

Help us write the next chapter for our libraries



An outline strategy for Bristol City Council's library service



Introduction

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Welcome

We'd like your help

We're starting a big conversation about the next five years for Bristol Libraries, and we'd like you to join in.

We have initial thoughts about what that could look like for our libraries, but let us know what you think:

- What do you need from your library?
- What's your experience of using our libraries?
- What ideas do you have for improving them?

We're not planning to reduce funding for libraries, so what could we do differently within their budget?

At the end you'll find how you can get involved in the discussion. Please join in – we're looking forward to talking to you about this important service.

Councillor Stephen Williams

Chair of Public Health and Communities Committee

Background

Towards a new strategy

Every few years the Council updates its long-term plans for the library service.

Since the last strategy was published early in 2020, much has changed. Our libraries were closed during COVID lockdowns and visitor numbers are only now getting back to where they were. More people read and get information on their phones and stream their entertainment.

This is the start of a process to update the library service to reflect these changes. The library service still provides an important range of services to its tens of thousands of users, but it needs to deliver what you want and need now *and* in the immediate future.

Help us to design the new strategy for the library service.

Our outline strategy

To aid the conversation with the people who live, work and study in Bristol, we've developed an outline strategy as a 'starter for ten'.

It was worked on by a cross-party group of councillors who reviewed the purpose of the library service and what its focus should be. They looked at data on the service and the city and at the results of early discussions with a selection of community groups, other organisations in the city, and with some library users and members of library Friends groups.

In our next phase of work, we'll be testing the priorities in the outline strategy with people across Bristol – getting your ideas for what's needed. We'll be doing further research on social and economic issues in the city and how libraries can help. We'll then be finalising a new strategy in 2026 with the benefit of your views and thoughts.

What our libraries offer

Books are, of course, central to our libraries, but libraries offer so much more:

Enabling people to enjoy culture and creativity through events and performances organised by the library service and other groups.

Helping people with their health and wellbeing through information and the social connections they offer.

- Giving people access to information and digital services, such as our free public computers and Wi-Fi.
- Helping people with literacy and encouraging the joy of reading, with book groups and talks by authors.

Libraries also help our young people to get a great start in life. They support people's learning and offer study space. More people are using libraries as places to work and to get business support.



How people use them

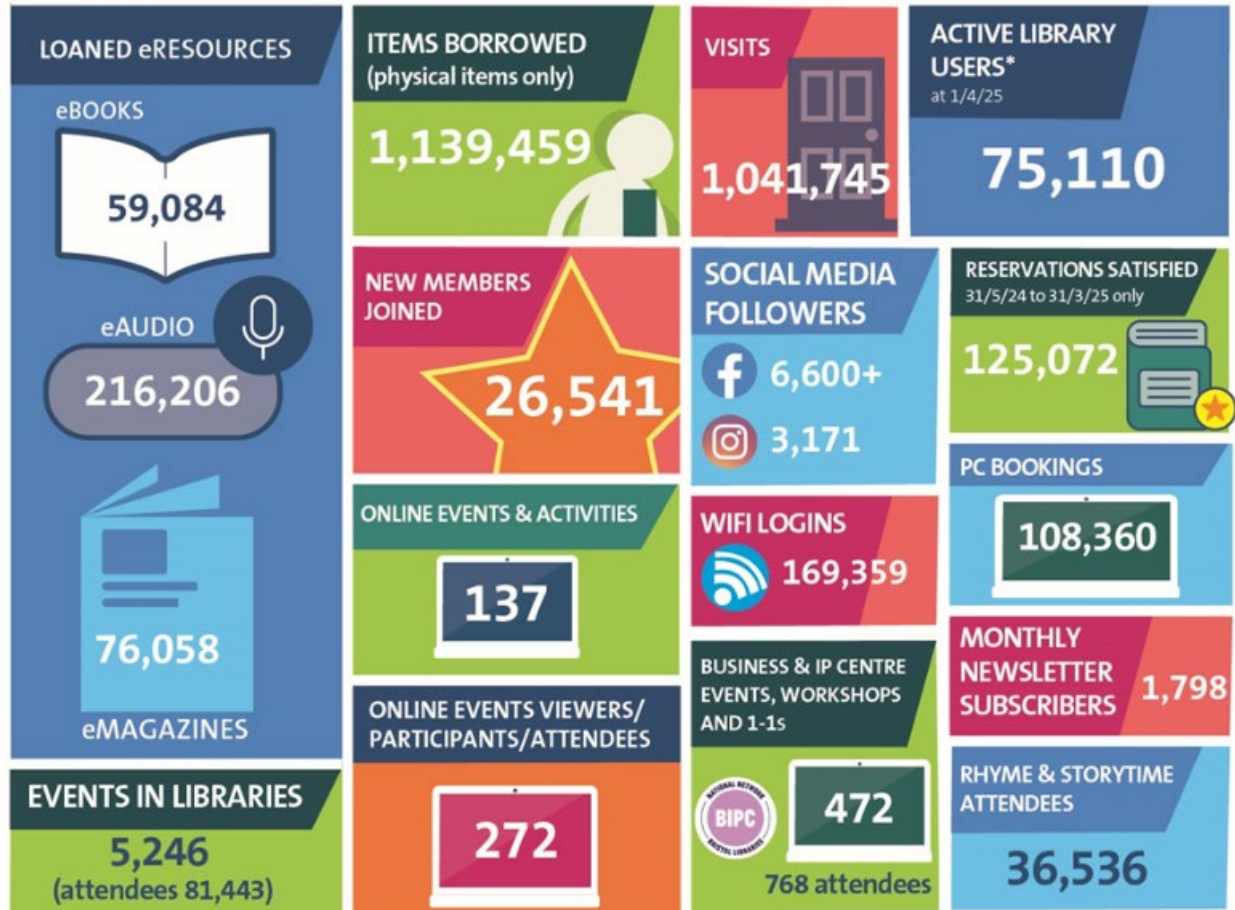
Many thousands of people in Bristol use these different services as shown on the right.

There have also been interesting trends. Fewer physical books and other items are being borrowed, but the use of eBooks, eAudiobooks and eMagazines has been shooting up.

We'll be looking in more detail at these trends and how our service compares with other councils and what people want.

Question

Do you know about all the things on offer in Bristol's libraries?



*The number of people who have borrowed or renewed a physical item, borrowed a virtual item (eBooks, eAudio etc) or booked a computer session in the past 12 months.

The impact of the 2020 strategy

The last strategy was developed after public consultation in 2019 and published in 2020. It included a range of plans that have been achieved such as:

- Extending the digital offer, e.g. Wi-Fi printing.
- Offering more self-service access to libraries when they are not staffed.
- Encouraging more volunteers and library Friends groups.

Despite the disruption of COVID, most of the aims were achieved. There are now more Friends groups, often running their own events in their libraries, including performances, film nights, and fun days. The grant stream “Innovation Fund” enabled communities to bid for small amounts to trial new activities in libraries.

We also successfully bid for funding to introduce Business and Intellectual Property Centres in Central and three other libraries, providing more support to start ups and small businesses.





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learn. We see
together we be.

What we want to know more about

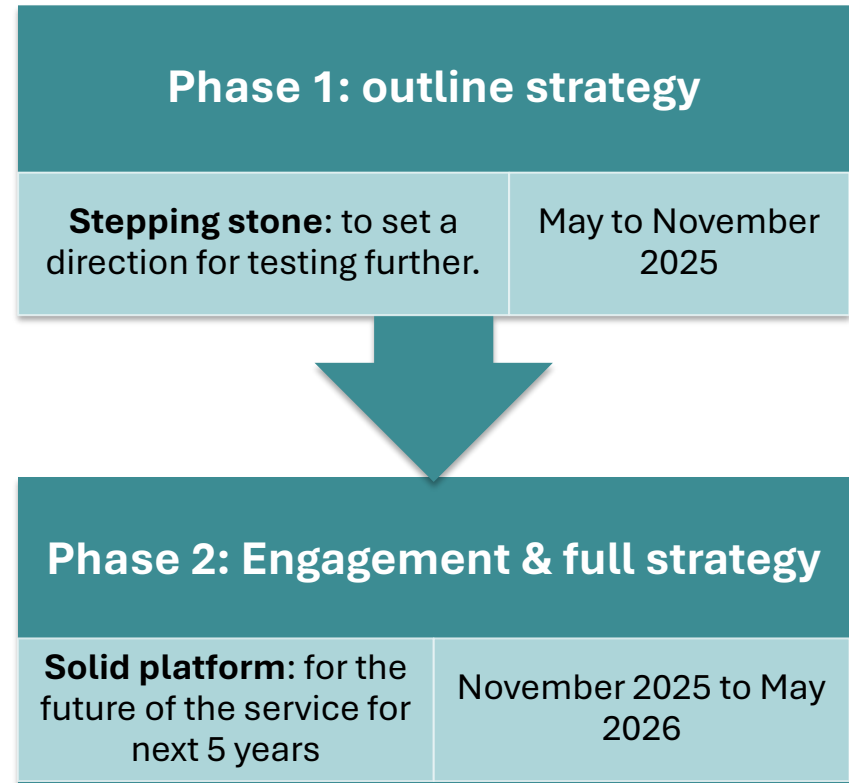
How we're going about it

Developing a new strategy

The strategy is being developed in three phases. In the first phase we undertook some initial analysis into the trends in needs in Bristol. We have also sought early views from a selection of community groups, other organisations, library Friends groups and some members of the public. This has informed our 'outline strategy'.

In Phase 2, we are going to be researching further into data on Bristol and its communities and into examples of library services elsewhere. We will also be having discussions across the city to give everyone a chance to share their views. We will then use that research and input to develop a full strategy.

If the new strategy involves fundamental changes to the library service, we will then carry out formal consultation before making final decisions.



What we want to understand better

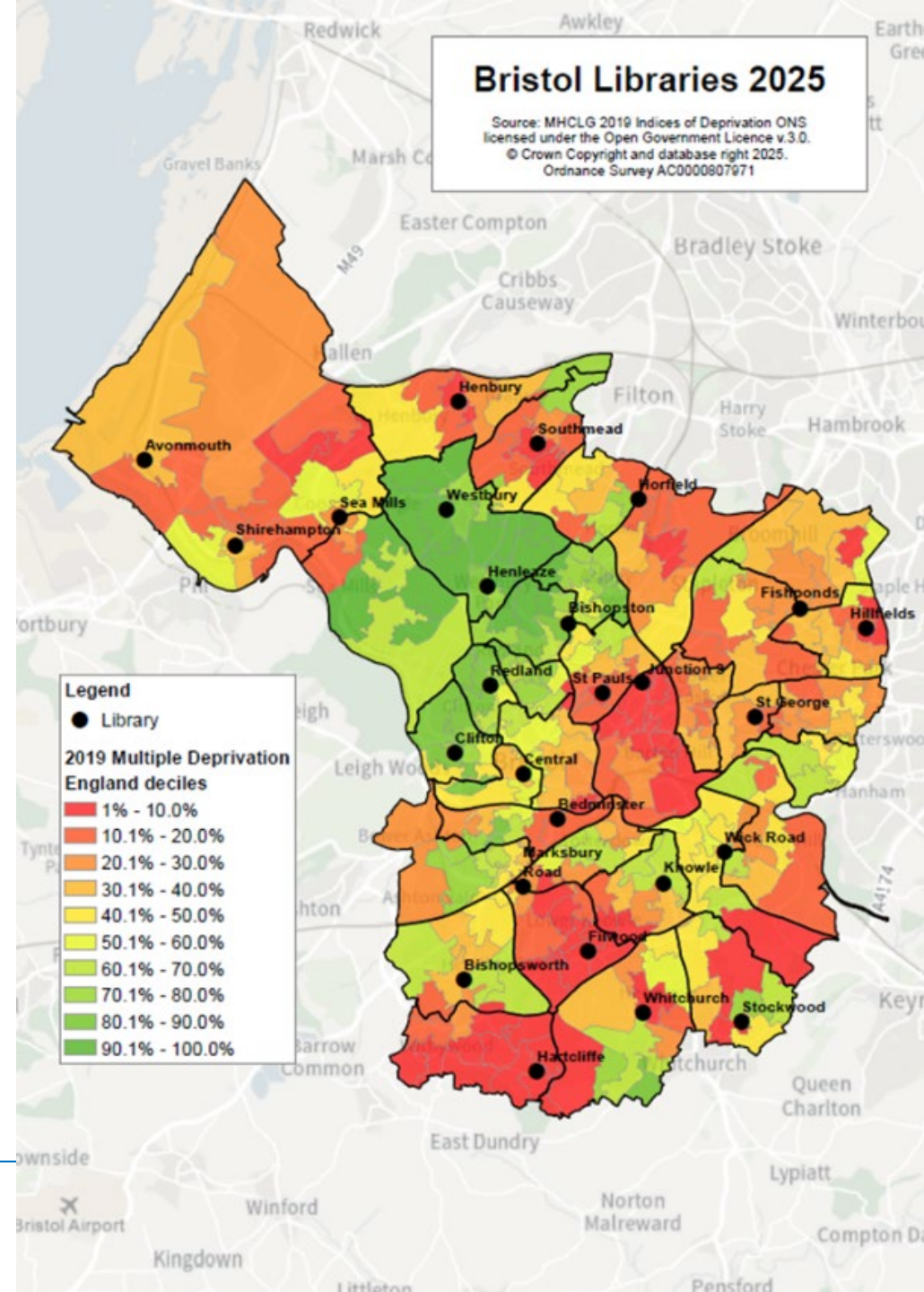
The cross-party councillor group working on the outline strategy has been asking three main questions:

1. Where are greatest needs across the city and how are these changing?
2. How are people currently accessing support and using services across the city?
3. What might the future library service look like?

In this section, we'll look briefly at levels of need and how people use the service. In the next section, we'll look at what the future library service might look like.

How need is distributed

As the map on the right illustrates, Bristol has some of the most deprived (red) and the least deprived (green) areas in the country. We'll need to understand better how well our current network of libraries responds to need across Bristol and how easy it is to access them, particularly for more deprived areas.



Changing needs across the city

What the data tells us

The best source of data on poverty and need is the Government's 'Index of Multiple Deprivation' which has been updated this autumn. This will provide a detailed picture of how well Bristol's communities are faring. But in the meantime, there are some trends identified in the Bristol Quality of Life Survey, e.g.:

- Overall health and wellbeing appear to have worsened in South, East and Central Bristol.
- Aspects of children's attainment are below the national average, particularly in low-income families.
- Access to internet at home has improved across some areas but not in the most deprived areas.
- Population changes due to new housing are impacting on the demand for social infrastructure.

There are also national concerns about falls in the level of reading, particularly among boys.

These will all be analysed further in the next phase.

What we've heard

Feedback so far has included:

- Literacy and reading support remains a key need.
- People need neutral spaces for individual, group and business activities, either low-cost or free.
- More people are struggling with mental health challenges, their wellbeing and social isolation.
- There are big disparities between areas and pockets of very high deprivation.
- This means people need support with the basics as well as help with digital poverty, employment and learning.

These are all needs that a library service can help with, but we want to know how well the service meets them.

Question

Does the library service offer what you need?

How people are using services

What the data tells us

We know how many people borrow items and use our computers *and* we know how many visitors there are to each library, but we don't yet know whether visitors and borrowers are always the same people or the extent to which a smaller percentage of the population use the service a lot while most don't.

Although the figure appears not to be out of line with other library services across the country, it seems surprising that only 14% of Bristol's population actively use library services once a year or more. How many people don't read books at all or prefer to buy them?

We want to understand more about why people do and don't use the library service and all that it offers.

Question

What would encourage you to use your library more?

What we've heard

Feedback so far has included:

- Positive feedback about the core offer, the activities organised in libraries and the helpful staff.
- A feeling that the library service overall is 'unloved' and struggles for resources.
- Concerns about opening hours, condition of buildings and about a lack of space and toilets.
- Suggestions that it can be difficult for people to get to their libraries.

Some report that the library is the main facility for their community but others say community activities aren't always happening in libraries. Some organisations would like to collaborate with the library service and would like better partnerships.

Question

What gets in the way of you using your library?

What could we aim to achieve?

What could we achieve?

We've developed a set of objectives or 'outcomes' that we would like to see the library service *contributing to* in five years' time. **The library service can't tackle them on its own, so it would need to work with partners and other Council teams.**

The outcomes are very ambitious and designed to get us all thinking.

What part could libraries play in making a positive difference across so many fronts? How could libraries help to get people reading, whether or not they use a library?

Question

How could libraries make a difference to people's lives?

Main outcome	Supporting outcomes
People are taking part, whatever their circumstances	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People are reading.• Children are school ready.• People are confident navigating the digital world.• People feel safe and welcome at our libraries.
People are making things happen in every community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People are volunteering their time at libraries.• Libraries are places where people find inspiration for making the city a better place.
We are pulling together to get the most out of the resources we share	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Libraries are a key partner in communities.• Communities have access to resources and services locally.• Our library services are well used.



What the future might look like

What's possible?

Learning from the best

We want to learn from the best, so our cross-party councillor group has been exploring examples of how libraries are delivered elsewhere – here and abroad.

We also want to learn from past developments in Bristol, such as the experience of our new Bishopston Library. This has shown that having an attractive and prominent building in a busy shopping street encourages many more users!

It's not just about our buildings and design, it's about what goes on inside them, too. Are libraries just for books or are they cultural or community centres, too? As one of the few free public services available, how can we make them more attractive to use? How do we balance making them busy and lively with people wanting to study quietly? How can they contribute even more to the social and economic life of Bristol?

We will explore these questions in Phase 2 of the strategy development.



Towards a new vision

To aid our discussions, we've developed a new picture of what our library service could be for Bristol. Reading remains at the core of what we do, but there's so much more that libraries can offer. They are a source of enjoyment and learning. They can supply vital information and help people through difficulties. They bring people together – libraries are a home for our communities, whether they just want to enjoy the space or cultural events in the company of friends and neighbours.

A **possible vision** for Bristol *and* the library service is:

“Through reading and accessing knowledge, Bristol is a city where disparities in social and economic outcomes are reducing, and where communities are more united.”

To achieve that vision we have drafted a **new mission** for Bristol and the library service (see right). **Libraries will play a big part but cannot deliver this alone.**

Our mission is to inspire everyone in the city to read more widely; support those who face additional barriers to get the help they need to thrive; and enable people to come together to make things happen in our communities.

We will do this by **expanding access** to everything that libraries can offer by:

1. Making libraries exciting and welcoming places.
2. Reaching out to people who are struggling.
3. Bringing people together across communities.
4. Championing reading, literacy and creativity.
5. Providing support for entrepreneurs.
6. Creating a network of attractive facilities.
7. Providing space for climate and social action.
8. Actively programming and marketing our offer.
9. Collaborating with partners in each local community.
10. Analysing and gathering data to target our support.

Testing our ideas further

From our discussions with people so far, it looks there are some basics that need to change before we can achieve our vision.

We've produced **six 'basic principles' for our libraries** that we think will make a difference, but we need to learn more about the implications. That will involve research - and hearing from you!

Question

What basic changes would you like to see in our library service?

Basic principles	What we need to learn more about
1. People can access the best of what libraries offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to design high-quality spaces.• How to define a high-quality offer for Bristol.• How to target the right support for people.
2. People feel more welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical and other barriers.• Non-user perceptions of libraries.
3. Libraries are available when people want them	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Technology-enabled and volunteer-supported opening.• How to support better digital access.• How to make better use of staff time.• Patterns of opening and usage.
4. Our libraries are where people need them	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Catchment areas, usage, need and travel.• The impact of new housing developments.
5. We're sharing resources better	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to do co-location successfully.• What long-term partnerships to prioritise.
6. Having greater impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding the current service.• How we compare with other library services.• How to target resources where needs are greatest.

The challenges and the possibilities

The harsh reality is that councils find it hard to balance spending on libraries with the demands on services like social care and homelessness.

Changing the fabric of our buildings requires capital funds. Marketing depends on money for specialists. Some libraries are not well-used, but part-time opening and staffing shortages limit how often people *could* use their libraries. We do have lots of Friends groups and keen volunteers, but not everywhere in the city.

Sometimes, external funding is available and library services can make money go further by sharing buildings and working with other cultural and community bodies. We've done some of this already and in the next phase we will explore different ways of achieving more within our current budgets.



Question

What partners do you think could help us in future?



How to get involved

Get involved

We need your help

There will be plenty of opportunities to get involved in developing the new strategy for our libraries. This is just the start of a conversation that will have a lasting legacy for our library service and your city.

Whether you're a regular user or an occasional user; whether you used to visit our libraries but have stopped; or whether you wouldn't think of using a library, we want to hear from you!

How you can take part

Opportunities to have your say will be shared later this winter.

Sign up to our **library eNewsletter** for monthly emails about Bristol Libraries.

For future engagement opportunities sign up to

[ASK Bristol ebulletin](#)