THE STATE OF
LIBRARIES OF THINGS 2024
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Libraries of Things (often called LoTs) are a form of community infrastructure designed for sharing all kinds of stuff. LoTs hold true to the traditional mechanics of a library while pushing borrowing material to a new edge: instruments, gardening tools, camping gear, sporting equipment, and more are up for grabs to be borrowed.

There are about 2,000 formally established LoTs around the world, as well as countless informal ones. Modern LoTs have been in operation since 1978 (the longest-running is Berkeley Tool Library since 1979), but LoTs have existed informally for far longer.

LoTs build community while bringing solidarity economy and mutual aid practices to life. They counter consumerism and individualism, and are a more environmentally friendly way to meet our material needs.

In 2023, Shareable conducted a survey of existing Libraries of Things in order to gain a better understanding of the field and identify a set of industry benchmarks. The 82 LoTs (from 11 different countries) who participated included respondents who ranged from directors to volunteers and lived in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Oceania.
Report results reflect the experiences of the survey respondents. In future iterations of this survey, we hope to capture the experiences of even more of the 2,000+ global LoTs for increased accuracy and assessment of the needs and trends in the field.

Libraries of Things may look different around the world, but the core values of an accessible, community practice are constant. Our goal is to provide a helpful and inspiring look into the inner workings of LoTs. We hope this report is a helpful guide whether you are part of an established LoT looking to understand how it measures up to the larger field or if you are just getting started and are learning about what it takes to get a new LoT off the ground and open to your community!

Key Takeaways

• Libraries of Things look and feel different in every community
• Many LoTs are making a difference in their communities with just a handful of volunteers and a small space like a storage unit or garage
• Generally, there are three different “types” of LoTs:
  • Fully volunteer-run, with budgets less than $10k/year, limited inventory, and average memberships of less than 200 people (these are the vast majority of LoTs!)
  • Larger independent LoTs with storefronts, significant annual budgets, and at least one paid Library manager
  • Municipal LoTs that are connected to city libraries, including stand-alone dedicated LoTs or collections within regular libraries
• Volunteers are critical to the success of most LoTs, especially for inventory maintenance
• Many LoTs are small with limited usage/items lent out per month
• For financial sustainability, LoTs rely most heavily on membership fees, grants, and donations
• Many LoTs have never conducted a formal needs assessment to determine what their current (and potential) user base, wants and needs
• Most LoTs have been operating for less than 5 years and are open 1-3 days/week when they have capacity (with limited hours)
• The vast majority of LoTs provide other services beyond lending items
• Many LoTs are unsure of the racial, gender, income, and employment status of their members—surveying LoT membership can help inform efforts to increase diversity of membership and intentional decision-making
Methodology

The sample used for this data analysis was a database of survey replies from 82 total respondents.

The results were initially analyzed in an exploratory manner, through bar graphs of concrete survey questions or sets of questions, to make explicit preferences, trends, and patterns. Some open-ended responses that matched multiple-choice answers were added to make the data more accurate.
Results

Activity and Hours

Generally, the Libraries of Things (LoTs):
• Have been active between one and five years
• Are open just a few days a week
• Are open a total of five to 20 hours a week

How long have most LoTs been active?

How many days are LoTs open per week?
Almost 50% of the LoTs have been active between 1 and 5 years, with only about 10% open for more than 11 years.

LoTs are generally open just a few days per week, with 44% open 3-5 days per week and 36% open 1-2 days per week. This tends to reflect on a total of open hours per week between 5 and 20 hours for 46% of respondents, and more than 20 hours for 19% of them. Only one LoT is open seasonally and another one is operating on a self-service model.
LoT buildings are brick and mortar in 68% of cases, with size varying across a wide range, but tending towards smaller size. A few are located in storage units, even if temporarily. No LoT looks the same!

Here are some of the other types of spaces that are being used:

- Hired venues around our region
- A garage
- A local business lets us use a room in their store
- The city's main indoor shopping centre (retail)
- Storage rooms adjacent to a multi-use community building
- More than just a storage shed! :D Solar-powered off-grid purpose-designed and built shed.
- A “demountable”

The square footage of LoTs varies greatly between less than 100 square feet to more than 1,200 square feet. Every LoT will look different based on the needs of the community and the resources available.
Are LoTs located within other forms of social infrastructure?

- No (45%)
- Church (1%)
- School (3%)
- Public library (10%)
- Community center (12%)
- Other (29%)

LoTs are also located in:
- Business hub which has turned into a type of community centre due to the tenants attracted
- Coworking Space
- Religious campus
- Reuse charity
- Public living room
- Renting space from another organization
- Reclaimed building materials retail warehouse
- Disability charity
- Rent a space owned by the council and managed by a charity
- On a university campus

“Our main operation is independent, but we have a few dozen things housed at public library branches to be more accessible to people who aren't members of [our LoT] yet.”

—Sarah Summers, PVD Things, Providence, RI, United States
Community

Have LoTs conducted a formal needs assessment to determine if there’s a user base, what they want/need, etc?

Other answers include:
- We have a survey that gets sent out automatically when a member returns an item
- We wrote some survey monkeys and asked people in the community to fill these in. Some of the questions were around what sort of items they would like to see in the library, what they would borrow
- We did conduct a survey on Facebook

What demographics best describe active LoT members?

Demographics

Number of LoTs

Pacific Islander (0)
Middle Eastern/ North African (0)
Hispanic or Latinx (6%)
First Nations/ Indigenous (1%)
White/ European Descent (46%)
Asian/ Indian/ Pakistani (5%)
Black/ African/ Caribbean (9%)
Mixed (10%)
Don’t know (21%)
Prefer Not to Say (0%)
46% of the respondents are primarily serving members/users who are of White/European descent, approximately 21% are unaware of the primary demographic, and the second most common demographic is mixed (10%). Given these results, it's not surprising that only 12% of respondents have their materials available in multiple languages with a few others responding that some, not all, of their materials were available in multiple languages.

**What is the average household income range for LoT members?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Household Income</th>
<th>Number of LoTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$5,000–14,999 (2%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000–29,999 (17%)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000–49,999 (30%)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000–74,999 (28%)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000–99,999 (19%)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000–150,000 (4%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is the organizational structure of the LoTs representative of the demographics of the community(ies) they are located in/serving?

- No (10%)
- Other (22%)
- Yes (68%)

68% of LoTs consider their organizational structure representative of the demographics of the communities they serve.

Most libraries are unaware of the demographics of their memberships including education level, employment status, gender and racial identities, disability status, primary and secondary languages, etc.

*Anonymous membership surveys asking these questions could be a good way to gauge the current membership demographics, intentionally increase diversity, and to provide information for needed items and services at Libraries of Things!*
91% of the LoTs provide other services beyond item lending, including:

- Workshops and classes
- Repair cafes
- Job training
- Makerspace/fab labs
- Community gardens
- Recycling/upcycling services
- Seed banks

The most commonly found other services include workshops and classes (28% of LoTs), repair cafés (24% of LoTs), and recycling/upcycling services (14% of LoTs).

Some other types of activities are also available, with several LoTs offering social meetups, seed banks and internships opportunities.
More creative and unusual opportunities are also worth mentioning, such as:

- Swaps
- community service days
- Pop-up free shops
- Artistic residencies
- Dad’s and Kids “ravage” club (taking items sent to recycling apart to learn about what’s inside)

Even more services provided at LoTs:

- Concerts and lectures
- Digital tech refurbishment and redistribution project
- Free large meeting space
- Lending to groups/organizations and tool redistribution
- Benefit for employees and marketplace for external renters
- Socials like potlucks, happy hours to meet other hunters/anglers
- Seed Library, monthly Garden Swap events, community building nights, connection to our Malden Court Community Orchard, and our and partners’ resources
- Partnership with local college to give job training to students with intellectual disabilities
- “We plan to do work parties to help a neighbor do a big job at their house” —Cassandra Lyons, Lexington Tool Library, Lexington, KY, United States
- We run the occasional Mending Meet Up and partner with other local orgs to host Repair Cafes
- Seed Bank
- Internships
- Home repairs and workforce development for youth and young adults
- associated with timebank
- Time bank
- Community resources

*Classes and workshops can bring in a significant amount of revenue. For example, one established Tool Library in the United States brought in $200K in 2023 alone!*
Volunteers and Staff

How many paid staff members do LoTs have?

- No staff: 47%
- One part-time or one full-time: 18%
- Two: 4%
- Three: 4%
- Four: 6%
- Five+: 6%

How many active volunteers do LoTs have? (including board members)

- 1–5: 31%
- 6–12: 24%
- 13–20: 15%
- 21+: 30%
Despite being open at least a few days per week and providing several services to their communities, LoTs tend to have little to no paid staff: 59% of respondents have at most one person on payroll. The libraries are mostly supported by volunteers, and the amount of people involved is quite variable, with more than 20 respondents having only 1-5 active volunteers, and more than 20 respondents having more than 20 active volunteers.

What perks do LoTs offer volunteers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perks</th>
<th>Number of LoTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free membership/credit/etc</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free merch</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used items</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preferred method to reward volunteers for their support and time commitment is to offer them free membership or credit that can be used at the LoT (44% of respondents).

“It has taken a ton of volunteer work to get up and going but is well supported by our local community.”

—Kaitlyn Bailey, Bulkley Valley Tool Library Society, Smithers, BC, Canada
Partnerships

Libraries of Things are community spaces and that create great opportunities for partnerships. Common LoT partners include:

- Sources for volunteers
- Government institutions
- Service organizations
- Schools
- Nonprofits
- Community organizations and groups
- Businesses and companies that occasionally sponsor or donate to the libraries

Who are primary LoT partners?

Other LoT partners:

- Community groups
- Neighborhood service centers
- Penticton and Area Cooperative Enterprises
- Habitat for Humanity
- Companies that have ‘community funds’
- Local schools
• Funding orgs
• We collaborate with other community groups but have no formal partnerships
• Local rod & gun club/conservation group and folks that have donated items
• Environmental organisations

Primary Library of Things partners are sources for volunteers (23%), government institutions (19%) and service organizations (24%). Additional partners are most commonly other nonprofits, community organizations/groups, local government, local schools, and even some businesses/companies that occasionally sponsor or donate to the LoT.

“Lane County and City of Eugene contract with us to operate Fix-It Fairs (repair cafes); but that $ is just for the Fix-It Fairs, the tool lending library is stand alone -- except of course we've rec'd occasional grants from private foundations, the State, the City, etc. over the years. Oh and we have a few Business Sponsors for whom we do low-key "advertising, and they give us money.”

–Steve Bade, ToolBox Project, Portland, OR, United States
Legal Statuses

What are the legal statuses of LoTs?

- Nonprofit (73%)
- Cooperative (3%)
- Informal (4%)
- For profit/business (4%)
- Fiscally sponsored (by another nonprofit) (5%)
- Other (11%)

While some LoTs start from scratch, quite a few grow out of other organizations or initiatives, such as repair cafés, community makerspaces, and occasionally from programs started within an umbrella nonprofit that then take up life of their own. This seems aligned with the fact that 73% of respondents have chosen to incorporate as independent nonprofit organizations.

Other legal statuses:
- Community Interest Company CIC (Limited by Guarantee)
- Unincorporated, under the auspice of incorporated NFP organization
- Part of a Public Library
- Community Interest Company (CIC) Not for-profit & asset locked (assets stay with the community, even if we close

“We are registered as a for-profit as non-profit status is not available in Iceland, but we run and manage ourselves as a non-profit.” –Anna De Matos, Munasafn RVK Tool Library, Reykjavik, Iceland
Most LoTs are operating on low-scale budgets. Here’s the breakdown:

While a few LoTs have a significant amount of funding with access to over $100,000 per year (13%), the large majority are under $50,000 (80%), with over 50% operating with budgets of less than $15,000.
Insurance providers are quite varied. The top three companies chosen by LoTs in the US were Nonprofit Insurance Alliance, Philadelphia Insurance Company, and Hiscox. The LoTs surveyed in New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland, and Iceland do not have insurance or are in the process of setting up a policy.

**United States:**
- Nonprofit Insurance Alliance (x6)
- Philadelphia Insurance Company (x4)
- Hiscox (x2)
- State Farm
- Great American
- Philadelphia for Tool Library property and liability, Great American for Board policy.
- Auto Owners (Liability), Superior Point (Workers Comp) in Saint Paul
- Cincinnati, Markel, and Auto-Owners
- Risk Placement Services, LLC
- Solomon Insurance
- Meaders, Adams & Lee (local provider in Little Rock)
- Mesa Underwriters Specialty

**United Kingdom:**
- Naturesave (x3)
- Keegan & Pennykid (x2)
- Victor - Third Sector Policy
- Mid Cornwall Brokers Ltd
- Wessex Insurance
- Aviva

**Australia:**
- QBE (x2)
- LGIS (x2)
- Aon
- Keystone
- LCIS Australia - Insurance For Nonprofits

**Canada:**
- Co-operators
- Intact
- SGI

**France:**
- Maif
How much do LoT’s pay for their annual insurance policies?

Insurance policy costs vary, but the most common value seems to be between $1,500 and $2,000 per year (30% of LoTs).
A large majority of the LoTs are open to the general public (68%), and 15% have some restriction to membership, either based on residence or membership with another organization like a company or school. Public library membership is also a determining factor for several LoTs.

“I would love to see a concerted push for funding at the state/federal level for sharing/circular economy initiatives. They are a critical tool in hitting climate change goals, but aren’t being included or thought of by policymakers.”

—Derek Cotton, The Tool Library, Buffalo, NY, United States
How many active members do LoTs have?

![Bar chart showing the number of LoTs with different active member counts.](chart.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Active Members</th>
<th>Number of LoTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;20 members (10%)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–99 members (19%)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100–249 members (19%)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250–499 members (20%)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500–999 members (16%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000+ members (17%)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The membership of LoTs also varies widely, with 29% at under 100 members, 39% between 100 and 500 members, 16% between 500 and 1000 members, and 17% at over 1000 members.

What are the best marketing tools for reaching new members?

- Word of mouth (46%)
- Social media advertising (FB, Instagram, Twitter, etc) (24%)
- Event participation/tabling (9%)
- Paid media advertising (newspaper, radio, etc) (1%)
- Earned media (news coverage, radio interviews, etc) (9%)
- Other (11%)

The majority of the best marketing tools for reaching new members are through word of mouth (46%) and social media advertising (24%).
New participants tend to be reached mostly via word of mouth (46%), but social media advertising has also been successful for many LoTs (24%). Other forms of marketing include posting on a second-hand selling platform, email marketing, partner promotion, and regular posting on Facebook community groups.

**Do LoTs have a financial cost for membership?**

![Bar chart showing membership costs](chart.png)

Being a member normally entails some costs, except for a small percentage of LoTs (19%), and most commonly this takes the form of an annual membership fee.

Other membership financing methods:
- Free membership or Quarterly / Annual membership which allows you to borrow more items at once and applies a discount to the loans
- Annual membership fee but entirely pay-what-you-can
- Membership fee is donation based and only certain items have a “maintenance fee” associated with them
- Optional enrollment donation, most give $10 - $40
- Annual donation requested, but not required
How much do LoT annual memberships cost?

What percentage of members are utilizing scholarship or discounted membership programs (when available)?
For the majority of cases, the LoTs choose a tiered/sliding scale format for the annual membership (37%). Some libraries also offer scholarships or discounted programs.

To sustain themselves financially, LoTs rely most heavily on membership fees, grants and donations. There is a clear emphasis on maximizing accessibility, which leads to the popularity of tiered/sliding scale formats of membership fees. A few LoTs also have late fees, which are designed to encourage quick return of items, in a somewhat different expression of maximization of accessibility to individual items through high turnover.
Items

What are the primary items available at LoTs?

Other items offered at LoTs:
- Climate Adapted Seeds
- Gardening tools
- Puzzles, games, educational materials
- Hobbyist tools
- Durable medical equipment
How do LoTs choose the items for their inventory?

Other ways LoTs choose items:

- Leadership group assesses popular items and member feedback/requests
- Expensive, hard to store, single use items that don’t compete with local rental businesses
- What insurance will cover
- In the process of soliciting donations from businesses for items that are in demand but have not been donated thus far
- Democratic selection process, all members get to vote on what we should have available
- We already had the tools, none have been purchased
- Agreed “checklist” for what we believe will have maximum impact by being used by lots of people, and they each use it infrequently
How do LoTs obtain the items in their inventory?

- **Purchase** (31%)
- **Individual donations** (36%)
- **Waste stream diversion** (10%)
- **Institutional donations** (16%)
- **Other** (6%)

Other ways LoTs obtain items:
- Second-hand purchases
- Purchased through grant funding
- Repairs
- “Donations from the Habitat Restore and from Station North Tool Library” – Ellen Stewart, NRV ToolBank, Blacksburg, VA, United States

How many items do LoTs have?

- **<50 items** (4%)
- **50–99 items** (3%)
- **100–499 items** (39%)
- **500–999 items** (21%)
- **1,000–2,499 items** (17%)
- **2,500+ items** (16%)
While there is a variety of items available at different LoTs, a high percentage (42%) primarily provide tools, and the second most common type of library are more general Libraries of Things (18%).

Items are mostly chosen from donations to the LoT (31%), or chosen by staff and volunteers (22%). Membership surveys and community needs assessments are also common methods used to inform the choice of items. Items are obtained mostly through donations (36%), and also frequently purchased (31%). Very few LoTs have less than 100 items (7%), while 60% have between 100 and 1000 items. A few are larger in size (33%), with more than 1000 items.

Despite fairly large collections on average, most libraries (51%) lend out under 100 items monthly.

“Our tool library is built on mutual aid, solidarity between neighbors, trust, and sharing. It's not like a traditional nonprofit where there's a one-way relationship, where the organization has the resources and the client has the needs, so the organization dictates the terms on which the resources can be provided to meet the needs. Instead, it's everyone helping everyone.”

—Cassandra Lyons, Lexington Tool Library, Lexington, KY, United States
Inventory Maintenance

How do LoTs maintain the items in their inventory?

Inventory maintenance is mostly taken care of by volunteers (69% of the cases), and rarely by paid technicians (19%).
Management Software

What software program do LoTs use to manage members?

- myTurn (79%)
- Tool Librarian (6%)
- LendEngine (4%)
- Other (11%)

Other software programs that are used include internally built systems, and integrated library systems Polaris, Sierra, and BiblioCommons.

How much do LoTs pay annually for inventory and/or member management software?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Membership Software Cost</th>
<th>Number of LoTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20 (39%)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20–100 (4%)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100–200 (4%)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200–500 (29%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$500–1,000 (18%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $1,000 (10%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is a clear preference in terms of LoT management software, with myTurn being the most popular choice by far for both inventory and member management (79%) in comparison to other software solutions. Disparity seems quite high in terms of the software pricing, with 39% of LoTs paying less than $20 per year, while 57% pay more than $200 per year, and 10% of these over $1,000.

**Credits**

Survey questions were written by Tom Llewellyn, Roame Johnson, Bobby Jones, and Alison Huff with support from Amanda Miller, Gene Homicki, and Kelley Dennings. Survey analysis by Carolina Carvalho
Report written by Paige Kelly, Carolina Carvalho, Tom Llewellyn, and Alison Huff.

Thank you to everyone who contributed responses to our survey including:

- Ballad Tool Library
- Ballarat Tool Library
- Banff Public Library’s Library of Things
- Bibliothèque d’objets de Montreuil
- Borrow Don’t Buy CIC
- Bulkley Valley Tool Library Society
- Carhartt Workshop
- Central Arkansas Library System - Tool Library
- Chicago Tool Library
- Circular Lugano
- Columbus Babywearing
- Community Toolbox Canberra
- Cosy Koala
- Crieff Community Tool Library
- Cville Tool Library
- DEER Camp MT
- Edinburgh Board Game Library
- Edmonton Tool Library
- Flatbush Tool Library
- Gold Coast Tool Library
- Green Lents Community Tool Library
- Greenbelt Makerspace Cooperative
- Hastings Library of Things
- HNL Tool Library
- HNL Tool Library
- Inner West Tool Library Sydney
- Kernow Library of Things (KLOTH)
Kitchener Waterloo LOT
Knjižnica Reči
L'Objethèque de Cornouaille
Lewes
Lexington Tool Library
Library of Stuff CIC
Library of Things
Library of Things
Library of Things Prague
Library of Things YXE
Linlithgow Tool Library
Louisville Tool Library
Makers Mill
Minnesota Tool Library
Munasafn RVK Tool Library
Ne Seattle Tool Library
North Kohala Tool Library
North Sacramento Free Tool Library
Northeast Portland Tool Library
NRV ToolBank
ORE Tool Library
Penticton Tool Library
Phinney Neighborhood Association Tool Library
Portsmouth Library of Things
PVD Things
QUadra Island Library of Things (QUILT)
SEAC Tool Shed
SHARE Oxford
Share Shed - A Library of Things
Share Shed Bassendean
ShareShed Bassendean
Shirley Tool Shed
South King Tool Library
Southeast Portland Tool Library
Southside Tool Library
SoWashCo AT Library
Tacoma Tool Library
TBD
The Sydney Library of Things
The Tool Library
Things
Tool Library
ToolBox Project
Vashon Care Closet
West Seattle Tool Library
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About Shareable

Shareable is an award-winning nonprofit media outlet and action network with a mission to empower communities to share for a more resilient, equitable, and joyful world. In collaboration with global partners, we inspire social change through storytelling, advocacy, and organizing — with a mandate to prioritize high-potential, under-resourced communities.

Shareable’s new program, SolidarityWorks, is a learning and action lab designed to empower everyday changemakers to launch community initiatives that build solidarity. Through SolidarityWorks Co-Labs, we:

- Identify concrete projects that can be replicated and adapted in other communities
- Partner with practitioners to build a learning series and toolkit of collected wisdom to help new communities launch similar projects
- Bring together a group of organizers in communities around the US and the world
- Provide the support and resources to get those new projects off the ground