

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	10 NOVEMBER 2021		
TITLE:	READING LIBRARIES: FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2022-2025		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR ROWLAND	PORTFOLIO:	CULTURE AND LEISURE
SERVICE:	CULTURE	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises the responses to the libraries consultation on vision and strategy which ran from 9 August-17 September, to be read alongside the initial data review of 2019/20 data (July HNL Committee). This will inform a strategy for Reading's Libraries for approval.
- 1.2 At the HNL Committee meeting in July 2021, it was agreed that the library service could run a consultation to inform the strategy for the library service, and the results of this would be presented to the November 2021 HNL Committee.
- 1.3 The library service has run the libraries consultation exercise alongside an external consultancy between 9 August and 17 September 2021.
- 1.4 The library consultation exercises included:
 - a questionnaire which received 1,287 responses
 - 4 focus groups of users and non-users
 - drop-ins at each library with the Library Services Manager
 - interviews with key stakeholders both internal and external to the Council
 - a special "Home Service Questionnaire" was completed by 117 service users and 14 further home users completed the wider questionnaire.

In total, around 1,500 participants submitted responses to the consultation. People were asked if/how they currently use the library service and to provide their responses on the proposed strategic priorities set out below. Of the respondents, 82% had used Reading Libraries during the previous 2 years.

1.5 The proposed key strategic priorities are:

- * Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic
- Helping children and young people
- Improving access to online services
- Supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy
- Bringing arts, culture and heritage into library spaces

1.6 The above proposed strategic priorities were listed in the report presented to Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee 6 July 2021) and informed by analysing:

- Patterns of library use across opening hours to identify the busier periods Library usage and non-usage as a percentage of the population in different areas of the borough
- How usage maps to areas of deprivation in the borough
- Similarities and differences in the age profiles of those using the library service and their location
- Where ICT users within libraries are coming from

1.7 The strategic priorities aim to ensure that the library service is forward looking, innovative and provides an excellent experience for everyone, as well as contributing to the overall corporate priorities for Reading.

1.8 This report includes Appendices as follows:

- Appendix 1: Detailed findings from Consultation August - September 2021
- Appendix 2: Library Consultation Survey Results in full
- Appendix 3: Home Library Survey Results in full
- Appendix 4: Equality Impact Assessment for Library Strategy 2022-2025

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

2.1 That Committee notes the outcome of the consultation activity.

2.2 That Committee adopts the strategic priorities for the library service, as set out at paragraph 1.5 of this report.

- 2.3 That Committee authorises officers to develop a delivery plan for the library service, which is based upon and takes into consideration the strategic priorities for the library service, as set out at paragraph 1.5 of this report.**

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964 Act) the Council is obliged to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service for all individuals who live, work or study within the borough. Reading Borough Council currently delivers this through:
- a central library;
 - 6 local branch libraries across the borough;
 - a toy library;
 - e-resources;
 - a mobile library service; and
 - a home visiting service for the elderly and those unable to leave home.

It is considered that the library service offers a comprehensive and efficient service, in line with the legal requirements as specified in the 1964 Act.

The net budget for the library service in 2021/22 is £969,000.

- 3.2 The library service is open to all, but with a focus on targeting resources to improve outcomes for particular groups and communities and meeting the Council’s wider strategic priorities.
- 3.3 Since the initial lockdown closure in March 2020 due to Covid-19, the library service has looked and felt quite different. Between March 2020 and July 2020, the sole offering was online. Since July 2020 and throughout all subsequent lockdowns, a form of physical library offer has been available to Reading’s library users. Libraries were designated essential services for reasons of supporting access to digital services and for the impact access to books has on education and wellbeing and, therefore, a physical service has continued to be maintained. Full restoration of the library service hours occurred in October 2021, and services continue to be restored.
- 3.4 In addition to the physical service, during the pandemic the library service developed its online offer to introduce instant online membership, giving instant digital access, meaning customers could quickly access online resources - and this part of the service has grown to around 5,500 users per month across the year. The range and breadth of these resources, which are more expensive than printed books, was increased.

Libraries have reached new audiences:

- Over 3,000 new members have joined since March 2020, and over 1,000 of these since July 2021.

- Social media engagement went up by 1,000% in some cases, and increased from one post a day to around ten during the first lockdown.
- Story, rhymetime, craft and local history videos have been viewed over 35,000 times.
- These videos can remain available, subject to publishers' copyright, via Reading Council YouTube/Facebook and the new streaming site, Reading Culture Live.

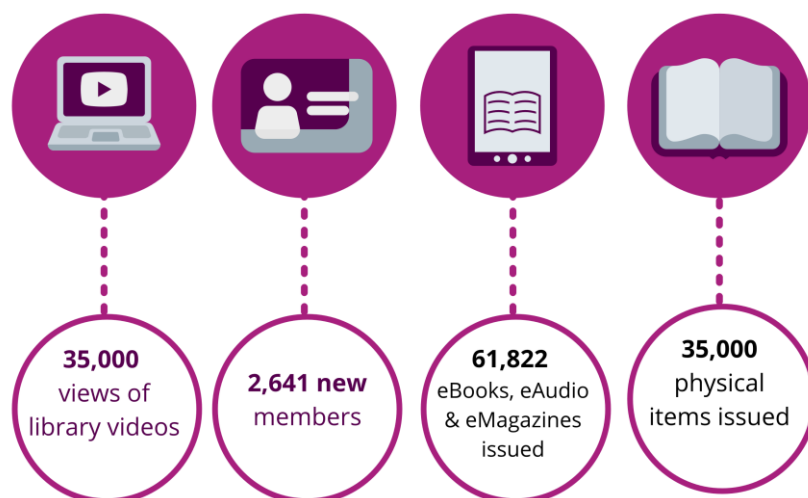
An expanded and improved digital experience:

- Online library resources improved and expanded.
- Issues of e-resources between April-September 2020 were three times what they were for the same period in 2019 and have largely stayed at the new higher level, with 61,822 items issued during 2020/21.
- The E-resources library is now the second busiest library in Reading when comparing to physical issues at library sites pre-March 2020.
- Wider range of stock as service is linked with other library services for ebooks and emagazines.

Still providing a greatly valued face-to-face service:

- Face-to-face library services were maintained as essential services through the November 2020 and Spring 2021 lockdowns.
- 400 people per week accessed our libraries in person during lockdown periods
- 45% of all books loaned are children's books.
- The home visiting service is supporting c.350 of the most vulnerable people in Reading and has been operating since August 2020, having been suspended during the first lockdown in March 2020.
- Around 90% of branch library use is from within the immediate library catchment - illustrating its value as a local service.

Data for 2020/21 is below



LIBRARY SERVICE STRATEGY - THE NEED

- 3.5 As part of the first phase of substantial change in 2015/16, the library service developed the 2015/16 Strategy - the time that has now passed since the development and implementation of the 2015/16 Strategy and the subsequent changes to the Library budget mean that it is now a timely moment to review this document.
- 3.6 Whilst many of the reasons given by residents and library users previously for valuing the library service are likely to remain, a new library strategy and development plan will set out the Council's ambitions for the library service over the next three years.
- 3.7 In previous library service consultation exercises in 2015, 2016 and 2018, customers highlighted the importance of libraries in:
- Providing local and free access to a wide range of books.
 - Supporting educational development - including the development of literacy, language and IT skills.
 - Supporting communities and fostering social interaction - especially between young children, their guardians and older people.
 - Providing access to IT and thereby tackling digital exclusion (with 12% of respondents previously reporting that they are reliant on libraries for their access to the internet).
 - Providing a safe space for vulnerable groups.
- 3.8 It is too early to tell what the long-term impact of Covid-19 may be on the library service's offer of shared space, books, resources and equipment. However, the library service, by virtue of being rooted in local communities, is ideally placed to respond locally to the changed world following Covid-19, and to note that book issues have already returned to 75% of 2019 levels.
- 3.9 A renewed library strategy is therefore essential in order to prioritise limited resource, to make the biggest difference to residents, to provide a driver for the service and aim to increase service resilience, all in compliance with the Council's legal obligations as set out in the 1964 Act.

4. CONSULTATION FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 OVERALL SUMMARY

- 4.1.1 The Council's aim is to ensure provision of a comprehensive, modern, affordable and efficient service for Reading which reflects local needs and makes the best use of resources. Legally, under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, a local authority must provide a library service and this service must be 'comprehensive and efficient'.
- 4.1.2 The library strategy will be informed by the data review exercise reported to Committee in July 2021, and by the recent consultation exercise. The consultation in August-September 2021 generated a very high number of responses, and around 1,500

people responded to it. The library service is grateful for the high level of responses from all respondents. Officers across the Council helped to spread the word, and there was excellent messaging from Communications to encourage feedback.

4.1.3 The detailed results from the consultation can be seen at Appendix 1 of this report, however the headline findings are that there is:

- a strong feeling of goodwill for the library service
- a willingness from to work with the service, and libraries are seen as valued and important places by partners
- previous reductions in opening hours and funding are still keenly felt
- a mixture of support for both physical and digital models, and a desire for both
- need for the library service to become more forward looking and proactive

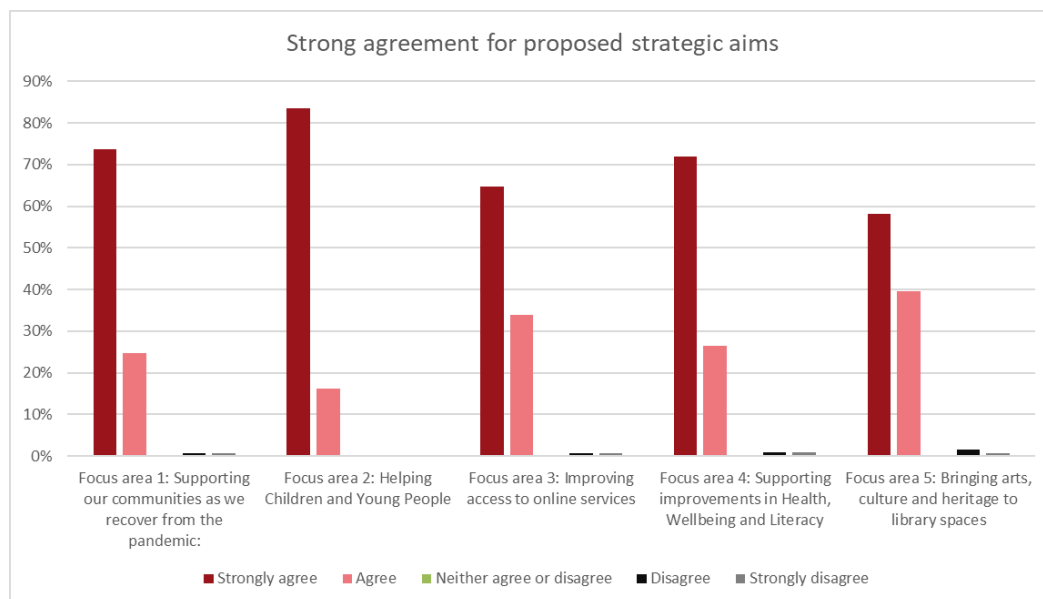
4.1.4 The services reported as most regularly used were book lending (81%), book lending for children and young people (41%), rhymetime (18%), ebooks (18%) and the Summer Reading Challenge for children (17%).

4.1.5 Those not using libraries cited buying own books (48%), getting information online (34%) and lack of time (34%) as reasons for non-use.

4.1.6 The areas that most service users requested to see the library service developing in the future were more online resources (44%), computer coding clubs (25%), spaces to create and use new technologies (24%) and community language and culture collections (24%).

4.1.7 Use in lockdown was chiefly using click and collect ordering (45% had used), and 30% of respondents had used the digital services of ebooks, eaudio and emagazines.

4.1.8 Overall there was strong agreement for the proposed strategic themes, with a particularly large number of additional comments focusing on the importance of the children's side of the library service.



4.1.9 The data presented in to committee in July 2021 used geographical and customer data to highlight some areas for further focus and these will inform the strategy.

The data review examined :

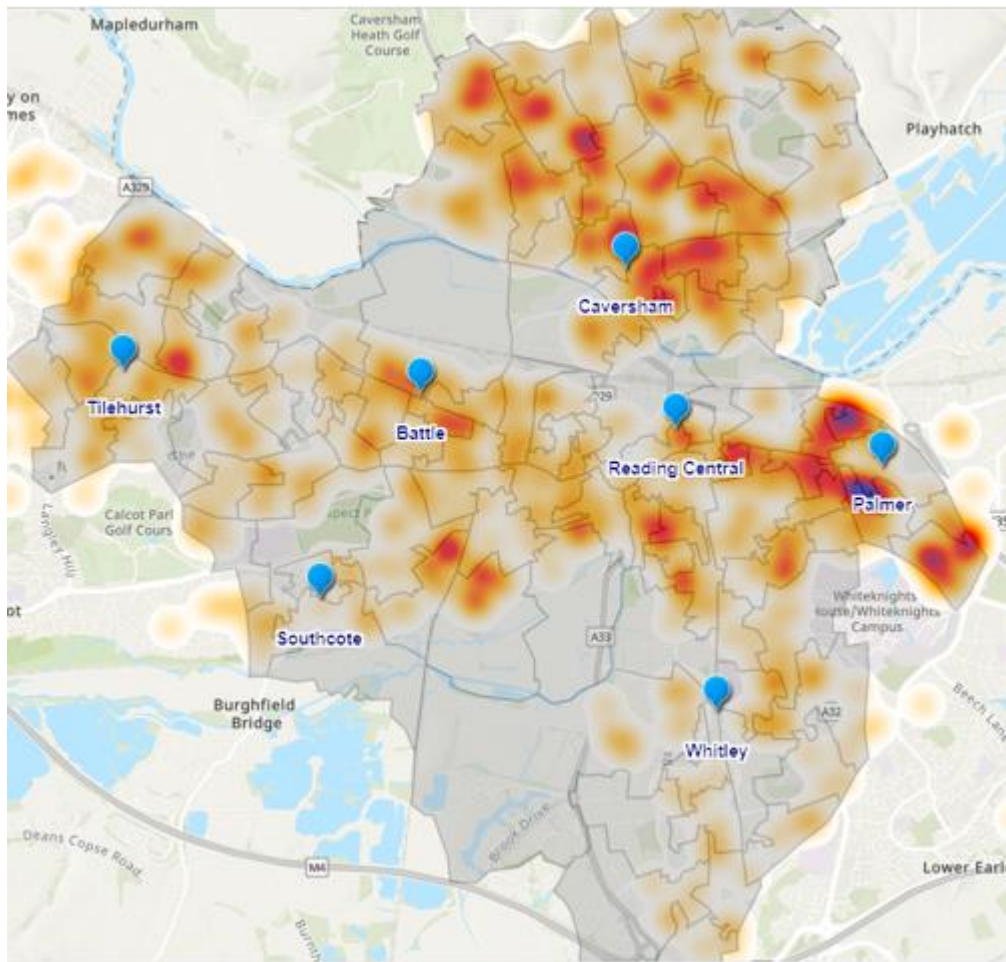
- patterns of library use across opening hours and where the busy periods are
- use as a percentage of population in different areas of Reading
- how this use maps to areas of deprivation
- similarities and differences in profiles of the ages of those using the service
- where ICT users within libraries are coming from

4.1.10 The detailed data is available as part of the July 2021 report, but in summary evidenced:

- The busiest times are generally Saturdays
- Central library remains the busiest library
- As opening hours were reduced, usage also reduced, but not at the same rate. The effect being some hours of opening are busier than previously
- There are peaks of borrowers aged 0-16 and 35-45 year-old adults, but smaller and more varied peaks between 60 and 80 year olds.
- There is heavier use in Caversham and less use in South Reading.
- Usage of ICT in libraries is heavily centred around a zone from Palmer Park to Norcot - the majority of provision is in Central library.

4.1.11 Usage patterns for previous years remain relevant, and the detailed data review of 2019/20 informed the drafting of the strategic themes for consultation. Whilst the long term impacts of library closures as a result of Covid-19 are still emerging, it is encouraging to note that borrowing levels are now at c.75% of 2019 levels.

4.1.12 The following shows a heat map of responses where a postcode was provided, showing coverage across Reading and the wider area, darker colours mean more responses

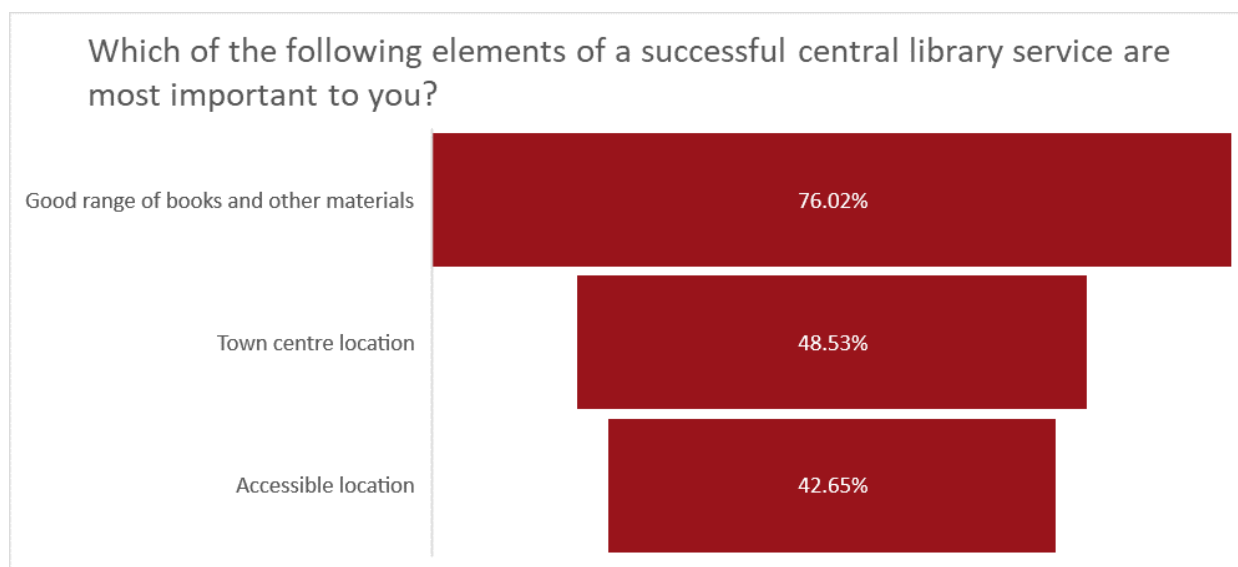


4.2 READING CENTRAL LIBRARY

4.2.1 Reading Central Library was built by Berkshire County Library Service as the County Library Headquarters and opened in 1985. As there is potential to refurbish, reconfigure or relocate Central library, we used the opportunity of a wider consultation to include asking for feedback in relation to what people would like to see from a Central library space.

4.2.2 Detailed feedback is available within Appendix 1, however the key points regarding Central Library are that:

- 68% of respondents had visited in the last 2 years.
- Central library is well located, good for public transport access - it does have limited car parking.
- Central library is a good size but in need of refurbishment and could be off-putting in current condition for current and potential customers
- The building does have toilets but the current ones are not in good enough condition
- There are antisocial behaviour issues at the library which can be off-putting.



- 4.2.3 This initial feedback will be incorporated into a wider feasibility exercise regarding the future offer at Central Library. Further consultation will take place regarding Central Library and no decision regarding Central Library has been taken.
- 4.2.4 Any possible changes to Central Library would be informed by and help deliver the net zero carbon plan and energy reductions required by the Council. This will reduce ongoing costs, improve efficiency and reduce energy requirements. Any potential orks would be informed by a decarbonisation feasibility study.
- 4.3 MOBILE AND HOME LIBRARY SERVICE (HLS)**
- 4.3.1 As part of an initial assessment of how the home library service (HLS) has run under lockdown, we used the opportunity of wider consultation to understand how people have found the service since it restarted in 2020 following the first lockdown. Around 350 people use the HLS and as part of the consultation, 131 users responded to the survey. Users were in strong agreement as to the value of this service. 96% of users were very satisfied with this service.
- 4.3.2 The HLS delivers library stock to those unable to visit a library building. The service offers a personalised service where we find out what people like to read and then visits regularly to deliver new books and collect the old ones. The service delivers books or audiobooks from the whole Reading Libraries collection and further afield if required. Users are generally older people. Prior to Covid-19 this was done using two vehicles: a smaller van and a large vehicle. Reading is a top quartile performing authority in Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) data for the number of home readers it supports.
- 4.3.3 Due to Covid-19, the HLS was suspended between March and July 2020 and restarted in August 2020, using the smaller van. The service visited everyone who had previously been seen. The majority of customers prior to Covid-19 were visited at their own homes by staff or volunteers using the smaller van.

4.3.4 The large vehicle visited certain housing complexes and residential home settings, and also visited five locations within the borough where it was available for customers to board and select items to borrow, noting it is a partially accessible vehicle. These stops are located at:

- * Mapledurham (RG4) (temporarily at Chazey Road/Hewitt Road due to works)
- * Caversham Park Village shopping centre/Farnham Drive (RG4 6NY)
- * Emmer Green shopping centre/Peppard Road (RG4 8UZ)
- * Ashcroft Close (RG4 7NU)
- * Micklands Road (RG4 6LU)
- * Whitley Wood Community Centre (RG2 8UH)

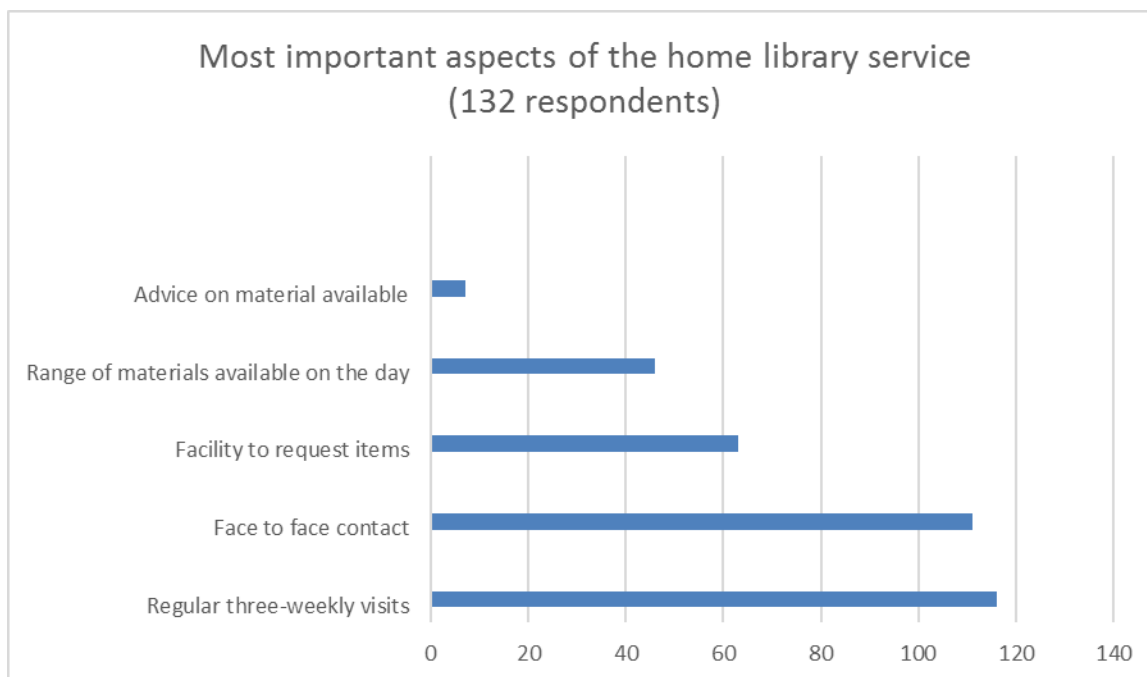
The use of this service pre-Covid-19 was low, with a total of around 15-17 people in total across the 5 stops (or 3 people per stop).

Where the large vehicle also visited residential housing complexes, the staff member also delivered items direct to customers' doors.

4.3.5 On restarting the home library service in August 2020, the large vehicle was not used due to the social distancing concerns involving vulnerable groups, and only the small van was used. The service resumed offering a direct to door delivery model, where customers continued to tell the service the type of book or audio book they would like to read and they were left at the doorstep and collected/exchanged by customers, with library staff remaining a safe distance away. This model continues today. All users at the 'public' stops (4.3.5) were contacted and were offered the direct delivery service, which all, except 1 customer, took up.

4.3.6 The feedback from the consultation is included in Appendix 1 and indicated the following in relation to the home library service:

- Highly valued service, especially by those who use it.
- Marketing and sign up is reliant on word of mouth/referral
- Capacity of service limited by existing model.
- Fiction/large print are the most frequently borrowed items.
- Digital can be useful but may not be suitable for many - support needed to get best use.
- Closer working with other Council services could be explored.



4.3.7 The service will continue to operate the HLS as per the August 2020 operating model and will reinstate the 5 'public stops', but using the smaller vehicle. The service will continue to give home visits to those users who were prior to March 2020 using the 'public stops' where that is the user preference. Everyone who is currently being seen by the service will continue to be seen, and the service aim will be to increase take-up of this service.

4.3.8 As part of the overall library service delivery plan the library service will review the operating model to explore options for reaching more non-users of the service, including vehicles, working with partners, reducing the impact of social isolation and loneliness in line with the strategic priorities, to allow the service to make the maximum difference.

4.4 CONCLUSIONS AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

4.4.1 Both the consultation findings and the data analysis demonstrate the rationale and support for adopting the following strategic priorities for the library service 2022-2025:

- Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic:
 - For libraries to be a key part of how Reading recovers from Covid and for Reading to 'think library' as part of recovery
 - To be the trusted place in communities where people can engage
 - To support the economic recovery for communities and individuals by hosting events, activities and services, enabling people to come back together.

- Helping Children and Young People
 - To ensure children's services work closely alongside the aims of Brighter Futures for Children, in order to maximise benefit and position the service as a key one contributing to the success and wellbeing of Reading's young people - with a particular focus on early speech and literacy
 - To provide a quality programme of events and activities that appeal to and help to develop creativity and a love of reading
 - To ensure that the voice of children and parents is part of service planning

- Improving access to online services
 - Work to support digitally excluded communities online, by hosting, supporting and developing device lending schemes, activities and supporting agencies who help people online, using library equipment to encourage people to get online
 - High quality online presence and offer - increased provision of e-resources, a range of resources for everyone to use, linked together seamlessly and efficiently to provide an excellent customer experience
 - Provide physical spaces that allow quality digital experiences - fast fixed networks, fast wifi and suitable spaces to plug in to support connectivity
 - Commitment to open data standards and working to encourage innovation

- Supporting improvements in Health, Wellbeing and Literacy
 - working with agencies in Reading to support targeted interventions and projects that will improve physical and mental health - encouraging this sector to 'think library' as a solution to reach the greatest number of people
 - Focused work in particular areas to reduce social isolation amongst particular communities to ensure that everyone can participate
 - Be key agent for town in getting public health messaging to communities and different age groups to reduce health inequality and support communities
 - A high quality book lending and digital lending service, focused on customer needs to make the service offer more attractive

- Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces
 - Work locally, regionally and nationally to provide high quality, locally focused experiences that delight audiences to ensure Reading as a place of culture is enhanced.
 - Support Reading's amazing cultural community to realise ambitions, by hosting, providing space and providing audiences to support artists and producers to stay in Reading

- Ensure library programming is alongside wider Cultural programming in Reading, encouraging ‘think library’ as a venue, audience and creative space to build audiences

The next step will be to develop a detailed strategy and delivery plan. The consultation process has enabled us to engage with a wider range of users and non users and the library service would like to continue to engage with the community as we develop plans.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The library service contributes to the to the shared agendas of the wider Council including the Council’s Corporate Plan, the emerging Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Culture and Heritage Strategy. Libraries are well placed to work with partners to deliver against a range of priorities and this will be one of the key principles of the Library Strategy 2022-25. The Strategy directly contributes towards the achievement of the following Corporate Plan priorities:

Healthy Environment

- Supporting mental health and wellbeing
- Services provided in local communities, with associated environmental benefits

Thriving Communities

- Tackling inequalities
- Dealing with effects of pandemic

Inclusive Economy

- Building on Cultural Heritage
- Creating skills, education and training opportunities

- 5.2 The Council’s corporate plan also highlights the need for Reading to be ‘Developing our library network to provide innovative local services in person and online’ - the Strategy will support this work.
- 5.3 The strategic priorities have been informed by the Council’s Customer Experience Strategy. Libraries are one of the busiest face to face Reading Borough Council services and, therefore, have an important role to play in providing a positive experience for our customers and residents.
- 5.4 The Council’s draft [Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-2030](#) says *health and wellbeing is about the whole person - giving physical, emotional and social aspects equal attention. It is about improving the way people feel and function today and increasing their chances of longer and healthier lives.* Libraries provide resources, activities and information, opportunities to connect, and promote, support and help with mental and physical wellbeing, and loneliness. The proposed strategic priorities for the library service would help contribute towards these aims.

- 5.5 The Council's [Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030](#) states *Reading will be recognised as a centre of creativity with a reputation for cultural and heritage excellence at a regional, national and international level with increased engagement across the town*. Libraries have the opportunity to provide spaces for artists and performers across Reading to access new audiences, provide inspirational culture in community venues reducing barriers to access, and enable the service to engage people in stories and storytelling in all forms. All of which supports the Council's wider cultural placemaking ambitions.
- 5.6 In addition, any changes to buildings would be done with environmental and carbon reduction principles, in line with further notes at Section 6 below.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers). The proposed strategic priorities would not directly contribute to changes in this area, with the following exception.
- 6.2 Any environmental or climate related issues arising as part of works to Central Library would be fully considered and would contribute to the net carbon zero aim by 2030. Should any works progress with Central Library then further opportunities would be taken to improve the energy efficiency of the building, which currently rates C-E on an Energy Performance Certificate scale. Overall any review of library buildings will include environmental improvements, in line with ongoing work on building efficiency and carbon reduction.
- 6.3 To note that current use of one smaller, more efficient vehicle to visit mobile and HLS customers will have a positive effect, particularly as RBC moves to an electric fleet.
- 6.4 Overall the proposals in this report will lead to reduced emissions of carbon and reduced environmental impact. An Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out showing a positive impact.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 The consultation methodology is summarised above (1.4) and the detailed report is at Appendix 1.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

8.2 Relevant protected characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

8.3 Having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to—

- a) remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- b) take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- c) encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

8.4 An initial Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out in respect of the exercise of creating the library strategy and delivery plan and this is included at Appendix 32]

8.5 Presently no Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out in respect of Central Library as no changes are currently proposed to this particular library. However, should the plans for Central Library change it will be necessary to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment Central Library and to consult on this.

8.6 Equality Impact Assessments will also be carried out as the delivery plan is developed.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Local Authorities have a statutory duty under the 1964 [Public Libraries and Museums Act](#) ‘to provide a comprehensive and efficient Library Service for all persons’ in the area that want to make use of it (section 7), taking into account local needs and resources. Further, local councils must:

- have regard to encouraging both adults and children to make full use of the Library Service (section 7(2)(b))
- lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area (section 8(3)(b))

- keep adequate stocks for borrowing/reference ‘sufficient in number, range and quality to meet the general requirements and any special requirements both of adults and children’

9.2 It is the statutory duty of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public Library Service provided by local authorities in England and secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries conferred on them as library authorities. The Secretary of State has a statutory power to intervene when a library authority fails (or is suspected of failing) to provide the required service (section 10). He/she will only intervene after careful consideration of local authorities’ compliance with the terms of the 1964 Act. This power to intervene has been utilised on only one occasion since 1964, with a [public inquiry on the Wirral](#) in 2009.

9.3 In October 2014, the Secretary of State, following receipt of a complaint in regards to Sheffield Library Service, issued a ‘[minded to](#)’ letter in October 2014, and in March 2015 issued a [final decision](#) letter. The decision letters cited the following observations of Ouseley J in *Bailey v London Borough of Brent* [2011] EWHC 2572 (Admin):

A comprehensive service cannot mean that every resident lives close to a library. This has never been the case. Comprehensive has therefore been taken to mean delivering a service that is accessible to all residents using reasonable means, including digital technologies. An efficient service must make the best use of the assets available in order to meet its core objectives and vision, recognising the constraints on council resources. Decisions about the Service must be embedded within a clear strategic framework which draws upon evidence about needs and aspirations across the diverse communities of the borough.

9.4 The letters also noted the view that:

- a wide range of approaches are open to the local authority when deciding how to provide a comprehensive and efficient Library Service
- the Secretary of State does not seek to proscribe how local authorities discharge their primary duty.

9.5 In determining whether to order an inquiry, the Secretary of State gives consideration to a number of factors, including:

- whether there is any serious doubt or uncertainty as to whether the local authority is (or may cease to be) complying with its legal obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient Library Service
- whether the local authority appears to be acting in a careless or unreasonable way
- whether the decision is or may be outside the proper bounds of the local authority’s discretion, such as a capricious decision to stop serving a particularly vulnerable group in the local community
- whether the local authority appears to have failed to consult affected individuals or to carry out significant research into the effects of its proposals
- whether the local authority has failed to explain, analyse or properly justify its proposals

- whether the local proposals are likely to lead to a breach of national library policy
- the advantages of local decision making by expert and democratically accountable local representatives
- whether there is any further good reason why a local inquiry should be ordered

9.6 The Secretary of State also noted that, as confirmed by the High Court in *R (Green) v Gloucestershire City Council* [2011] EWHC 2687 (Admin):

The availability of resources is highly material to the question of what constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service. The section 7 duty cannot be exempt or divorced from resource issues and cannot in law escape the reductions which have been rendered inevitable in the light of the financial crisis engulfing the country.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There will be no material saving or increase in expenditure directly arising from the strategy to be created. As the delivery plan develops, there may be changes to the revenue and capital budgets required, but these will be subject to the outcome of the Council's annual budget setting process.

10.2 The net budget for the library service in 2021/22 is £969,000.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 READING LIBRARIES: FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTION, 6 July 2021 report to Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee
<https://democracy.reading.gov.uk/documents/s17720/READING%20LIBRARIES%20FUTURE%20STRATEGIC%20DIRECTION.pdf>

APPENDIX ONE: CONSULTATION REPORT AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2021

Libraries consultation 2021 Reading Borough Council



**Report from RedQuadrant
September 27, 2021**

Reading Libraries Consultation Exercise

Executive Summary

The consultation ran for six weeks over August and September 2021



There were three elements to the consultation:

- To test the draft strategic priorities for the library service
- To get comments and ideas about Reading Central Library
- To understand what users of the Home Library Service value

We did this using a variety of methods:



The numbers

- **1287** responses to the survey: **18%** of respondents had not used Reading's library facilities in the last two years
- **132** Home Library Service users responded
- Open Days at all **7** libraries
- **4** focus groups with residents
 - Non-users of the library service via the Citizens Panel
 - Adult Social Care recipients and representatives of groups for disabled people
 - Parents and families via the Family Information Service and Brighter Futures
 - Reading housing tenants via the Tenant Participation team

What people said: Headline results

General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of previous budget cuts and reductions in opening hours is still keenly felt across communities: on occasion this was expressed alongside a mix of empathy and frustration • Generally, a strong sense of goodwill and supportive appreciation of the library service emerged from the stakeholder engagement programme • Books and buildings are important for many people: the development of online services and community hubs are equally important for other people: no clear consensus on how to strike the right balance emerged across the consultation programme • Responses from survey respondents demonstrated strong support and demand for an emphasis on books and reading while many discussions emphasised the importance of libraries as community hubs supporting local people • Some survey respondents were fearful that libraries would close as the emphasis in accessing information moves from books towards the internet and online services – this view was also represented in our non-user focus groups
Strategic priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong endorsement, supported by a breadth of evidence, that people see the library service having a crucial role to play as communities recover from the pandemic • Helping Children and Young People is unanimously viewed as one of the cornerstones of developing the new library vision. Developing the offer for older children and staffing implications are key considerations • Improving access to online services has been endorsed as a priority area of focus, with the caveat that it is a multi-faceted and complex area of service provision. • Supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy is evidently seen as one of the key elements of developing a vision for libraries, ranging from promoting the multifarious benefits of reading to partnership schemes and community-based projects. • Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces has a consultation mandate as a focus area with expressed opportunities for greater collaboration and community engagement. • All five proposed areas of focus were heavily supported across the consultation, with varying levels of strong agreement across the individual elements
Reading Central Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong preferences for a central and accessible location • A clear demand for good quality stock and the promotion of reading and learning throughout people's lives

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT facilities and online services should cater for all needs: from basic provision through to subscription services and the development of new technologies • There was a strong sense across all formats of the library being much valued but now looking tired and in need of refurbishment and modernisation.
Home Library Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely high levels of satisfaction were recorded for the Home Library Service, both in terms of materials provided and staff. There is potential for increased demand, but this would be likely to create capacity issues under the current delivery model.

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1. Introduction and Context

Reading's library service is developing a vision to ensure it is forward looking, innovative and provides an excellent experience for everyone. Libraries also want to contribute as much as possible to the new Corporate Plan and the overall corporate priorities for Reading.

Since the last Library Strategy was launched in 2015/16, there have been significant changes, not least the global pandemic, and libraries everywhere have adapted and changed focus to meet the needs of their users (and potential users).

This work is happening at a time of intense uncertainty and change and is crucial in making sure that limited resources are used to their best. It is also a chance to refocus and consider the future Reading library service.

Public libraries have changed significantly over the last decade. The most successful public library services are at the heart of their communities and helping to meet council priorities on health and wellbeing, education, digital enablement and employment. The current pandemic has further demonstrated how libraries can give vital support to local people and play a central role in community recovery.

These changes have been demonstrated in Reading during the pandemic by the increase in library membership, virtual and physical services delivered during lockdown, the significant uptake of digital resources and the recognition of libraries as an essential council service. The new strategy will reflect those developments and the results of this engagement, focused on the needs of Reading's communities.

2. The strategic priorities

The five priority areas for Reading Library Service, set out below, were developed using analysis of available usage statistics, patterns of use and demographic information, enabling a focus on areas of need in Reading.

Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic

- Spaces open to everyone in local communities
- Connecting to wider community projects to support residents
- A good quality library service when people need it

Helping Children and Young People

- Access for everyone to inspiring spaces, books, online content, and activities
- Encouraging reading for pleasure
- Supporting early speech and language

Improving access to online services

- Providing free access to computers and Wi-Fi for all
- Helping people who don't have a computer or can't use one
- Providing an easy-to-use online service

Supporting improvements in Health, Wellbeing and Literacy

- Working to make Reading a great place to live, work, and study
- Helping to reduce inequality and improve mental and physical health
- Encouraging reading in all forms at all ages

Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces

- Working with arts, heritage and cultural organisations locally and regionally
- Hosting and highlighting art, heritage and culture from local communities
- Encouraging people to take part by offering free or affordable activities

3. Methodology: how we consulted

3.1 What we asked

RedQuadrant were commissioned by the council in August 2021 to carry out a six-week programme of public consultation and engagement on:

- The **proposed new strategic priorities** to underpin an emerging vision for the library service: to gather feedback on whether they were the right priority areas. The consultation also sought to get the views of residents and stakeholders on how they use and interact with library service. Views were also sought from people who don't currently use libraries.
- **Reading Central Library**: in light of the potential development of a new central library, views were sought on how people used, or didn't use the current facility, and what they would like to see provided in the future.
- **Home Library Service**: the consultation asked how people currently use the service, how they felt about the service they receive, and how they would like to see the service develop.

We worked very closely with the library management team in the development of the consultation plan and the survey questionnaire. We liaised with the communications team and a number of other council services to ensure that the consultation was both wide reaching in its scope and well publicised through a range of media.

3.2 Getting a wide range of views: recruitment and publicity

Libraries are a universal service for all residents, and it was important to try to canvass as many people as possible to get their views. We used a range of council and community channels to publicise the survey and recruit to focus groups:

- Housing and Communities; Tenant Services
- Adult Social Care groups mailing list, Disability support groups
- Family Information Service, Brighter Futures mailing lists including foster carers and teachers
- Reading Citizens Panel
- Access Officer
- ACRE
- Reading Youth Council
- Council's social media

Our consultation plan also included speaking with designated library staff and stakeholders.

The range of engagement methods across the consultation are shown below.



Consultation in the summer can be challenging so we made sure that events were spread across August and September. We were also flexible to maximise participation.

4. Reach of the consultation

4.1 Breadth of engagement

We sought to engage as widely as possible; canvassing views of regular customers but also reaching out to people who are not regular library users and whose views are therefore less frequently heard.

In addition to offering people a number of ways to complete the questionnaire, the combined offer of online and in person engagement activities enabled residents and stakeholders to share their thoughts in the way that is the most convenient for them.

The range of engagement methodologies employed, combined with the collaborative approach and the commitment demonstrated across the council, enabled us to achieve a very high response rate.

4.2 Scale of consultation

The consultation programme ran from August 9th until September 17th 2021, and we received views in the following formats:

A survey questionnaire (online with paper copies available), widely promoted:

- 1287 responses
- 18% of respondents had not used Reading's library facilities in the last two years.

Surveys are excellent for getting a large range of views across a number of key questions. Free text questions gave respondents opportunity to share specific points. From our experience, the survey completion rate was excellent and many respondents wrote passionately about libraries in their open responses.

Focus groups and/or individual conversations with:

- Non-users of the library service via the Citizens Panel
- Adult Social Care recipients and representatives of groups for disabled people
- Parents and families via the Family Information Service and Brighter Futures
- Reading housing tenants via the Tenant Participation team

Online focus group discussions had between 3 and 8 members which enabled participation from all members. Although these numbers of attendees are small, the information gained was rich. Participants were able to build on others' opinions and share the reasoning behind their views.

A targeted survey questionnaire for home library users with:

- 117 respondents giving views via a telephone survey
- 15 home library users who filled in the full online survey, including targeted questions on the home library service

This enabled us to hear from home library users, including those who were not comfortable, willing or able to fill in the full survey.

Open days or drop-in engagement sessions at all libraries

- where people had the chance to come and talk face to face about the consultation and where we were able to promote the survey to many customers

Stakeholder interviews

- with councillors, senior council managers, library managers and staff, officers in services and partner organisations currently work, or could work more closely with, the library service.

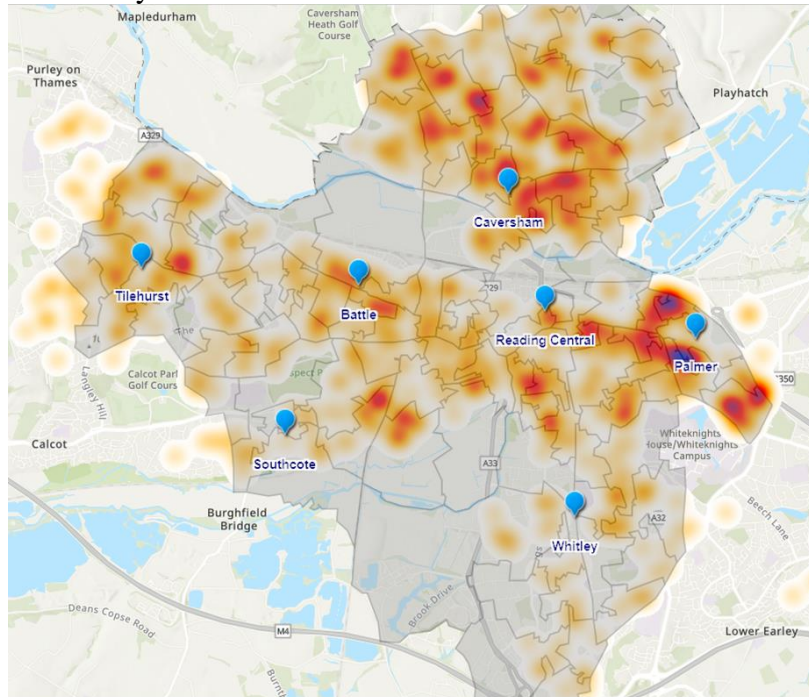
Customers and potential customers engaged with us positively, providing constructive comments that will be invaluable to the library service as it continues to develop its strategic aims and better meet the needs of its communities in a range of ways.

Throughout we have been impressed with the level of engagement and commitment from council staff, both those involved with Libraries directly and those who we have liaised with to broaden the scope and reach of the consultation programme.

4.3 Geographic reach

4.3.1 Survey respondents

Survey respondents were spread across the borough, with hot spots in the east and in the area close to Caversham library.



4.3.2 Focus group and individual conversations

Individual and focus group respondents were recruited from across the borough in partnership with council officers from a number of service areas. All libraries were mentioned as being local to individuals during our conversations.

4.4 Equalities Breakdown

4.4.1 Survey respondents

Gender	Age	Disability	Ethnic group
Female: 66% Male: 28% PSD: 1% PNS: 5%	Under 25: 2% 25-34: 13% 35-44: 24% 45-54: 18% 55-64: 17% 65-74: 15% 75 plus: 7% PNS: 4%	Yes: 11% No: 84% PNS 5%	White ethnic groups: 80% Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: 2% Black ethnic groups: 1% Asian ethnic groups: 5% Other ethnic groups: 1% PNS: 11%

Religion	Sexual Orientation
No religion: 42% Christian: 37% Muslim: 2% Jewish: 1% Hindu: 1% Buddhist: 1% Other: 3% PNS: 14%	Heterosexual: 74% Gay or Lesbian: 3% Bisexual: 4% Other: 2% PNS: 17%

5.3.2 Focus group and individual conversations: equalities considerations

We targeted our focus groups and individual conversations at people who might be less likely to engage with the library service, council communications and a formal consultation. In these groups, we saw greater representation from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, and even gender split and more people in the 25-54 age brackets. The rich information we heard goes some way to balance the underrepresentation of people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities and men via the survey responses

5. Findings from consultation

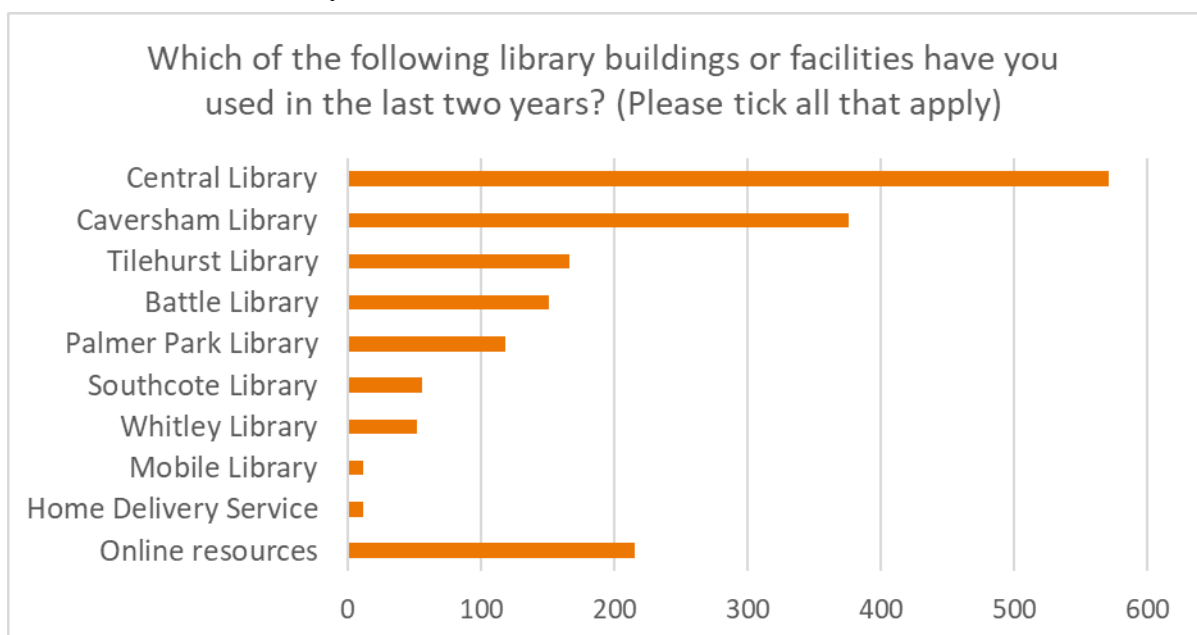
We have organised the findings from all areas of the consultation into key areas and themes. These are:

- Library usage
- The five proposed focus areas (strategic priorities)
- Reading Central Library
- The Home Library Service.

5.1 Library usage

5.1.1 How people use libraries in Reading

- 82% of respondents had used Reading Libraries in the last two years, with 53% being users in the last six months
- Central Library (62%) and Caversham Library (42%) were the most common library facilities used by respondents in the last two years, whilst 23% had used online resources remotely



The top ten services reported as the most regularly used by survey respondents (all library users) were:

1. Books – adults (81%)
2. Books – children and young people (41%)
3. Rhymetime (18%)
4. eBooks (18%)
5. Summer Reading Challenge (17%)
6. In person events (14%)
7. Newspaper and magazines - paper copies (12%)
8. Study Space (12%)

9. Seating areas (12%)

10. Storytime sessions and online resources (both 11%)

All other options listed were selected by less than 10% of library user respondents. Respondents were asked to choose up to five services and that survey approach accounts for the wide range of services and percentages recorded. The indicated usage levels of adult books (81%) and books for children and young people (41%) were significantly higher than all other options.

Other services mentioned are shown below (the size of the font corresponds to how often it was mentioned):



An expanded range of online resources (44%), coding clubs (25%), spaces to create and use new technologies (24%), community language and culture collections (21%), and scrabble clubs (14%) were specific service offers flagged up in the questionnaire. Respondents expressed their interest in using these services at **some point in the future** as per the figures in brackets. The levels of interest expressed also endorse the proposed focus areas to varying extents. 24% of respondents said they have no interest in the above options.

5.1.2 Service usage during the pandemic

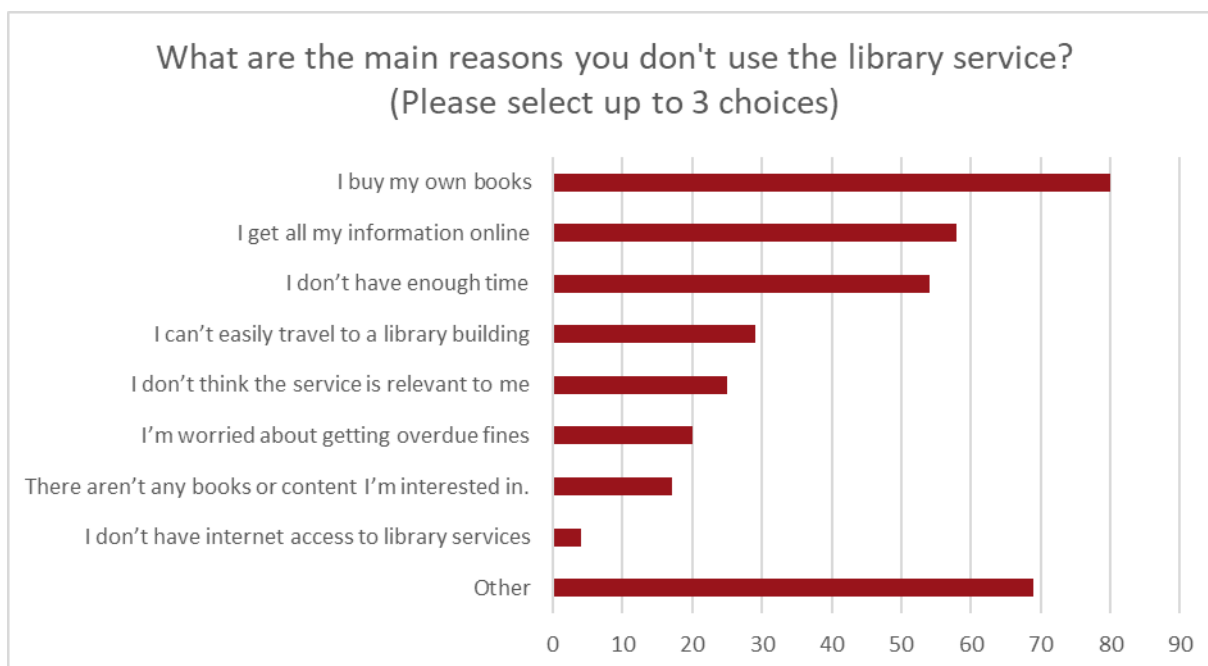
- 85% of respondents said that the facility they missed the most during the pandemic was choosing their own books and other items, followed by attending events and activities for children and young people (24%) and events for all ages (24%)
- The service most used during the pandemic was the Click and Collect specific items (45%), where customers could choose their own items. Many respondents said they would be interested in using that service again in the future.
- In contrast, only 7% of respondents had used the Click and collect service for items selected by library staff
- 30% of respondents had used eLibrary services (eBooks, eAudio and eMagazines)
- Only 3% of respondents had attended online Storytimes and other online events respectively

Reading Library is a terrific asset in the town, truly shining during the pandemic

5.1.3 Hearing from people who don't use libraries

A critical aim for this consultation was to hear from people who don't use libraries or haven't used libraries for some time. 219 people who responded to the survey (18%) had not used library services in the last 2 years. We chose this time period to allow for pre-pandemic use to be recorded. We also carried out one targeted focus group for people who didn't use the library. Other focus groups were open to users and non-users, but the majority of people who attended had some connection with the library service, even if only as Rhymetime attendees, or were lapsed users.

The top three reasons cited in the survey by non-users for not using libraries were that they buy their own books (48%); that they get all their information online (34%); and not having enough time (32%).



Some other common reasons that people mentioned were that the opening hours were inconvenient, or they were unclear on when the library was open, they had access to a university library, or because of the pandemic itself.

In relation to opening hours, respondents said:

It's open only
on specific
days

Opening hours are a
barrier when I work full
time during the week

The library is
never open

Opening times don't
match working times

The library in Caversham is
not open when I have time to
visit

Other reasons cited are below:

I got out of the habit and
have lost my library ticket

I belong to a book swap group so get my books
from there so saves travelling to the library

unlikely to
be the moment.

I don't know the
details of the
offer

Covid prevented me
wanting to return to the
library

Never
think of it
anymore

Former library users who attended our focus group mentioned the following reasons for no longer using the library:

- Reduction in expenditure had a significant effect on book stock making it less attractive to borrow books
- Reduction in opening hours, especially libraries no longer opening into the evening, is a barrier to potential use
- One person said that they no longer need library access to these resources as they can buy books and access the internet now

My library use faded away when the stock became fossilised after a marked drop in expenditure

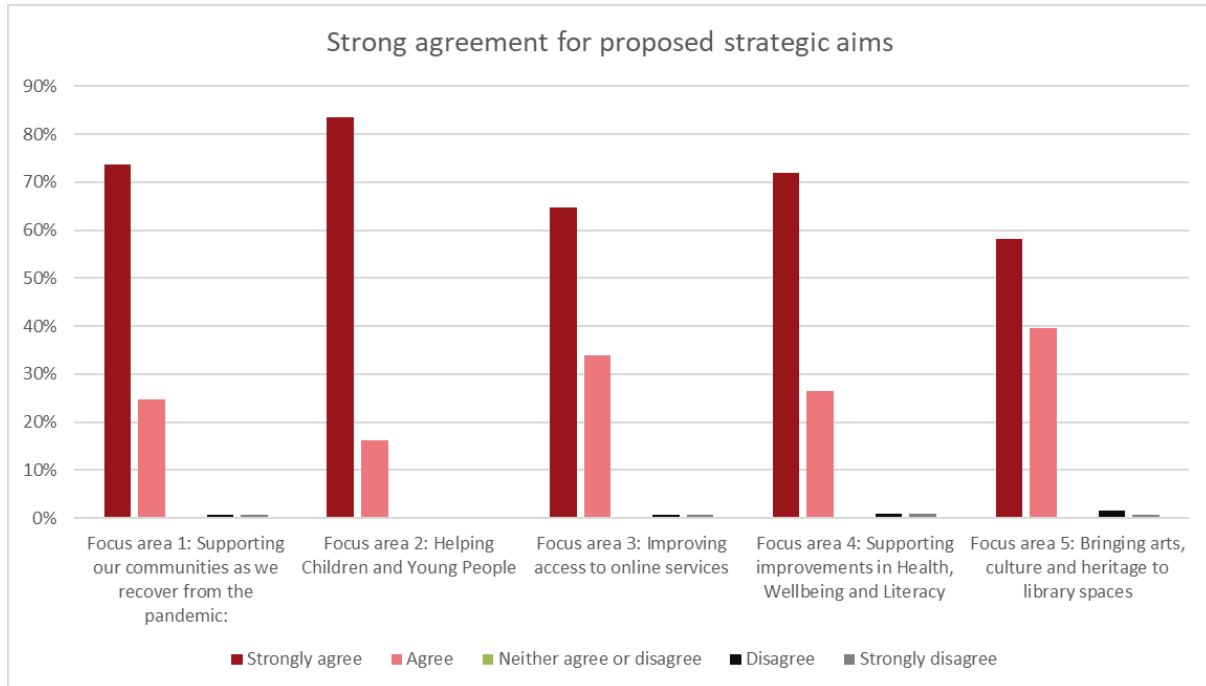
Focus group attendees cited the following as potential opportunities for increasing library use:

- Embedded cafes or book shops as well as considering possible co location with post offices and other facilities
- Reacting to the changes in technology and supporting customers in that
- Extended opening hours perhaps in line with late night shopping
- More marketing and publicity is needed, perhaps virtual tours and podcasts by library staff - and remember that not everyone uses social media
- More events and activities in the libraries

5.2 Strategic priorities: proposed focus areas

The five proposed focus areas, or strategic priorities, to underpin the vision and direction of the new library strategy were tested through both the survey questionnaire and stakeholder discussions. Each priority heading had subheadings within the questionnaire.

Survey responses demonstrated that both library users and non-users were in overall agreement with the proposed focus areas; library users were markedly stronger in agreement than non-users.



Some respondents suggested that the library service might be trying to over-extend itself given limited resources and should stick more closely to the traditional view of a library.

Feel there is danger of overextending the scope of limited library resources and not targeting what the core functions are and doing them well

Comments from survey respondents regarding the focus areas tended to deal with specific areas on which respondents would like there to be greater emphasis. There was a huge range of ideas, with the most common being around focusing on services for children and young people, the importance of a strong collection of physical books, and more accessible opening hours.



313 responses, size of response indicates how often this theme was mentioned.

Only themes mentioned by over 10 respondents are included

Other themes mentioned by fewer than 10 people were:

- Online services
- Training and support
- Café
- Diverse stock
- Family and local history
- Goods library/repair café
- Library service from other locations
- Traditional library service
- Host other organisations
- Volunteers
- Computers and online access
- Council services
- Home delivery and mobile libraries
- Study space
- Art, heritage & culture
- Job seeker support
- Businesses

Two potentially competing views were raised by a number of respondents: the importance of having a strong focus on books as a traditional role of libraries; and on making the most of the physical space available, enabling the library to be a heavily usable community space

Libraries should not be community halls or community centres. They should focus on reading and accessing information. They should be quiet places with helpful and knowledgeable staff who know how to source information. Reading will soon have thousands more residents in the area, so we need a city sized library focused on reading and information. It should not try to be an exciting event centre; that would detract from its core purpose. I had to leave central library on many occasions as I could not think over the noise of chatting and picnicking in the book lending areas.

Please keep very strongly focused on [books and reading'. Let community centres do the community stuff.

A local library is also a community centre, so activities suitable for each locality are an important part of being inclusive and accessible.

Libraries in the 21st century should be the centre of communities - events, making connections for people, providing a venue for business and as a point of access for public services and support. And they should always be open seven days a week, so that working people can also use the services.

5.2.1 Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic

92% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the overall strategic priority of focusing on supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic

In terms of the three individual elements supporting the overall aim, a good quality library service when people need it registered the strongest agreement percentage from 98% of respondents

Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic

- Spaces open to everyone in local communities
- Connecting to wider community projects to support residents
- A good quality library service when people need it

Strategic priority subheadings	Strongly agree	Agree	Total in agreement
Spaces open to everyone in local communities	72%	22%	94%
Connecting to wider community projects	51%	34%	85%
A good quality library service when people need	85%	13%	98%

The above figures correlate reasonably closely with feedback from the focus groups, drop-in sessions and stakeholder interviews. However, spaces in local communities and connecting to wider community projects featured prominently in discussions outside of the survey.

- Strong evidence that people had badly missed the library service during the pandemic and were keen for normal service to be resumed
- Opportunities for community groups and volunteers to work with the council to extend opening hours to host events and activities
- Opportunities to connect with local community entrepreneurs to host pop up or low-cost space
- The importance of providing venues and services for support with using computers for beginners and searching and applying for jobs was emphasised by a number of individuals
- As they are a universal service, stakeholders see libraries as a potential referral or advertising route, especially providing a way to reach children
- A number of focus group participants saw libraries as a place of peace and calm – either to rest, or to do focused work. Some participants also saw libraries as a good place to meet others from the local community

Improve the library service in deprived areas like Whitley where there is a low literacy rate

Libraries as community hubs in the Scandinavian style should be a priority: they are about more than books and the online offer

Libraries are vital to those residents who are new to the country: the citizenship role is crucial

Local libraries must be kept going for the benefit of those who would otherwise be most adversely affected if there was a move towards centralised facilities. The 'pop in' aspect of the library is lost if one has to get on a bus to get to the town centre. A local library is also a community centre, so activities suitable for each locality are an important part of being inclusive and accessible.

Conclusion: A very strong endorsement for this proposed area of focus across all consultation formats, with “a good quality library service when people need it” as the element with strongest agreement for survey respondents. This provides clear evidence that people see the library service having a crucial role to play as communities recover from the pandemic.

5.2.2 Helping Children and Young People

96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the overall strategic priority of focusing on Helping Children and Young People. Encouraging reading for pleasure was the most strongly agreed with element of the overarching aim at 85% of respondents. Extremely high levels of agreement were expressed across all three elements, ranging

Helping Children and Young People

- Access for everyone to inspiring spaces, books, online content, and activities
- Encouraging reading for pleasure
- Supporting early speech and language

It's really important to me that RCL offers support with applying for jobs, CV and letter writing and using computers

from 94% to 98%

Strategic priority subheadings	Strongly agree	Agree	Total in agreement
<p>The library is not about reading alone – it's about human and communal</p> <p>Access for everyone to inspiring spaces, books, online content and activities</p>	80%	15%	95%
Encouraging reading for pleasure	85%	13%	98%
Supporting early speech and language	76%	18%	94%

The extremely high support for this focus area from survey respondents was echoed across all other formats of engagement, from the various focus groups through to key stakeholders and non-users

- Children and young people were very widely recognised and cited as high priority by the large majority of stakeholders, council managers and customers: however, this does not appear to be reflected across the management structure and staffing establishment
- In particular, Rhymetime is extremely highly valued by parent/carers and children and was referenced by the majority of stakeholders as a success story for the service
- Parents were keen to see other opportunities being developed as part of the library offer for their children as they grow older: the “What next after Rhymetime?” factor was flagged up on a number of occasions. Coding clubs and reading groups were some of the options mentioned. One focus group participant mentioned that young people often congregate outside Southcote library so there is an opportunity there
- Reading Repertory Theatre have initiated a 4–5-year partnership with libraries and others, focusing on children and young people.
- Some stakeholders saw the library service as a good way to be able to reach all children. Other felt that the library service needs to be sold to children and young people and that there are barriers and myths for some that need to be broken down. For

example, “you need to be clever to go to a library” or that it’s very complicated to join a library.

- Some stakeholders found that when partnering with libraries they had an easier route to working with schools, since the ‘legitimacy’ of a free library service takes away the barrier of being seen as ‘selling something’. When working with schools, an opportunity, but also a challenge is for libraries to have sufficient planning and stock in line with the curriculum
- Space in libraries was also seen by stakeholders as a great place to host events for parents – in this way parents can be influenced to develop their own love of reading and also have a better understanding of what libraries can offer to their children.
- A potential opportunity cited by a stakeholder would be to develop and market an offer to foster carers.

I would like to see better links between branch libraries and local schools, especially where schools don't have enough resources or pupils don't have access to books at home.

You could provide standalone children’s libraries

The library supports my child with his learning disability by giving a wider range of access to books

Conclusion: A virtually unanimous endorsement for this proposed area of focus, including its

In collaboration with the university and local high-tech companies, there could be more focus on STEM education, and increasing diversity in STEM. Coding clubs, robotics clubs/workshops, math camps, etc. could be some ideas to consider. I believe Reading area has lots of volunteer potential to make some of these a reality, and library can provide organisational and logistical support.

three individual elements, from all quarters of the consultation spectrum. Helping Children and Young People is clearly seen as one of the cornerstones of developing the new library vision.

5.2.3 Improving access to online services

91% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the overall aim of focusing on improving access to online services. Helping people who don't have a computer or can't use one was the most strongly supported element of the overall aim at 67% of respondents. All three individual elements had agreement levels of 88% or higher

Improving access to online services

Providing free access to computers and Wi-Fi for all

- Helping people who don't have a computer or can't use one
- Providing an easy-to-use online service

Strategic aim subheadings	Strongly agree	Agree	Total in agreement
Providing free access to computers and Wi-Fi for all	54%	34%	88%
Helping people who don't have a computer or can't use one	67%	27%	94%
Providing an easy-to-use online service	58%	33%	91%

- Evidence gathered from discussions with stakeholders and focus groups participants reinforced the agreement of survey respondents that improving access to online services was a key role for libraries
- Helping people who don't have a computer or can't use one was firmly recognised as a vital part of the library offer by respondents, people who attended the drop-in sessions, and focus group participants. People felt it was important that this included informal support for beginners, e.g., drop-in sessions or clinics, as well as more formal arrangements such as structured training courses
- Some participants mentioned that the quality of WIFI and internet connection was important for people to be able to have a good experience online

A wide range of individual needs across all respondents in relation to online services:

- One stakeholder highlighted the potential role for libraries in relation to home learning and/or homework, especially for families with more children than available devices
- Another stakeholder suggests that a key role for libraries is their ability to offer access to online content that is not available elsewhere, for example, specialist journals or family history information
- Many focus groups or drop-in session attendees demonstrated a good knowledge and experience of online services, including subscription services and digital content. Conversely a number of people expressed little or no knowledge of how to use computers and access online services
- Online service may not be easily accessible for some home delivery customers or for some individuals with long standing health conditions e.g., people recovering from

I don't know how to use computers, but I would really like to learn when the library restarts its sessions

It's not fair to leave people behind [digital exclusion] – it will be good if the library contributes to helping people who feel left behind

In all these new and technologically focussed things, please don't forget those of us who just want to go to our local library, browse real, physical books and borrow some, with a human being physically present

strokes



Conclusion: High overall agreement for this proposed priority, although less strong agreement for the individual elements compared with some other proposed areas. This may reflect the diverse range of existing skills and emerging future needs amongst customers and residents, as evidenced in the focus groups. Improving access to online services has been endorsed as a priority with the caveat that it is a multi-faceted and complex area of service provision.

5.2.4 Supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy

91% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the overall priority of supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy. Encouraging reading in all forms at all ages was the element that registered the highest percentage of strong agreement at 81% of respondents.

Whilst there was some significant variation in levels of strong agreement, all three elements registered individual agreement rates of 88% or higher.

Feedback gathered outside of the survey also provided evidence of strong support for this proposed area of focus. Thoughts, comments and suggestions put forward reflect the breadth of opportunities in this area.

Supporting improvements in Health, Wellbeing and Literacy

- Working to make Reading a great place to live, work, and study
- Helping to reduce inequality and improve mental and physical health
- Encouraging reading in all forms at all ages

Strategic priorities subheadings	Strongly agree	Agree	Total in agreement
Working to make Reading a great place to live, work, and study	58%	30%	88%
Helping to reduce inequality and improve mental and physical health	61%	27%	88%
Encouraging reading in all forms at all ages	81%	16%	97%

- Stakeholders felt that libraries are a place people ‘recognise’, so potentially a good place from which to provide other services
- Specific examples of supporting health put forward by stakeholders included closer partnership working with other council services and external partners; working with community groups and volunteers to house advice and drop-in sessions; and putting local arrangements in place where appropriate and practical.
- An individual we spoke to suggested partnerships with local GP surgeries, showcasing relevant books such as self-help books that could improve mental or physical health
- Another stakeholder saw libraries as having a key role with older people who are digitally excluded and have become increasingly disenfranchised during the pandemic. Libraries can offer ways for people to engage outside of the digital realm.
- Stakeholders see opportunities both in the space and status of libraries. They felt there might be opportunity for more support around wellbeing as well as practical support for employability and job applications

Conclusion: A high level of overall agreement for this priority, with particularly strong agreement for the individual element of ‘encouraging reading in all forms at all ages.’ This view was unanimous. Supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy is evidently seen as one of the key elements of developing a vision for libraries, ranging from promoting the multifarious benefits of reading to partnership schemes and community-based projects.

5.2.5 Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces

84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the overall aim of focusing on bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces.

55% of survey respondents registered strong agreement for encouraging people to take part by offering free or affordable activities

The levels of strong agreement for the individual elements of this area amongst survey respondents were markedly lower than in the case of the other four proposed focus areas.

However individual levels of general agreement ranged from 81% to 88%

Several focus groups participants emphasised the importance of working with local communities and organisations in the context of the library as a hub for events and activities.

Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces

- Working with arts, heritage and cultural organisations locally and regionally
- Hosting and highlighting art, heritage and culture from local communities
- Encouraging people to take part by offering free or affordable activities

Strategic priority subheadings	Strongly agree	Agree	Total in agreement
Working with arts, heritage and cultural organisations locally and regionally	48%	35%	83%
Hosting and highlighting art, heritage and culture from local communities	47%	34%	81%
Encouraging people to take part by offering free or affordable activities	55%	33%	88%

Less non-survey feedback was gathered regarding access to arts, culture and heritage than was the case with the other priorities. Some customers mentioned their having appreciated the talks in Central Library before the pandemic, but many felt there was more that could be done. Some partners suggested that this could have a more local feel, reflecting Reading's communities in local collections or by offering a more diverse range of books and other materials to attract wider community participation

The stakeholder interviews provided a few examples of opportunities for improved collaborative work in this area of focus

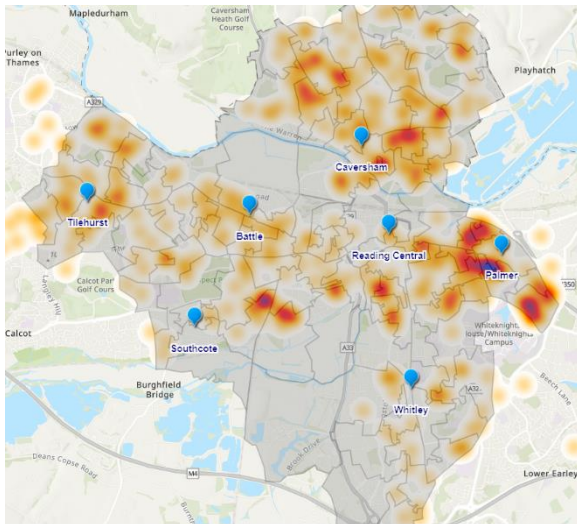
- Reading Museum and Reading Repertory Theatre are very keen to build on existing relationships and work more collaboratively with the library service, particularly with children and young people in the case of the latter.
- Some examples, such as the Storyhouse in Chester, were highlighted with suggestions that extended partnership working could offer a sustainable way for libraries to maintain a physical presence.

Conclusion: Broad overall agreement with this proposed priority, albeit with slightly lower percentage levels than other focus areas. Individual elements attracted similar levels of agreement. Community focus and affordability were the main elements endorsed by focus groups in this sphere. Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces has a consultation mandate as a focus area with opportunities for greater collaboration and community engagement.

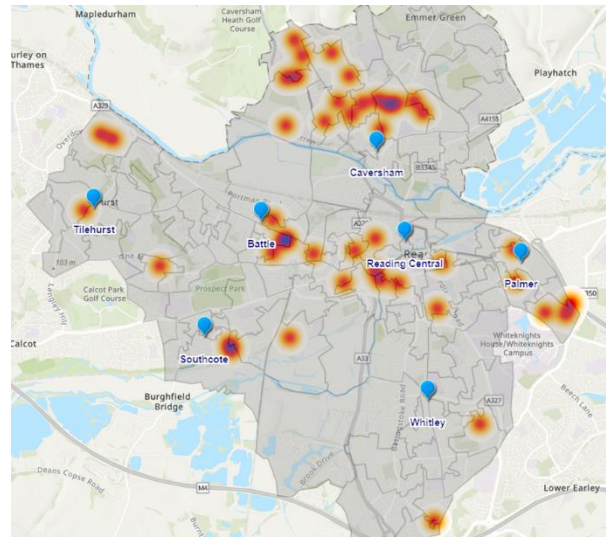
5.3 Reading Central Library

Feedback on current usage and ideas for the future development of Reading Central Library were sought via the questionnaire and through stakeholder discussions and focus groups

- 68% of survey respondents had used Reading Central Library in some form in the last two years
- Mapping survey respondent postcodes: those who have used Reading Central Library in the last two years are spread across the borough in this way:

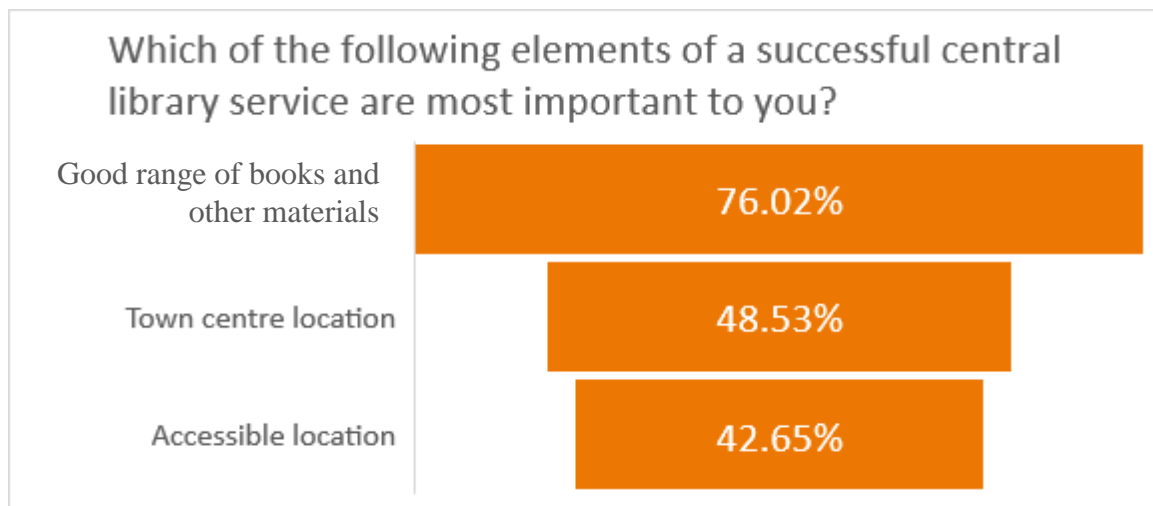


*Survey respondents who have used Central library services **in person** in the last 2 years (456 postcodes)*



*Survey respondents who have used Central library services **remotely** in the last 2 years (44 postcodes)*

- Survey respondents were asked to choose the top four service elements that were the most important to them in the context of Reading Central Library.



- The requirement to choose four options without any form of ranking (e.g., 1,2,3,4) will have had an impact on the top line results. The vast majority of respondents chose the maximum number of options and the resulting data requires careful analysis. For example, it is clearly evident that a good range of books and other materials is of great importance to over three quarters of survey respondents. Toilet provision was reported as an issue at the drop-in session but 26% of survey respondents is significantly higher than other facilities, such as IT and WIFI provision

- The high scores for town centre location (49%) and accessible location (43%) are in marked contrast to the low score of 14% for high street location close to shops. In this instance it is reasonable to conclude that the first two options were significantly more important to people than a high street location
- Priority elements were similar for those who use libraries and those who don't use/haven't recently used libraries

Service/facility	Included in top four most important choices – percentage of survey respondents	
	All respondents	Non library users
Good range of books and other materials	76%	47%
Town centre location	49%	24%
Accessible location	43%	32%
Events and activities for all ages	26%	20%
Toilet facilities	26%	26%
Events and activities for children and young people	22%	16%
Study space	16%	13%
IT facilities	15%	10%
WIFI provision	14%	15%
High street location	14%	8%
Online services	13%	13%
Space for general community use/cafe facilities	12% for each option	11% for each option

All other options recorded importance levels of less than 10% for users and non-users:

- online events
- carbon efficient building
- development of new technologies
- support for local start-up businesses
- meeting rooms
- range of partners in the same building
- access to wider council services under one roof (11% for non-users)
- general seating areas
- help and advice sessions

5.3.1 Location

- The vast majority of focus groups attendees felt that the Central Library is well located. The only problem cited around location was the lack of affordable parking near the library. However, since the public transport options are excellent, this was not a barrier for most.
- A small number of people said that they didn't feel the current location is central, and one participant didn't know Central Library existed until attending the focus group. One suggestion for location was to be closer to the Civic Centre or in a high street location.
- A number of people mentioned that there are some antisocial behaviour issues, particularly with people congregating in the entrance area
- Many stakeholders felt that the location of Central Library is excellent – central and well-established. One stakeholder said that the only location that they felt could be better was inside the Oracle.

5.3.2 Fabric of the building

- A number of people, especially internal and external stakeholders liked the overall size of the building but felt that the inside of the building was severely in need of refurbishment and could be off-putting to customers as is.
- In addition, the 'tired' nature of the building takes away from opportunities to use the space for other activities such as performance arts or networking meetings
- Many stakeholders mentioned that a refresh to the building is well overdue.
- Members of the non-user focus group felt that any new library should be attractive and community focused, perhaps modular with different areas for different purposes with functional and flexible space

5.3.3 Facilities

- Many comments via the survey, focus groups and stakeholder conversations were made about the need for public toilets in the library, but that the current (now closed) toilets were not in an acceptable condition
- A number of stakeholders mentioned that the size of Central Library lends itself very well to an offering for training and meetings
- A number of stakeholders and focus group members suggested that a good quality café would be a great addition.
- Accessibility is key – one wheelchair user mentioned the difficulty with entering and existing the lift and a stakeholder mentioned there had been some problems with lack of reliability of the lift

Libraries are important for people throughout their lives and I love the people at Reading Central Library

Feels a bit tired and run down.

Reading Library is not glamorous, but it's good

Reading Central library could be greatly improved by better lighting and more books on the ground floor.

Refurbish Central Library. It is a good building but desperately needs top to tail refurbishment.

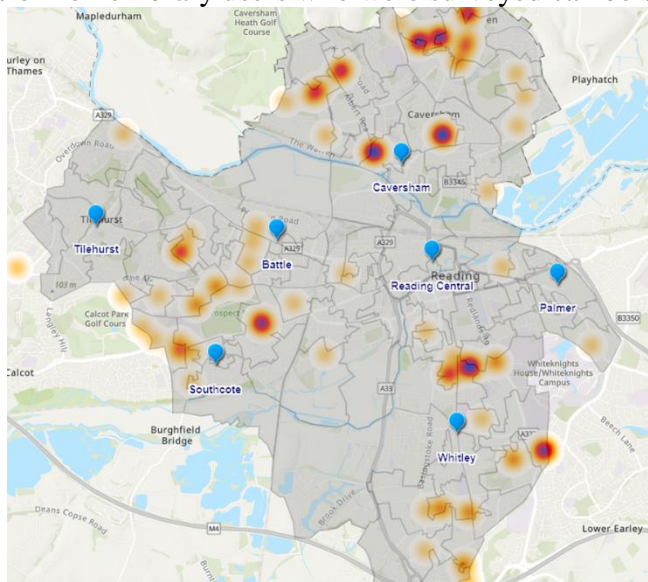
Conclusion: This preliminary piece of engagement work on Reading Central Library has evidenced a number of key themes for consideration:

- Strong preferences for a central and accessible location
- A clear demand for good quality stock and the promotion of reading and learning throughout people's lives
- IT facilities and online services should meet all need: from basic provision through to subscription services and the development of new technologies
- There was a strong sense across all formats of the library being much valued but now looking tired and in need of refurbishment and modernisation.

5.4 Home library service

The Home Library Service delivers books and other materials to residents who are unable to get out and visit libraries. Staff (and volunteers prior to the pandemic) have delivered and collected back items carefully selected to meet the expressed needs of customers. One strand of this consultation programme sought to find out the views of recipients on how they use the service and how to best meet their needs in future.

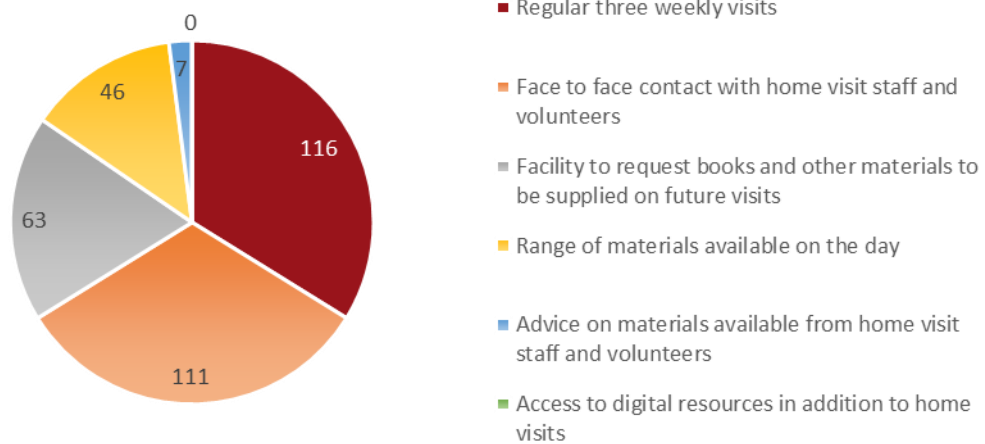
The spread of postcodes of home library users who were surveyed can be seen in this map:



Home library users surveyed (111 postcodes)

- Stakeholders and service recipients were unanimously in strong agreement that the home library delivery service is hugely appreciated by recipients: it enhances people's quality of life and provides access to books and other materials
- As to be expected, over 75s (78% of respondents) and people who have a disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010 (58% of respondents) are well represented in home library users. Only 3% of respondents are from BAME communities.
- The marketing of the service and the sign-up process relies very heavily on word of mouth, Visual Impairment Scheme referrals and personal recommendations.
- There is potential for growth and development but there are resource implications under the current model
- The service delivery model hasn't been reviewed for many years and closer working with other council services is an option which can be explored
- 126 of the 131 survey respondents said they were *very satisfied* with the home library service, whilst no respondents were dissatisfied with the service.
- Fiction books (regular (61%) and large print (47%)) are the most borrowed materials
- Many customers said that the visit from a person and the chance for a quick chat was one of the key benefits of the service

Most important aspects of the home library service



- The digital offer may not be suitable for many home delivery customers due to a combination of factors, including health conditions and physical disabilities. This is evidenced by staff feedback, the fact that only 7% of current customers who responded currently use online library services. Most common reasons for not using the online services were having no computer (39%) or internet access (5%) or being unable to use a computer (22%)
- The “comfort of own home” approach to healthcare has seen a change in service delivery methods and security arrangements (e.g., keypad entry) that needs to be considered as part of a service review.
- One stakeholder posed the question of whether this service could be promoted to parents for whom it is difficult to come to a physical library.

Nice to have a little chat on the doorstep and of course great books

Home library service is the one thing I look forward to

Wonderful friendly staff. Excellent service. Thought I would miss the big mobile van but I don't. I like someone else picking my books for me!

I would be lost without this service

Only visitor I have calling in. The big van was a good social meeting place

I am blind and rely on my audio books. Excellent service brought to my door. Staff brilliant as they read the back of the audio to let me know what the story is about. Don't know what I would do without the visits

I do not sleep, no near relatives. Visits from the mobile and books make my life more rewarding. Lost without them. Helps with my pain takes my mind off it

Very good service. I am very lonely and to have someone to visit and talk to and have books delivered is a life saver

Such a wonderful service. I don't know what I would do without my books and so good to see someone to talk to.

Conclusion: Respondents articulated extremely high levels of appreciation for the Home Library Service, both in terms of materials provided and the delivery model including staff and volunteer interaction. Word of mouth recommendations and referrals are the main methods of identifying and contacting new service users. There is potential for increased demand, but this would be likely to create capacity issues under the current delivery model.

5.5 Leadership and management considerations

- Councillors are committed to ensuring that library services are accessible to everyone across the borough, especially to those people who need them the most
- The profile and role of the library service is steadily growing and developing alignments with other council services
- There is general recognition at director level that the service delivers a wide range of services on a relatively low budget
- The library senior management team recognises that it has a strong operational focus and would benefit from adopting a more strategic approach
- Children and young people are fundamental to developing a vision for libraries, but this emphasis does not appear to be strongly reflected in terms of management roles and staffing responsibilities
- The sign off of the emerging library strategy will lead to the creation of a developmental plan for the service and review of job descriptions as and where required
- The Home Library service has the potential to develop but this may cause capacity issues for the current delivery model. Options for working with Social Services can be explored
- Recruiting and training volunteers is an option for developing services, but consideration needs to be given to the associated staff time and capacity implications
- Electronic formats of stock performed well during the pandemic following reallocation within the stock fund. Careful consideration will need to be given to the mix of hard copy and electronic stock in future, given the pressures on the stock fund

6. Summary of key findings

Consultation analysis is complex. The points below set out the key points made by customers, residents and stakeholders across the whole programme

6.1 General findings

- The impact of previous budget cuts and reductions in opening hours is still keenly felt across communities: on occasion this was expressed alongside a mix of empathy and frustration
- Generally, a strong sense of goodwill and supportive appreciation of the library service emerged from the stakeholder engagement programme
- Books and buildings are important for many people: the development of online services and community hubs are equally important for other people: no clear consensus on how to strike the right balance emerged across the consultation programme
- Responses from survey respondents demonstrated strong support and demand for an emphasis on books and reading while many discussions emphasised the importance of libraries as community hubs supporting local people
- Some survey respondents were fearful that libraries would close as the emphasis in accessing information moves from books towards the internet and online services – this view was also represented in our non-user focus groups

6.2 Proposed strategic priorities

- A strong endorsement, supported by a breadth of evidence, that people see the library service having a crucial role to play as communities recover from the pandemic
- Helping Children and Young People is unanimously viewed as one of the cornerstones of developing the new library vision. Developing the offer for older children and staffing implications are key considerations
- Improving access to online services has been endorsed as a priority area of focus, with the caveat that it is a multi-faceted and complex area of service provision.
- Supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy is evidently seen as one of the key elements of developing a vision for libraries, ranging from promoting the multifarious benefits of reading to partnership schemes and community-based projects.
- Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces has a consultation mandate as a focus area with expressed opportunities for greater collaboration and community engagement.
- All five proposed areas of focus were heavily supported across the consultation, with varying levels of strong agreement across the individual elements

6.3 Reading Central Library

- Strong preferences for a central and accessible location
- A clear demand for good quality stock and the promotion of reading and learning throughout people's lives

- IT facilities and online services should cater for all needs: from basic provision through to subscription services and the development of new technologies
- There was a strong sense across all formats of the library being much valued but now looking tired and in need of refurbishment and modernisation.

6.4 Home Delivery Service

- Extremely high levels of satisfaction were recorded for the Home Library Service, both in terms of materials provided and staff. There is potential for increased demand, but this would be likely to create capacity issues under the current delivery model.

6.5 Other findings: partnership working, community engagement and leadership

- Partner organisations that need meeting space to meet clients generally see libraries as safe and neutral venues – close enough to the ‘establishment’ without being off-putting
- Community groups and volunteers can work more closely with the council to offer the library service a way forward in developing and delivering its new vision
- Constructive and considered feedback was provided throughout the process, with several examples of people expressing a willingness to work collaboratively with the council to develop the role and impact of libraries
- Senior managers focus heavily on operational issues and reacting to issues due to time pressures which limit strategic planning thinking and the development of services

APPENDIX TWO : SURVEY RESULTS IN FULL

Attachment : - see Appendix 2 after Appendix 4



Reading Library
consultation - survey |

APPENDIX THREE : HOME SURVEY RESULTS IN FULL

Attachment : see Appendix 3 after Appendix 4 and 2



Reading Library
consultation - Home L

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

For advice on this document please contact Clare Muir on 72119 or email Claire.Muir@reading.gov.uk.

Please contact the Project Management Office at pmo@reading.gov.uk for advice and/or support to complete this form from a project perspective.

Name of proposal/activity/policy to be assessed: LIBRARY STRATEGY 2022-25
Directorate: DEGNS
Service: Library

Name: Simon Smith
Job Title: Library Services Manager
Date of assessment September 2021

Version History

Version	Reason	Author	Date	Approved By
0.1	Initial	SS	12/9/21	DP

Scope your proposal

- **What is the aim of your policy or new service/what changes are you proposing?**

A new library strategy 2022-2025 formed of the following strategic priorities:

- Supporting recovery from Covid-19
 - Helping Children and Young People
 - Improving Digital Inclusion
 - Supporting improvement in Health, Wellbeing and Literacy
 - Providing access to quality cultural experiences
- **Who will benefit from this proposal and how?**

Customers will benefit from a library service with a strategic direction that can deliver a greater benefit to the town, and should see a better customer environment, both digitally and physically.

- **What outcomes does the change aim to achieve and for whom?**

We will have a focus on key strategic themes and groups, per the document, but the service will remain open to and relevant to all.

- **Who are the main stakeholders and what do they want?**

Customers - the service has used the consultation to better understand the needs of current customers to consider as part of the delivery plan.

Non-users - the service has used the consultation to better understand the reasons for not using the service to consider as part of the delivery plan.

Page Break

Assess whether an EqlA is Relevant

How does your proposal relate to eliminating discrimination; advancing equality of opportunity; promoting good community relations?

- **Do you have evidence or reason to believe that some (racial, disability, sex, gender, sexuality, age and religious belief) groups may be affected differently than others? Make reference to the known demographic profile of the service user group, your monitoring information, research, national data/reports etc.**

No

- **Is there already public concern about potentially discriminatory practices/impact or could there be? Make reference to your complaints, consultation, feedback, media reports locally/nationally.**

No

If the answer is **Yes** to any of the above, you need to do an Equality Impact Assessment.

If **No** you **MUST** complete this statement.

An Equality Impact Assessment is not relevant because:

The changes that are part of the strategy seek to improve the library service for everyone, the overall strategy seeks to ensure that everyone in Reading has access to a better quality library service that is ambitious and can deliver more for the town. The delivery plan will be subject to a separate EIA as it is developed.

X

X

Completing Officer

Lead Officer