (Legal Deposit Libraries Act 2003, 2003) allows each LDL to claim a copy of any work published in the UK. In 2013, a new Act updated the regulations to include non-print materials (The Legal Deposit Libraries (Non-Print Works) Regulations 2013, 2013). This hugely expanded the scope of legal deposit as it now collects a vast amount of digital content as well as print items. The Agency for the Legal Deposit Libraries (ALDL) collects and distributes the print items on behalf of the six LDLs in the UK legal deposit system: the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, the National Library of Wales, the Bodleian Libraries at University of Oxford, Cambridge University Libraries, and The Library of Trinity College Dublin. Digital content is collected by the British Library and shared with the network of LDLs. Print and digital items are available for the public to consult in reading rooms in the libraries, with rules restricting the use of tools on the digital content and access limited to one user at a time. Despite these restrictions, legal deposit collections remain an extensive resource for research, information, and learning, for current and future users.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, or the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, are a set of ambitious aims designed to improve the lives of people and the planet, through '*strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests*' (United Nations, 2025b). Achieving the goals requires collaboration and global partnership between governments, institutions, communities, and individuals. There are 17 goals, made up of 169 targets and 234 unique indicators (13 repeat to give a total of 251 indicators), which are listed in the Global Indicator Framework (United Nations, 2025a).

As '*information and data form the foundations of all activities related to sustainable development*' (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2024, p. 3) libraries are in a prime position to help society successfully meet the targets and indicators, through their collections and services, programmes, and outreach. Exactly how LDLs may contribute is the focus of this paper. It aimed to examine how legal deposit specifically contributes to sustainable development by mapping LDL activities to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, targets and indicators. It describes the main activities of LDLs in the UK and identifies how these correspond to each of the goals and targets.

The research questions asked:

RQ1. What are the key activities of LDLs in the UK?

RQ2. How do the key activities of LDLs contribute to the SDG targets and indicators?

Through understanding how legal deposit activities contribute to the SDGs, we can celebrate and promote the work of UK LDLs as examples for other country's legal deposit systems. The findings of this paper revealed for the first time how the specific activities of LDLs support the achievement of the SDGs, highlighting the wider impact of legal deposit.

Research literature

In 2015, librarians and library organisations were involved in the creation of the goals, specifically advocating for the inclusion of 16.10: protect and promote public access to information (Connaway et al., 2023). Many librarians are now *'involved in furthering them through providing access to information'* and the literature provide examples of how the library sector can contribute to targets 4.5 (gender equality in education), 9.5 (research and technology in industry), 11.7 (safe and accessible public spaces) (Cyr & Connaway, 2020).

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) advocates for and promotes research in libraries and sustainable development, providing resources for librarians. Its storytelling manual states: *'libraries around the world offer a wide range of products and services that promote the achievement of each and every one of the SDGs'* (IFLA, 2018). A survey in 2020 by OCLC revealed *'in some cases, libraries contribute to the SDGs through activities based on explicit strategic choices. More commonly, however, it is as a result of their overall mission, with activities that they were conducting long before the SDGs were adopted'* (IFLA, 2018). The top five goals that libraries may influence were identified as 4 (quality education), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 10 (reduced inequalities), 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and 17 (partnerships for the goals) (Connaway et al., 2023).

Researchers have identified how the different types of libraries contribute to the SDGs. One paper suggests these contributions fall under three aspects: collections and access; education for sustainable development; and literacy, advocacy and awareness programmes (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2024b). In the public library sector, it has been suggested that library assessment frameworks should align with the SDGs, using an impact evaluation system that involves a thorough process of gathering evidence (Pinto & Ochôa, 2019).

Method

Simple content analysis of strategy documents from the LDLs was used to establish key activities of LDLs (see table 1). The documents were read, manually checked, and key phrases highlighted: institutional aims, objectives and core values, responsibilities, and operational priorities. This list was then refined to ensure only activities relevant to legal deposit were included. Three of the LDLs are national libraries and the other three are academic or research libraries (also known as national research libraries). It can be challenging to separate the work of national and research libraries with that of legal deposit. Some LDL institutions may not distinguish between legal deposit and national or research library functions in their operations. Activities explicitly referring to national or research library functions were removed from the list.

Legal deposit library	Strategy document	Key legal deposit libraries activities
British Library	Knowledge Matters (British Library, 2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘make our intellectual heritage accessible to everyone, for research, inspiration and enjoyment’ • Accessible collections • Unique datasets • Collect, catalogue and preserve • Free access with support • ‘trustworthy, engaging and accessible source of information for our communities’ • ‘for today’s users and far into the future’
National Library of Scotland	Reaching People (National Library of Scotland, 2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive collections • ‘guardian of published and recorded memory of Scotland’ • Collect, preserve and make available diverse materials • Safeguarding collections • Encourage and support research • Support knowledge economy
National Library of Wales	A Library for Wales and the World (National Library of Wales, 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect, preserve, give access • Preservation and management of information • Celebrate and promote culture • Enabling research and lifelong learning
The Library of Trinity College Dublin	Continuity and Development of the Library Strategy (The Library of Trinity College Dublin, 2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserve cultural heritage collections • Collecting resources from underrepresented areas • Research, curation, conservation • Digital infrastructure
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford	Sharing knowledge, Inspiring Scholarship (Bodleian Libraries, 2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible collections • ‘preserve truth and integrity’ • Stewardship • Support readers to become researchers • At the forefront of research
Cambridge University Libraries	A Vision for the Future of Cambridge University Libraries (Cambridge University Library, 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New research and learning • Open and accessible to all • Discoverable world-class information resources • Sharing collections and knowledge openly with the world • Management and preservation of collections (print and non-print)

Table 1. List of key activities from UK legal deposit libraries

This list of activities was then mapped to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, targets, and indicators, using the Global Indicator Framework (United Nations, 2025a). A methodical approach was taken by the researcher, with the wording of each target examined against the LDL activities, considering if they help meet said target. The focus was on the targets, but the indicators added some further context by providing more details on how the target can be met.

Targets which refer to ‘research’, ‘information’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘scientific capacity’ were generally identified as being impacted by LDL activities, as they matched up with activities such as enabling research and making discoverable world-class information resources from the list of LDL activities in Table 1. Targets which concern culture (e.g. 8.9 and 12.b) were also deemed relevant as preserving cultural heritage collections is a core task of LDLs.

To provide an example of this mapping exercise, let's consider target 14.5 (by 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific data). It benefits from scientists and researchers having access to relevant data, particularly historical and current map data. Providing access to data is a key legal deposit activity, so LDLs contribute to and positively impact this SDG target.

Analysis

After establishing if the LDL activities have any impact on each target, it was decided whether each activity has a direct or indirect contribution. Targets directly impacted by LDL activities are those explicitly related to research, accessing information, or preserving culture and knowledge. These are the core aspects of legal deposit and can drive significant progress in achieving the targets. Indirectly impacted targets still benefit from the LDL activities, but to a lesser extent. They receive a more minor contribution or require another step to be considered relevant to the goals. These are targets where LDL activities do not lead to significant progress on their own. This distinction is based on Gooding et al.'s discussion of impact evaluation in cultural heritage, which notes the difference between 'intrinsic value (the value something has in and of itself) and instrumental value (the value something has because it helps to achieve or get something)' (Gooding et al., 2019).

To illustrate this, consider SDG8: decent work and economic growth. Target 8.9 aims to 'devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products' (United Nations, 2025a). The systematic collection and preservation of a nation's published output promotes cultural knowledge, so we can say that LDL activities directly contribute to progress in this target. On the other hand, target 8.6 aims to 'substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training'. LDLs themselves do not have the ability to personally employ a large proportion of youth, however they do provide young people with access to information and resources. These can indirectly help by allowing people to educate themselves and find material needed to advance their career opportunities.

Simple calculations were then carried out to establish the extent to which LDLs help meet the goals and targets. It is worth noting that several of the indicators are repeated under two or three targets, such as 4.7.1, 12.8.1 and 13.3.1. The targets associated with these indicators are similar and may have some overlap in their aims. Despite these similarities, the targets were mapped and counted separately, as they are viewed within various contexts under different goals.

Table 2 shows the goals and targets directly influenced by legal deposit, and the specific activities that correspond to each identified target. An expanded version of this table can be found in the appendix.

SDG	SDG target	Contributing legal deposit library activity
Zero hunger	2.a	Supporting researchers
Good health and well-being	3.b	Access to data; supporting researchers
Quality education	4.4	Access to information and resources
	4.7	Access to data; access to information and resources
Affordable and clean energy	7.a	Access to data; supporting researchers
Decent work and economic growth	8.3	Access to information and resources
	8.9	Cultural heritage management; preservation of knowledge
Industry, innovation and infrastructure	9.5	Access to data; supporting researchers
	9.b	Access to data; supporting researchers
	9.c	Access to data; access to information and resources
Sustainable	11.4	Collect, preserve, give access; cultural heritage

cities and communities		management; preservation of knowledge
Responsible consumption and production	12.5	Sharing of and reuse of materials
	12.6	Sustainability reporting; access to data and resources
	12.8	Access to data; access to information and resources
Climate action	13.3	Access to data; access to information and resources
Life below water	14.a	Access to data; supporting researchers
Peace, justice and strong institutions	16.10	Access to information and resources; free access for all
Partnerships for the goals	17.16	Access to data; access to information; collaborations with partners and stakeholders

Table 2. Targets directly influenced by legal deposit activities

Table 3 shows the targets that are indirectly influenced by LDLs, and the corresponding activities that support each target. Full explanations of each of the targets can be found on the Global Indicator Framework (United Nations, 2025a).

SDG targets	Contributing legal deposit library activity
1.2, 1.4, 1.5, 1.a, 1.b, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.c, 3.7, 3.8, 4.5, 4.c, 5.5, 5.6, 5.a, 6.1, 6.4, 6.5, 6.b, 7.3, 7.b, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6, 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 10.2, 10.4, 11.2, 11.3, 11.5, 11.a, 11.b, 12.1, 12.2, 12.7, 12.a, 13.1, 13.2, 13.b, 14.2, 14.3, 14.4, 14.5, 14.b, 15.1, 15.2, 15.3, 15.4, 15.6, 15.a, 15.b, 16.3, 16.6, 16.7, 17.3, 17.6, 17.7, 17.8, 17.14, 17.15, 17.19	Access to information; access to data; access to resources
1.5, 2.4, 6.1, 7.b, 9.4, 11.5, 11.a, 11.b, 12.a, 12.b, 13.1, 14.2, 14.3, 14.4, 14.5, 15.1, 15.2, 15.3, 15.4, 17.6, 17.7, 17.8	Supporting researchers
2.3, 5. a	Support for businesses
2.5	Preservation of culture and knowledge
4.5, 4.a, 5.c, 11.7	Free access to all
1.5, 1.b, 10.4, 11.b, 12.1, 13.1, 13.2, 13.b, 15.6, 15.9, 16.6	Collecting and preserving government documents

Table 3. Targets indirectly influenced by legal deposit activities

Results

The data showed that LDLs contribute directly to 12 of the 17 goals (71%) by significantly contributing to 18 of the targets (11% of the 169 in total). This is achieved by supporting researchers; providing access to data and information; preserving knowledge; free access for all; and the sharing and reuse of materials. Table 2 shows the directly impacted goals. Perhaps the most obvious example of how LDLs directly contribute to the SDGs is through 11.4: strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage (United Nations, 2025a). The entire concept of legal deposit is based on cultural heritage management: systematically collecting, describing, preserving, and making discoverable and accessible the published output of a nation, as illustrated by one of the British Library's purposes '*custodianship: we build, curate, and preserve the UK's national collection of published written and digital content*' (British Library, 2023, p. 7).

LDLs have an indirect impact on a further 71 targets, 42% of the total targets. These impacted targets are dispersed among the goals, meaning LDLs contribute to all 17. The libraries do this by

providing access to information, data and resources; supporting researchers; support for businesses; preservation of culture and knowledge; free access for all; and collecting and preserving government documents. As an example of an indirect contribution, access to historical and contemporary maps and research data allows scientists to study land use change over time, aiding agricultural productivity (targets 2.3 and 2.4).

Overall, LDL activities relate to 89 specific targets, supporting progress in 53% of the targets and 100% of the goals. This is not an inconsequential contribution, and shows that libraries, information services, and cultural institutions certainly have a role to play in progressing sustainable development. The primary way LDLs contribute is through providing access to information, data, and resources. LDLs are unique libraries as they collect everything that is published and are non-judgemental on what is included in their collections. The preservation of knowledge is also a significant aspect, especially with small and indigenous publications who may not have the resources to preserve content for posterity, and whose materials may otherwise be lost. This provides a valuable resource for researchers, as many of the SDG targets relate to research and innovation (3.b, 9.5, and 14.a). Several of the targets are based on the public's ability to access information (4.7, 9.c, and 12.8), which LDLs provide by being open to all. Through understanding the specific ways in which legal deposit activities contribute to the SDGs, we can celebrate and promote the work of UK LDLs as examples for legal deposit systems in other countries.

The value in legal deposit for sustainable development lies in the breadth and comprehensiveness of the collections, the high quality of material available to researchers, and the fact they are open and accessible to all, not only academics and scholars. The findings of this paper revealed for the first time how the specific activities of LDLs support the achievement of the SDGs. This knowledge can now be combined with existing research on other types of libraries to provide an overview of how the library sector as a whole impacts the sustainability agenda.

Conclusion

This project was limited to a desk study, so future studies may conduct qualitative research and gather evidence directly from LDLs to report on any additional ways they contribute to the goals. As this paper focused on LDLs in the UK, it may also be beneficial to investigate how LDLs in other countries, particularly developing countries, contribute to the SDGs. The differences in contributions between the two types of LDLs (national libraries and national research/academic libraries) would also be a key area to explore.

LDLs contribute significantly to the SDGs, mainly by supporting research, providing access to data, information and resources, and preserving culture and knowledge. Directly supporting 70% of the goals and indirectly supporting them all, the activities of legal deposit, including their vast collections of knowledge and data, enable progress in a variety of areas of sustainable development.

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Appendix

	SDG target	Contributing legal deposit activity
2.a	Increase investment, including through enhanced international cooperation, in rural infrastructure, agricultural research and extension services, technology development and plant and livestock gene banks in order to enhance agricultural productive capacity in developing countries, in particular least developed countries	Supporting researchers
3.b	Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines, in accordance with the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, which affirms the right of developing countries to use to the full the provisions in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights regarding flexibilities to protect public health, and, in particular, provide access to medicines for all	Access to data; supporting researchers
4.4	By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship	Access to information and resources
4.7	By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development	Access to data; access to information and resources
7.a	By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology	Access to data; supporting researchers
8.3	Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services	Access to information and resources
8.9	By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products	Cultural heritage management; preservation of knowledge
9.5	Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending	Access to data; supporting researchers
9.b	Support domestic technology development, research and innovation in developing countries, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for, inter alia, industrial diversification and value addition to commodities	Access to data; supporting researchers

9.c	Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020	Access to data; access to information and resources
11.4	Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage	Collect, preserve, give access; cultural heritage management; preservation of knowledge
12.5	By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse	Sharing of and reuse of materials
12.6	Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle	Sustainability reporting; access to data and resources
12.8	By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature	Access to data; access to information and resources
13.3	Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning	Access to data; access to information and resources
14.a	Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity, and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries	Access to data; supporting researchers
16.10	Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements	Access to information and resources; free access for all
17.16	Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries	Access to data; access to information and resources; collaborations with partners and stakeholders

Table 4. Details of targets directly influenced by legal deposit activities.

Full explanation of each of the indirectly impacted targets can be found in the Global Indicator Framework: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/indicators-list/>