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"More than one way to burn a book?": Culture wars, censorship, and neutrality in Scottish public libraries

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in partnership with CILIPS



Background



- Funded under RSE's Collaboration Grant Scheme
- Phase one was an FOI data gathering exercise requesting the number of challenged books and events in Scottish public libraries between 2019 and 2024 (conducted summer 2025)
- Phase two was a sector-wide survey of staff experiences of censorship conducted in February-March 2026
- Phase three gathered deeper anonymous qualitative data from in-person workshop participants to complete the dataset (May 2026)



Access and censorship



- Freedom of access to information and freedom of expression are very closely aligned rights.
- Indeed, the International Federation of Library Associations special interest group, FAIFE, represents both rights, stating that the “Advisory Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) is at the heart of IFLA’s efforts to promote intellectual freedom and achieve the vital mission of supporting libraries in their role as gateways to knowledge and ideas.”



CILIP's Ethical Framework



- **A4. Intellectual freedom, including freedom from censorship**
- **Intellectual Freedom**
 - Intellectual freedom is the right to access and share information, to intellectual activity and creativity, to expression and debate
- **Censorship**
 - Censorship is the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons find objectionable or dangerous on political, religious or moral grounds.



Selection and censorship



- Censorship is clearly a word that is perceived pejoratively in many peoples' minds, as it relates to restricting access to something someone else does not want others to see. The American Library Association define censorship as:
 - Limiting or removing access to words, images, or ideas. The decision to restrict or deny access is made by a governing authority. This could be a person, group, or organization/business.
- Malley suggested that “Censorship is a recurring problem in libraries, and there is no issue in librarianship which is more likely to bring libraries on to the pages of the Press, frequently in a damaging and trivial representation of the library profession” (Malley, 1990, p.1).



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But...

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There are guidelines and precedents that
can be drawn upon, but it's not that simple



Mark Manson



@Markmanson

Purpose doesn't eliminate your anxiety.

It just gives your anxiety nothing to argue with.

4:00 PM · Mar 24, 2026 · **11.9K** Views



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SELF-PROTECTIVE (HUMAN INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR) PERSPECTIVES OF CENSORSHIP

Self-protective (HIB) perspectives of censorship

- Information behaviour is concerned with:

The totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use” (Wilson, 2000, p.49)
- Self-protective information behaviours related to censorship (professional and public), including self-censorship, remain under-studied including in libraries.

[Library self-censorship] ...is the most elusive form of censorship
(Yeon & Dudak, 2025, p.541)

Self-protective (HIB) perspectives of censorship

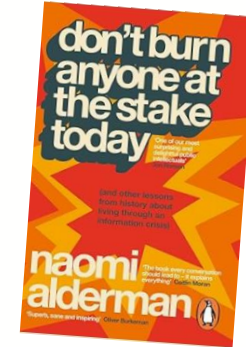
- Chatman's (1996) theoretical framework for describing small information worlds and issues of self-protection draws on insider/outsider theories from the social sciences to explore how insider/outsider identity influences people's information behaviours.
 - in a "world on which [social] norms and mores define what is important and what is not" (1996, p205).
- Chatman argues that "Based on previous research, one can make a prima facie case that people who live in an **arduous** social landscape view outsiders with self-protective eyes" (1996, p.205).
 - Arduous: onerous, taxing, difficult, exhausting...
- Can our information worlds be described as arduous?



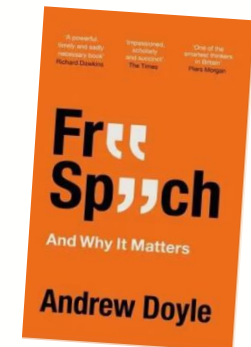
Arduous information worlds



We live in a tidal wave of data. We don't have the social and informational structures in place yet to manage it... My suggestion is that this enormous information wave makes us anxious and angry (Alderman, 2025, p.9).



A combination of state censorship, hostility to press freedom, cancel culture, big tech interference, media complacency, and a substantial proportion of the public that has lost trust in its fellow citizens, has created the conditions within which authoritarian alternatives can germinate (Doyle, 2024, p.96).





Arduous information worlds: three significant factors



- Uncertain times
- Fear of Judgement
- The Erosion of Trust

...a number of interrelated challenges... contribute to the destabilisation of information – fragmentation, individualisation, emotionalisation, and the erosion of the collective basis for trust... (Haider & Sunden. 2022, p.5)



Arduous information worlds: uncertain times



- Shifting/changing beliefs and language
- Alderman (2025, p.9) argues that we are experiencing an information crisis that:

... introduces us to all the things we don't know, all the ways in which we're not experts. We might end up expressing an idea online which we've heard many times in our social circle only to be jumped on by fifty people who know more and tell us our ideas are stupid, old-fashioned and even prejudiced... it can make you feel profoundly unsettled, frightened, out of touch. That might be a good thing. It's also an emotionally destabilizing thing.



Arduous information worlds: fear of judgement



- Fear of judgement a major driver of self-protective information behaviours (e.g., see Chatman 1996; Buchanan & Jardine, 2023; Breslin Davda & Buchanan, 2024).

There is a way of attacking people now... to find the worst or most objectionable thing they have ever said and bring it to attention (Alderman, 2025, p.37).

[Cancel culture] a metaphor for a retributive method of public shaming and boycotting, often for relatively minor mistakes or unfashionable opinions... typically driven by social media (Doyle, 2025, p.25).

Effective responses [to online mob harassment] are hard to come by given the pervasiveness of digital hate speech and the limitations of traditional approaches to the problems it represents for democratic communication (Waisbord, 2020, 1030).



Arduous information worlds: the erosion of trust



- Consistent evidence (2014-2024) has shown declining trust levels in public institutions in the UK and around the world (Gibbs & Mutebi, 2025).

Overall, our data shows there are clear issues with a lack of trust by the public in certain institutions, particularly those in the political and media spheres (YouGov, 2024).

...the level of measurable trust in institutions is shown to be in decline in most of the world, with implications across all domains, from business to banking, healthcare, and rule of law. (Haider & Sunden, 2022, p.9).

Social media algorithms corrode democracy: facts are distorted, public trust is destroyed (Horton, 2026, p.1).

Arduous information worlds: impact on librarians

The personal impact from the cases of censorship is probably the most disheartening. The toll that the book challenges have taken on library directors has been especially hard. For individuals who have been up in a position within a community with polarized views, the role of providing access can be daunting. It is important that the library community of practice takes a long hard look at the stress many practitioners are experiencing (Clark-Hunt, 2024,p.191).





Four Self-Protective Information Behaviours



- In arduous circumstances, our associated information behaviours (Chatman, 1996):
 - Secrecy
 - Deception
 - Short-termism
 - Aversion to Risk
- Both secrecy and deception are self-protecting mechanisms, due to a sense of mistrust.
 - Employed in response to social norms.
 - Normal reactions to difficult situations.



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DATASET 1 · FREEDOM OF INFORMATION RETURNS

**Scottish local authorities reporting at least one challenge,
2019–2024**

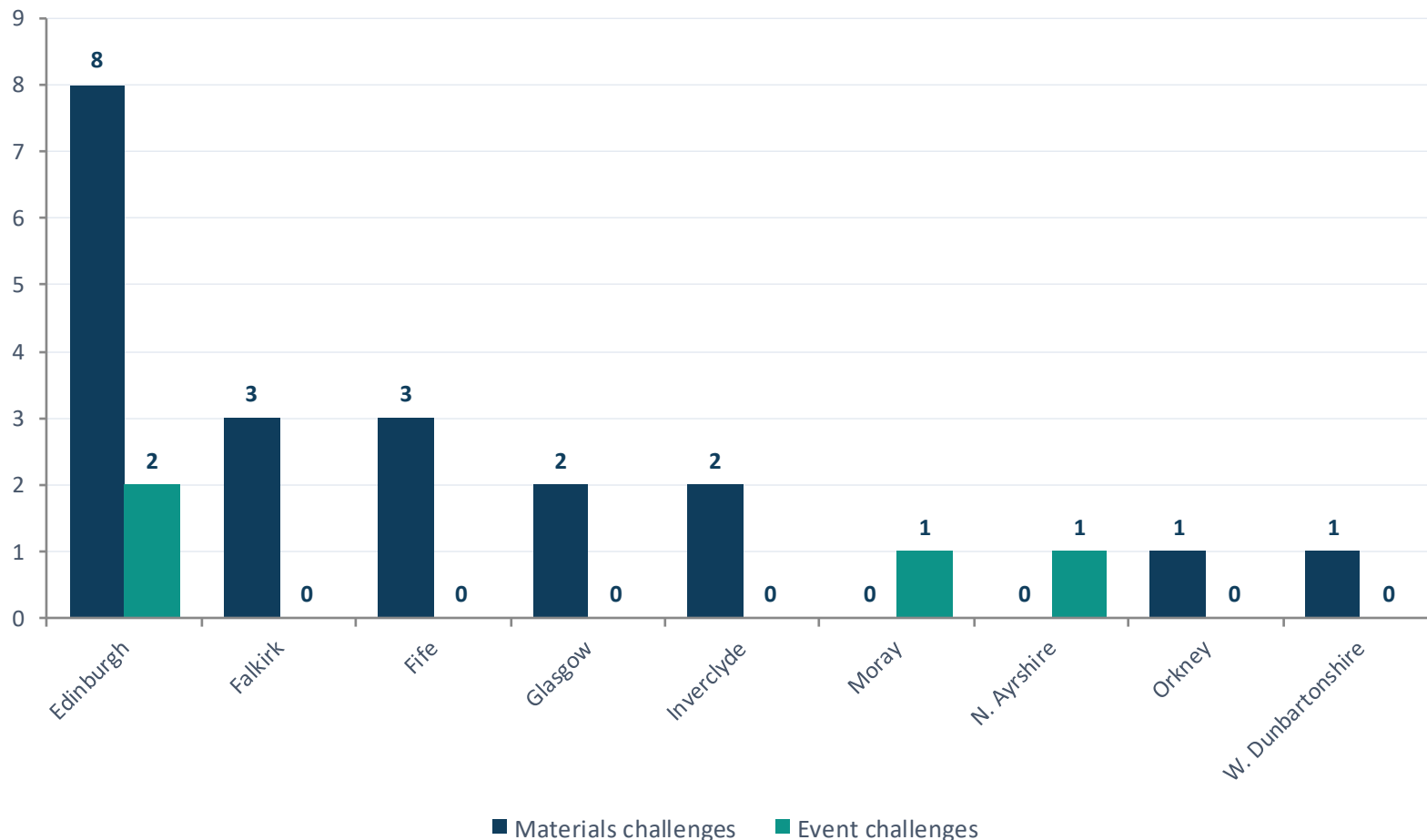
Data collected summer 2025



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Materials & event challenges by authority

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20

Materials challenges
across 9 of 32
authorities

4

Event challenges
across
all 32 authorities

23

Authorities reported
NO
challenges over
2019–2024



Unpacking the larger picture (Edinburgh)



Type	Title / Event	Reason cited for challenge	Outcome	Notes
Material	The trial of Magneto (comic book)	Racist language	Withdrawn / Replaced	Copies withdrawn due to racist language; a newer, edited version was ordered.
Material	Aurton par haram magari kiya? (Khalid Abdurrahman al Ak)	Religious accuracy / Age	Withdrawn	10-year-old book with incorrect info on Islam/women; withdrawn due to age.
Material	Trans (Helen Joyce)	Transgender rights	No action	Retained to ensure a variety and balance of viewpoints.
Material	Beyond Magenta (Susan Kuklin)	Sexually explicit	Relocated	Moved from the Teen section to the Adult section.
Material	Irreversible Damage (Abigail Shrier)	Anti-trans ideas	No action	Retained to ensure a variety and balance of viewpoints.
Material	Grandad's Pride (Harry Woodgate)	Suitability of images	Replaced	Original copies replaced with a later, edited edition with updated illustrations.
Material	Feminism for Women (Julie Bindel)	Anti-trans activism	No action	Part of an International Women's Day display; retained for balance of opinions.
Material	Difficult Women (Helen Lewis)	Anti-trans activism	No action	Part of an International Women's Day display; retained for balance of opinions.
Event	'School and Gender Identity'	Gender identity views	Event held	Community room booking; 200+ complaints received but went ahead with security measures.
Event	Community Assembly (Palestine)	Potential antisemitism	Event held	Community room booking; allowed to proceed with additional safety measures in place.



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DATASET 2 · SURVEY OF LIBRARY STAFF

Survey targeted across sectors in Scotland (expanded beyond only public libraries)

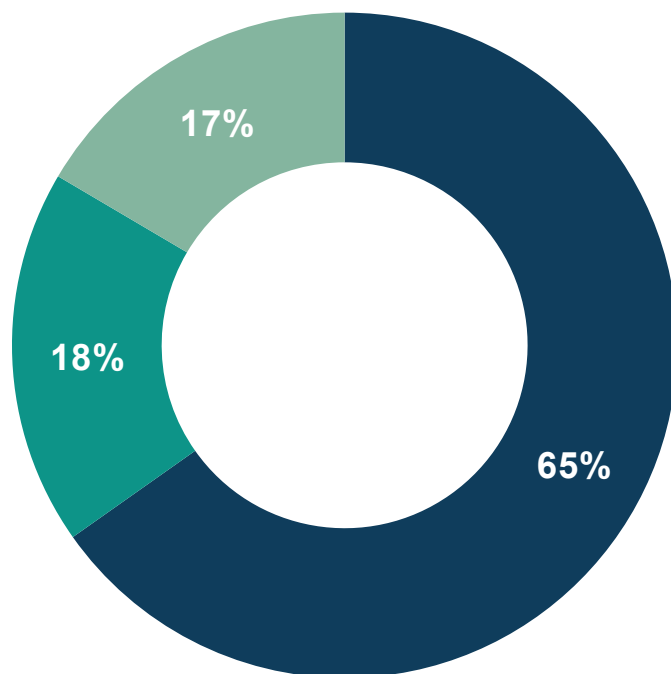
Data collected February through April 2026



Workforce tenure



How long have you been part of the library and information workforce? (n=115)



■ 10+ years ■ 0-5 years ■ 6-10 years

75

65%

have worked 10+ years
in libraries

21

18%

are in their first
5 years

19

17%

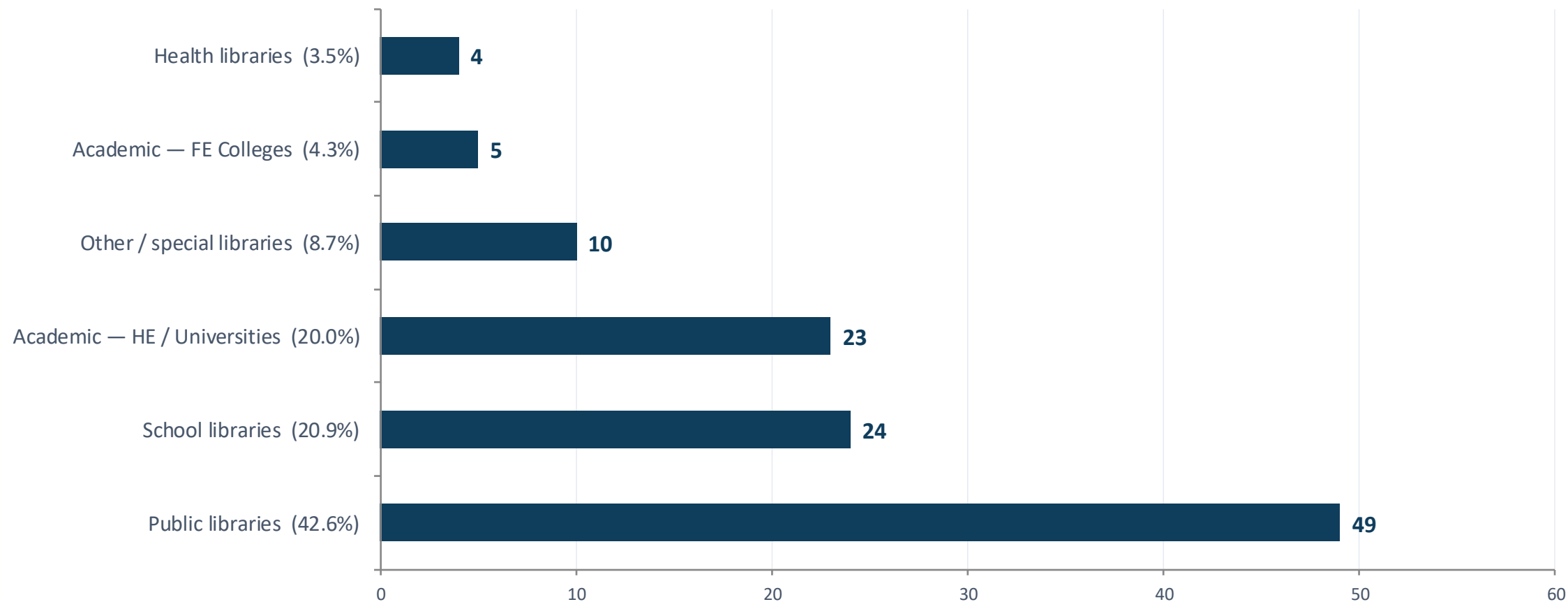
are between 6 and
10 years in



Sector currently working in



Which library and information sector do you currently work in? (n=115)

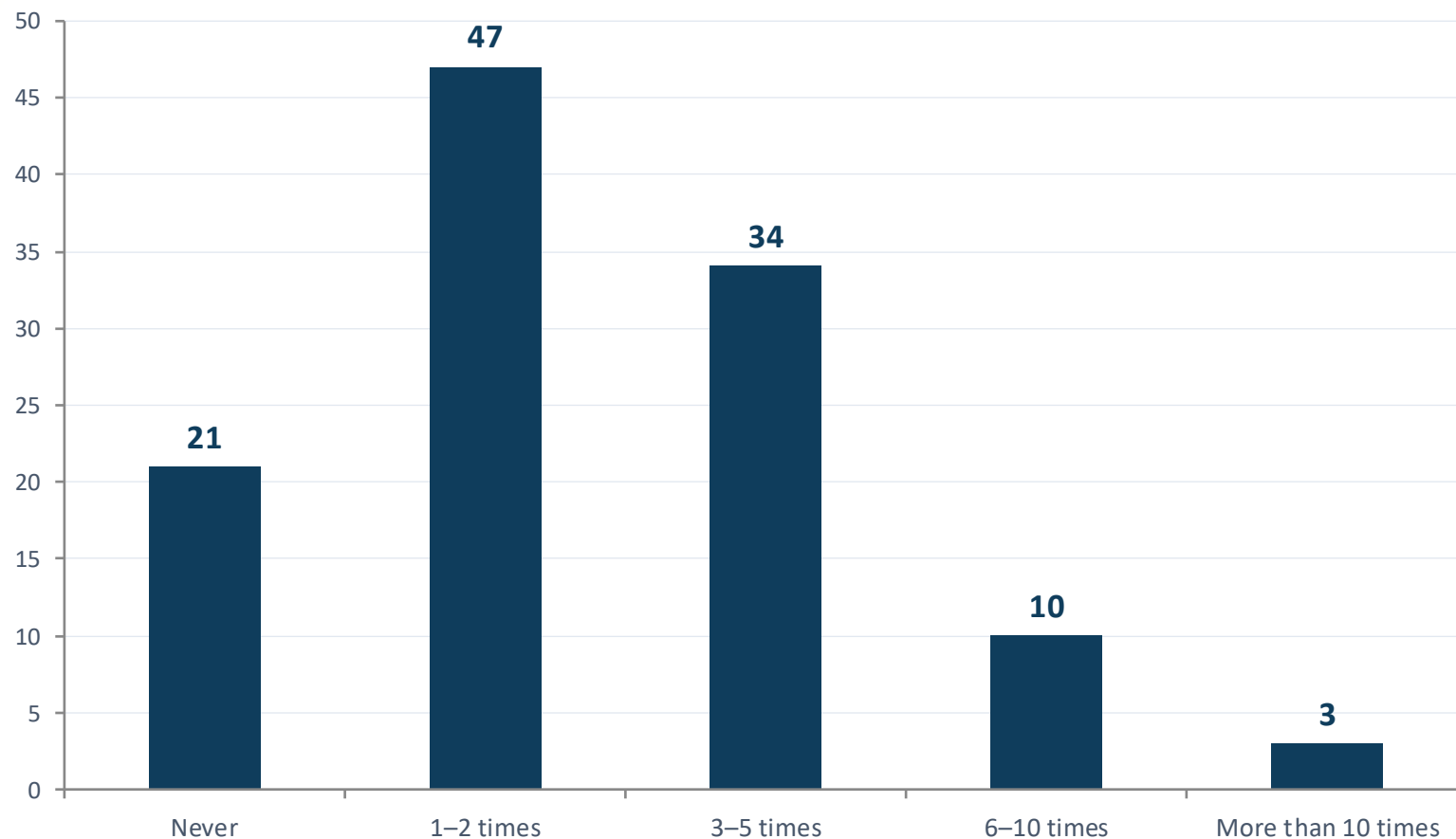




Personal experience of challenges



"How often have you personally experienced attempts to censor or challenge collections in your own service?" (n=115)



82%

of respondents (94 of 115) had personally experienced at least one challenge attempt

11%

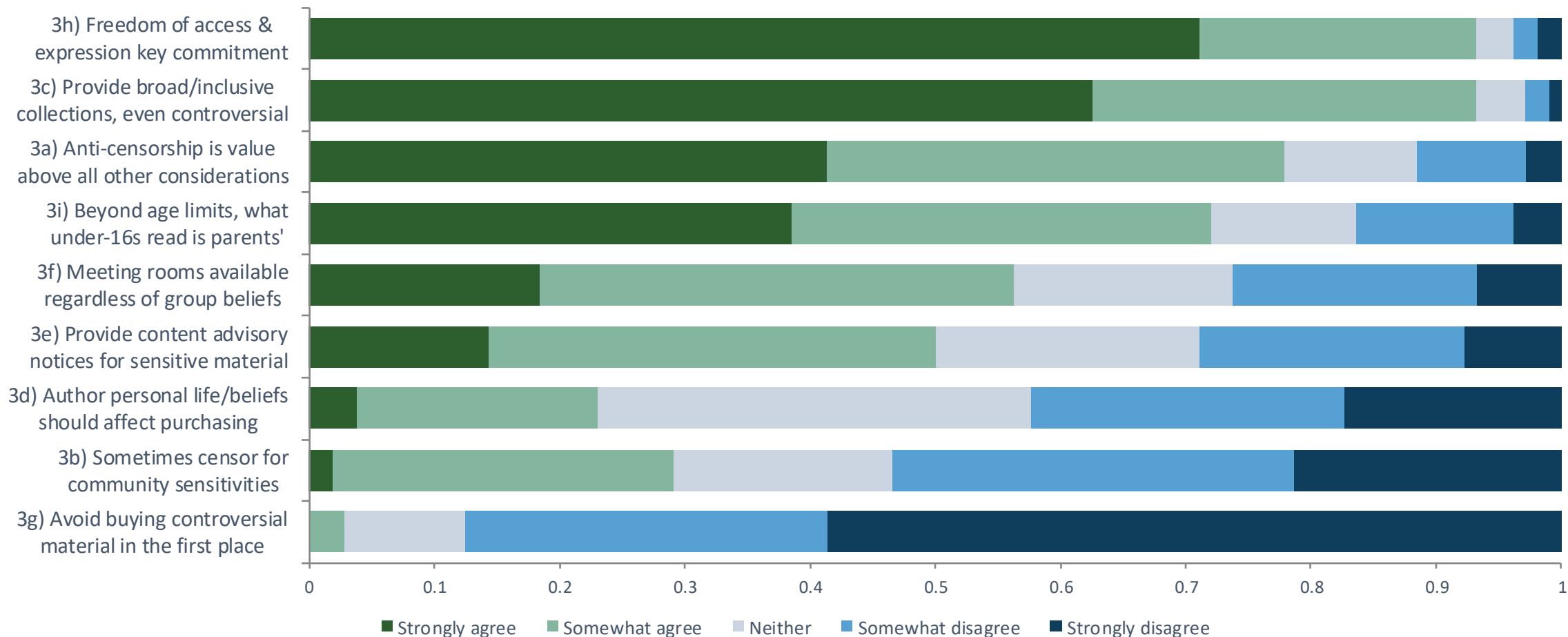
had personally encountered six or more such incidents



All attitudinal statements at a glance



Distribution of responses across the 9 Likert statements (sorted by % strongly agree)

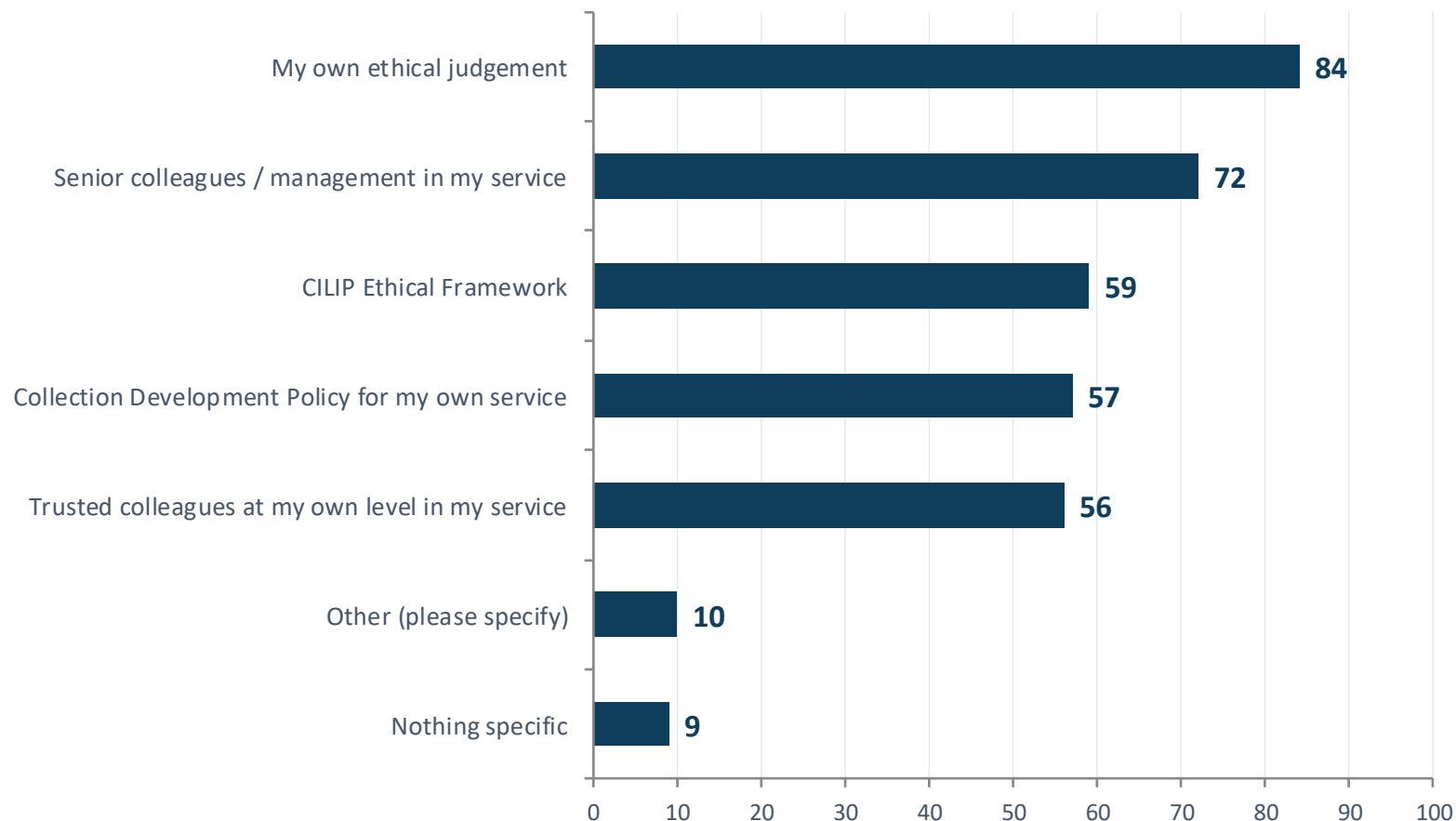




What staff draw on for guidance

Each of 113 respondents could tick all that applied - share of the workforce citing each source

Note • Multi-select question, so percentages do not sum to 100. Base: 113 respondents who answered this question.



THE GAP

Formal anchors vs. personal sources

74%

rely on their own
ethical judgement

~50%

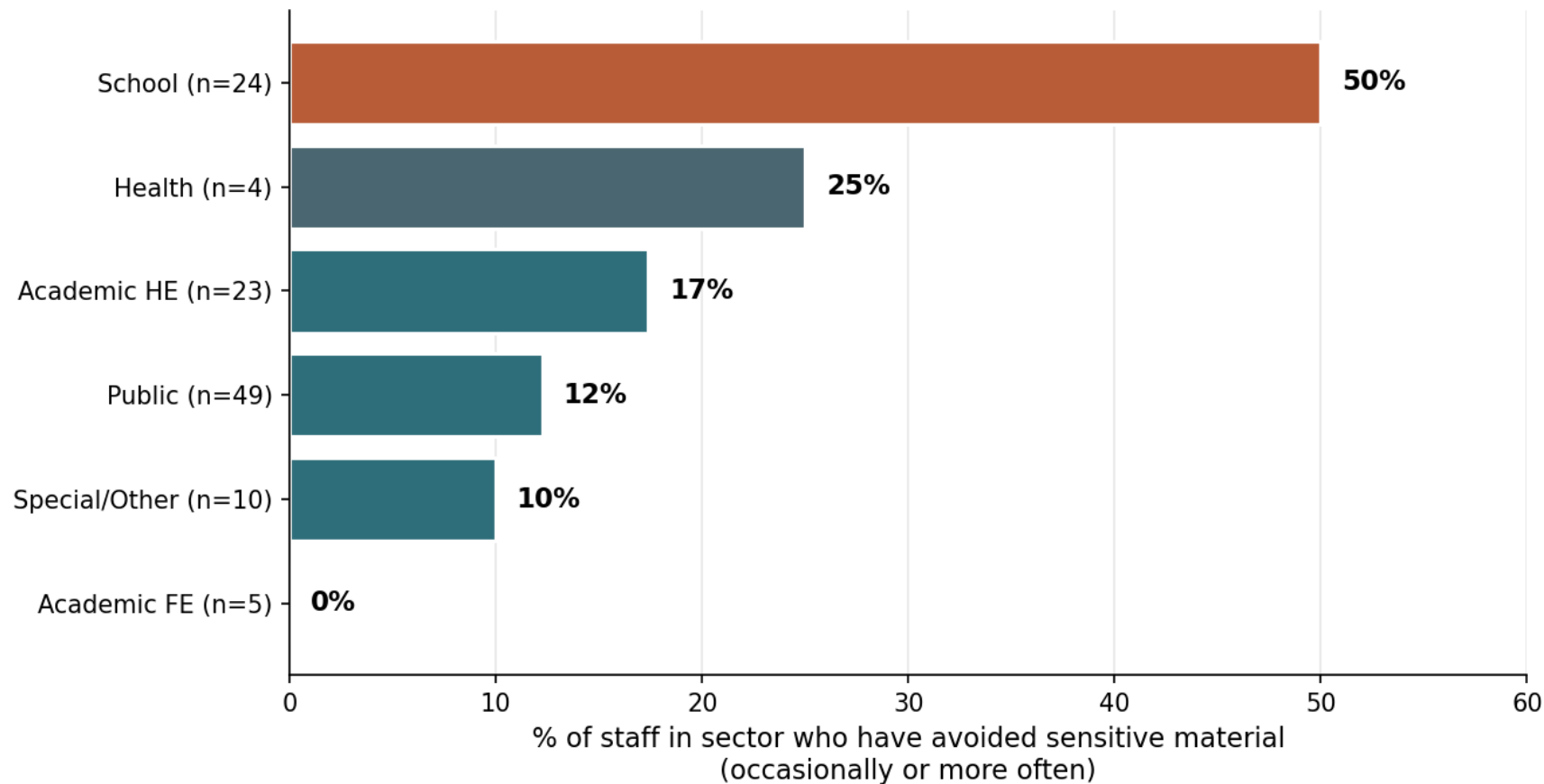
use the CILIP Framework
or their own service's CDP



Self-censorship by sector



Self-censorship by sector: school libraries are an outlier

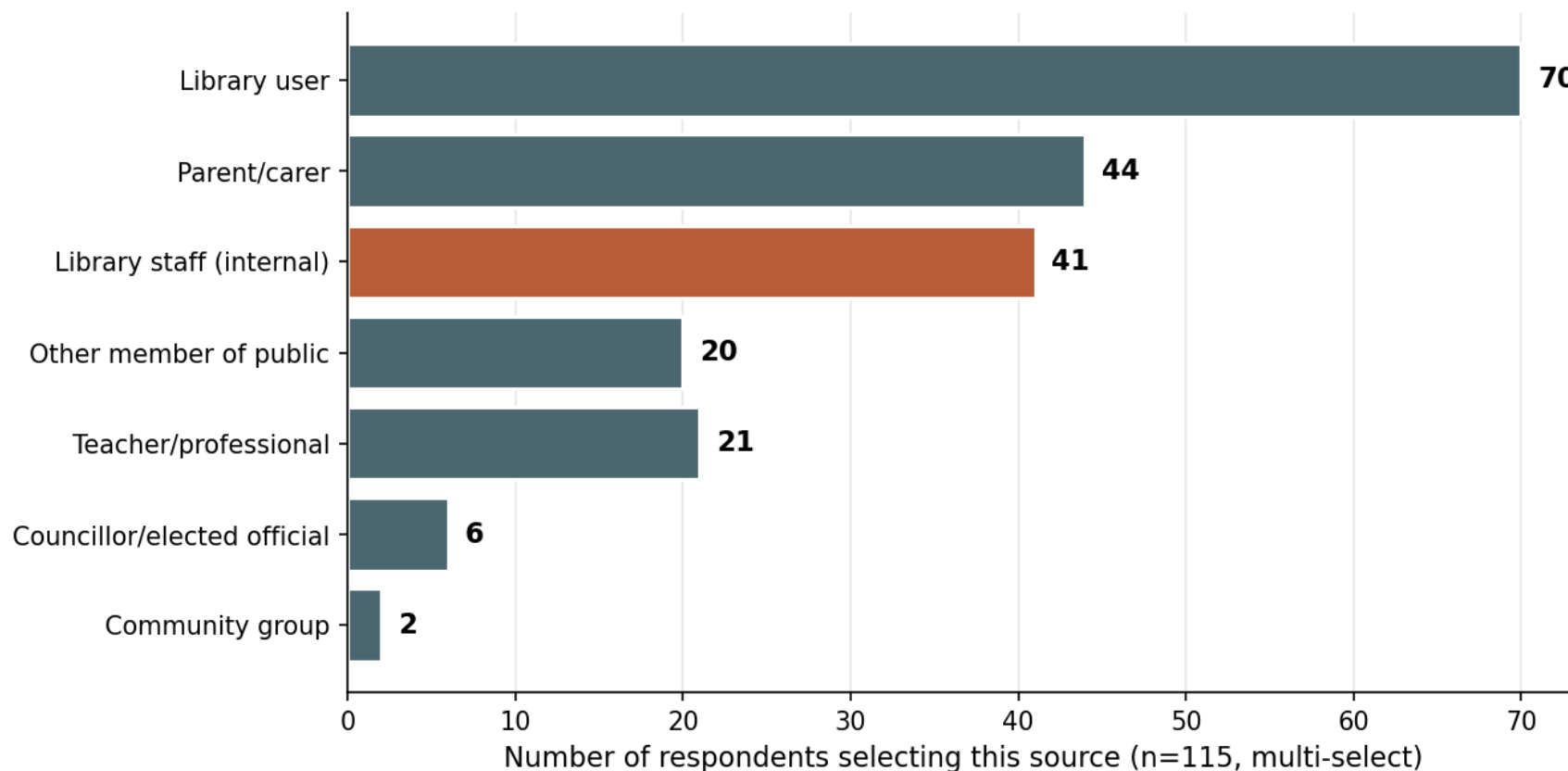




Where pressure actually comes from?



Where censorship pressure comes from:
library staff are the third largest source



**Just under 36%
from survey and
33% from workshop
indicated library
staff as a source of
censorship
pressure**



Biggest challenges facing libraries



67 substantive responses (58% of 115 respondents)

Headline · Respondents describe **external pressure that the sector is poorly equipped to absorb** - organised, polarised, and amplified by social media - while the defences they describe (training, policy, leadership backing, funding) are repeatedly characterised as inadequate.

Polarisation, social media & organised pressure

The dominant theme - roughly half of substantive responses. Fast online pile-ons; well-funded campaigning groups; the NLS 'Wheesht' episode named directly by several.

LGBTQIA+ and gender-identity as flashpoint

Repeatedly singled out as the contemporary contested area. School librarians describe pressure to keep titles off display; academic librarians describe gender-critical pressure on trans-related collections.

Self-censorship driven by reputational fear

Staff and services quietly avoiding controversy - 'playing it safe', limiting promotion of sensitive material. Several frame this as more damaging than overt censorship because it is invisible.

Funding and capacity as de facto censorship

When budgets shrink, diversity of perspectives shrinks with them. One school librarian: under £1,000 a year for 1,100 pupils. Reduced opening hours themselves a restriction on access.

Lack of training, policy and leadership backing

Repeated calls for clear, enforceable guidance, training on handling complaints, and visible senior management willing to absorb the heat. Without these, staff fall back on personal judgement.

Mis/disinformation and the information environment

AI-generated content entering collections; clickbait journalism distorting public perception; a public increasingly unable to distinguish fact from opinion. Libraries seen as a defence - if resourced.



What would help staff address censorship



60 substantive responses (52% of 115 respondents)

Headline • Respondents are not asking for new principles. They are asking for **the principles they already have to be made usable, visible, and backed** - what one respondent calls policies with 'teeth'.

01

Clear, freely-available professional-body statement

A current, adaptable position on intellectual freedom from CILIP / CILIPS / SLIC that local services can build into their own collection development policy. Several respondents recall such a statement existing and can no longer find one.

02

Strong, visible institutional backing

Councils, boards, headteachers and university leadership prepared to defend curatorial decisions publicly and absorb legal/reputational risk - rather than pushing it down to frontline staff. The phrase 'path of least resistance' recurs as a complaint.

03

Practical training and toolkits

Workable resources that bring the CILIP Ethical Framework to life outside the Chartership context. Specific asks: case studies (including ones that didn't go well), training for lone workers and new entrants, scripts for handling challenges in real time.

04

Protection for individual librarians

Particularly for school librarians and lone workers - including legal support when challenges escalate. One school librarian flagged the specific risk of censorship pressure being reframed as a safeguarding issue to justify removing the librarian or library.



Gap between statistics and experience



- 72% of public library services had received no formal censorship challenges
- Survey revealed only 12% of respondents had never experienced a censorship challenge
- 41% of workshop attendees reported that censorship issues arise rarely or never in their daily practice



In summary



- An apparent **gap** exists between real world experiences/fear of censorship and the official recorded instances
- **Self-censorship** manifests in several ways, as silent, preventative, or curatorial choices to avoid drama
- **Internal censorship pressure** is a significant issue – external challenges get the headlines and the documentaries; we may also need to look closer to home!
- **Flashpoints and sectoral vulnerabilities** are clear for example, LGBTQ+ and gender-identity content (spanning both pro-trans and gender-critical materials) appear current flashpoints.
- **School libraries** are particularly vulnerable working in high pressure and low-resourced spaces
- **Anti-censorship values** predominate amongst librarians (84% of survey respondents, and strong adherence visible in Fols), however operational vulnerabilities exist due to lack of robust policy and support



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- **Thank You!**
- Full public report to come later in Summer 2026



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