

March 23, 2014 12:31 pm

Libraries lend themselves to new business creation

By Andrew Bounds, North of England correspondent

Manchester's imposing Central Library reopened this weekend with a mission to inspire a new generation to read – and start businesses.

The £50m refurbishment of the listed building includes a business centre offering free offices and advice to start-ups as well as the traditional children's section, archive and lending library.

Behind the Portland stone with a rotunda inspired by the Pantheon in Rome lie PCs and Apple computers equipped with software to create video games and music, as well as leather bound tomes of patents.

"It is not a silent library. We encourage conversation," said Jonathan Emms, head of services for business. "We want people to collaborate. You have got everything you need to do a business plan."

Manchester is among six English cities to set up business and intellectual property centres helped by the British Library in London, which established one at its St Pancras base in 2006.

Leeds opened this month, joining Newcastle, with Birmingham, Liverpool and Sheffield to follow.

The British Library has helped more than 350,000 entrepreneurs with £5m worth of support. It has helped create 2,775 business and 3,345 jobs.

A user survey found that only one in ten of businesses had failed in the first three years, compared with four in ten across Britain. It has an entrepreneur in residence, Stephen Fear, and provides one to one advice, the chance to meet entrepreneurs, and networking.

Isabel Oswell, head of business and research audiences at the British Library, said she hoped to establish a national network by 2020.

One beneficiary of Manchester's existing commercial library is Russell Clifton. The former youth worker is about to launch Rukbug, a children's folding buggy attached to a rucksack.

Mr Clifton, 41, said he first had the idea after his daughter's pushchair was broken in the hold of an aircraft nine years ago. But it was only when he went to a free patent session at the library that a product took shape.

"The library has saved me thousands of pounds," he said. As well as a place with free access to market research and free desk space, he also used the Manchester Inventors' Group there to find a designer.

"So many people have an idea they never put into practice. With the help of staff here you can," he said.

With interest from international retailers he still requires £200,000 of finance to get his first order to a market worth £280m in Britain alone.

It is a far cry from when Central Library was opened in July 1934 by King George V. It was used as a means of educating an illiterate population and employing people in the Great Depression.

Now, in another age of austerity – with many libraries operated by volunteers – it is part of a £150m public scheme to transform Manchester's civic core which has also attracted private developers to put up new office blocks.

Other cities have used libraries to kickstart regeneration. Birmingham last year opened its £189m library, replacing a 1960s concrete

brutalist structure.

Liverpool's Central Library reopened last year after a £50m refurbishment, including a public roof terrace.

In Manchester, the old basement rolling stack has been opened up as an archive centre with touchscreen panels reminiscent of a modern museum. There is also a bustling café and 70 per cent of the building is now accessible, against 30 per cent before.

There remain quiet places. The reading room under the dome has retained its wooden furniture and hushed feel, drawing praise from Guy Garvey, frontman of the band Elbow, who wrote schoolboy poetry there. "When people discover Central Library as a resource they will be inspired – it's a place that is conducive to creativity," he said.