As Britain prepares to go to the polls, there's one topic which has hardly been mentioned this election campaign. To be sure, there have been other pressing issues on the agenda, like our relation to Europe and the state of the NHS. But this is something I feel very strongly about - the state of our libraries.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 stated that councils have a legal duty to provide a "comprehensive and efficient library service". This statement is unhelpfully vague, it must be said - yet few people would agree that the current state of library provision in the UK is "comprehensive and efficient".

Since 2010, when the Conservatives first came to power, UK library numbers have fallen by more than 17%, from 4,482 to 3,718. First initiated under the guise of austerity, these closures have continued during the fourteen years of Tory rule: since the Covid pandemic at least fifty further libraries have shut their doors.

And they are just the libraries that have been closed down: countless more have had their opening hours slashed, often to only a few hours a week, or else have been handed over to volunteers and community groups who, while well-meaning, cannot offer the professional service the public deserves.

I suppose libraries are an easy target: when the other options are cutting social services, schools and rubbish collection, councils prefer to find savings in cultural and leisure services. Spending on libraries has fallen by almost half (47.9%) since 2010. Libraries NI, the group that runs all 96 public libraries in Northern Ireland, announced that owing to significant budgetary constraints, they wouldn't be able to afford a single new book in 2023-24.

This situation is even more frustrating as it's an undeniable false economy. Researchers at the University of East Anglia found that English libraries generate at least £3.4 billion in value a year through services supporting children's literacy, digital inclusion and health. The services provided by a typical branch are worth £1 million a year.

Much of the value of libraries, it must be said, is impossible to measure in financial terms - which is why they are such an easy target. The library is one of the few remaining public spaces in which one can spend time without the pressure to buy something, and the most vulnerable in society can speak to a friendly face. It is a quiet place for teenagers with cramped homes and noisy families to revise in peace. A happy place for toddlers to enjoy storytime and their parents to chat to others in the same boat. A useful place for jobseekers to search and apply for work when they don't have a computer or the Internet at home. Somewhere where the homeless can keep warm and shelter from the rain.

Libraries are gateways to knowledge: in books and online. Countless public figures, including the journalist and author Caitlin Moran, and poet and former Children's Laureate Joseph Coelho, have spoken about how libraries opened up new worlds to them and shaped their passion for literature. Will the next generation of writers be drawn only from those lucky enough to grow up with family wealth and lots of books at home?

It doesn't have to be this way. Prioritise libraries. Restore their funding, open new buildings, employ professional librarians. When libraries thrive, we can create a better and more equal society.