



Title	Reading Libraries Improvement Programme Update
Purpose of the report	To make a decision
Report status	Public report
Report author	Simon Smith, Reading Libraries and Museum Manager
Lead Councillor	Cllr Adele Barnett-Ward
Corporate priority	Thriving Communities
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To note the progress made by the Library Service in line with the strategic priorities set in 2021, including the recovery in borrowing to pre Covid levels, linking of libraries into the Speech and Language Pathway, the new Service branding, new library app for customers, and improved digital device lending offer.2. To note the progress made to date with the new Central Library project.3. That Committee agrees to move the Toy Library provision to Palmer Park Leisure Centre & Stadium and authorises the Assistant Director Culture in consultation with the Lead Member for Leisure and Culture to finalise arrangements for the move.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report provides a review of the progress made by the Library Service since the strategic priorities were approved by HNL Committee in November 2021. Substantial progress has been made to develop the Service, alongside two large grant funding awards, and record levels of income. New services have been introduced, budget has been maintained and increasing numbers of residents are using our services.
- 1.2. It also provides an update on the Central Library project, which is scheduled to open in Spring 2026.
- 1.3. The report also recommends the future improved relocation of the Toy Library to Palmer Park Leisure Centre & Stadium, which has the potential to provide a much better experience for users, with no financial impact arising from the move.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. The HNL Committee in November 2021 endorsed the Reading Libraries Strategic Priorities 2022-25. These were informed by public consultation and in turn helped to inform the development of the new Central Library at the Civic Centre.
- 2.2. Reading has 7 libraries, 1 home service and provides a digital library of online content. The service has around 275,000 visitors a year and issues around 475,000 items. Around 350 people are visited at home by the home service. The net budget of the library service is around £1m. Methodology from Libraries Connected (2022) indicates

the value of a branch library to an area in supporting education and health is around £1m <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-living-and-living-better>

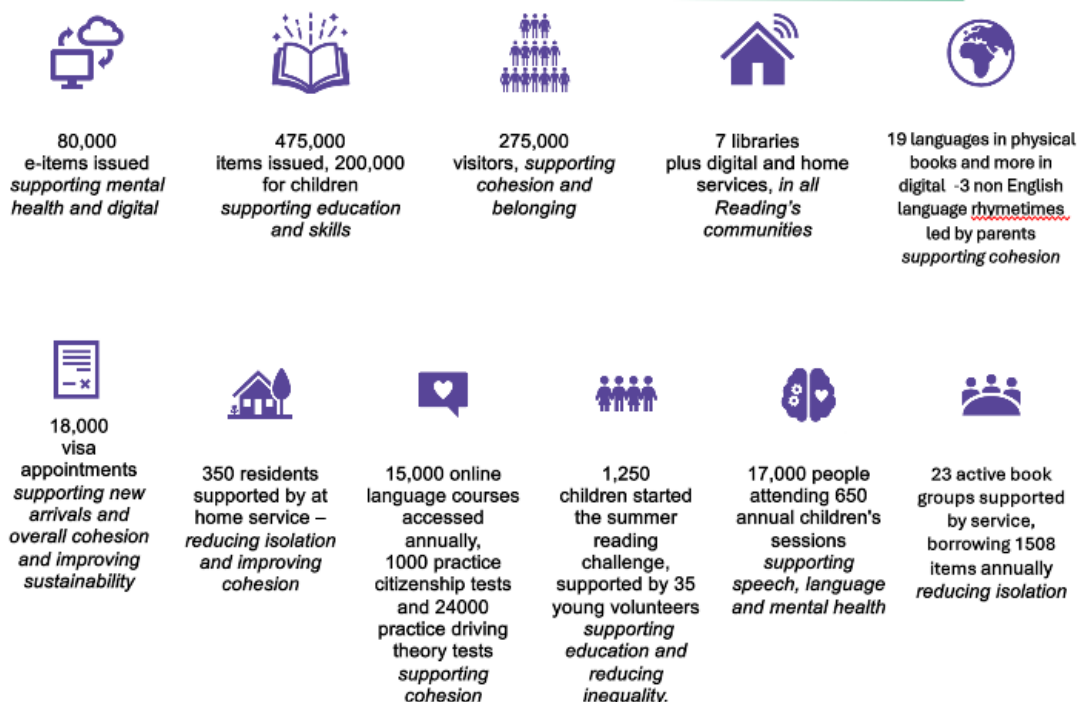
- 2.3. The current strategic priorities, agreed in 2021, are
- Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic
 - Helping children and young people
 - Improving access to online services
 - Supporting improvements in health, wellbeing and literacy
 - Bringing arts, culture and heritage into library spaces
- 2.4. The project regarding the move of Central Library, funded by the UK Government, has reported to Committee previously, most recently with a report in February 2024 to update on proposals regarding stock in the new library.
- 2.5. The Service applied for and was awarded £495,000 capital from Arts Council England in 2024, with the aim 'to make all library spaces amazing' and spread the technology from Central Library to all other sites. In addition, 3 self service library machines will be put into community centres across Reading to deliver a library offer closer to more people.
- 2.6. The Toy Library was set up with a European Social Fund grant in 2003 at the old Southcote Library. It was moved to Central Library when the new Southcote Library at the Community Hub opened in 2018. The Toy Library does not form part of the statutory provision of a library service but the report to HNL Committee in February 2024 said that a proposal regarding the toy library would come to a future HNL Committee. The proposal to move to a new location and improve provision is below.

3. Reading Libraries Improvement Programme

3.1. Progress made linked into strategic priorities since 2021.

- 3.2. The following infographic demonstrates the provision of the Service across the last 12 months – what libraries do and why and how they links to library and corporate priorities

A typical year in Reading libraries...



3.3 The strategic priorities are noted at 2.2 above, below are some of the key achievements delivered:

Supporting our communities as we recover from the pandemic:

- Visitor numbers have recovered to around 70% of pre Covid levels, in line with many library services. Library issues are higher than pre Covid, driven by increased digital provision. The service has increased overall issues on a rolling quarter-by quarter basis since 2020, and these are now higher than they were prior to Covid, arresting a longer term decline. Libraries issue around 35-40,000 items every month.
- An Arts Council England funded project supporting hire of Tilehurst Library is now live and being tested before wider publicity. This allows easier and better use of hireable spaces. Another element of this project has delivered 14 digital devices for Tilehurst.
- All events the services provided pre-Covid have returned, with the chief focus on the rhymetime services, which returned as soon as possible to support speech, language and child and parental mental health alongside school readiness – 16 sessions, attracting 340 people per week are delivered.
- We have developed a consistent, quality logo and house style, on buildings, publicity and social media, making communication about events clearer and recognisably consistent.
- We have removed fees to reserve items, fines and removed fees from physical audio items. Reservation numbers have more than doubled as a result, to 3,000 per month. This has supported greater use and made better use of stock resources.

Helping Children and Young People

- Rhymetimes are now linked into the Brighter Futures for Children Speech and Language pathway. The sessions are run by library assistants 16 times a week and continue to be an excellent, low cost way of delivering support to early language development. We have continued to link in with Brighter Futures for Children and have collaborated on projects such as the Summer Reading Challenge and school links. We have increased the number of summer volunteers to 25.
- We have ensured a live performance/activity at each library is part of our summer reading offer, running a different show at all libraries each year, to bring low cost cultural events direct to communities and to inspire children to read. Over 1,250 children took part in the summer reading challenge in 2024 supported by 30 volunteers.
- We continue to deliver high quality events with Reading Rep Theatre at all libraries, supported by what have been regular, successful bids to Arts Council England, to deliver high quality activities, linking library activity to the theatre space and promoting library use.
- We offer craft sessions at every library, particularly during holidays to provide a low no cost, proven activity for all; supporting people's mental health and wellbeing.
- We encouraged feedback form young people into the new library consultation.

Improving access to online services

- We have introduced free on site tablet lending at 3 libraries, allowing people to access IT in an app based way rather than a desktop based way. Customers are increasingly needing access to apps rather than websites.

- We have introduced free off site laptop lending, including free data, with support at 2 libraries. This enables use of laptops at home with no wifi needed, to encourage people to try digital. These have supported wider RBC projects and grew from community identified need in Southcote. We have lent devices over 120 times in the last 12 months.
- We have gained funding to introduce both these services at all libraries from 2026, as part of a successful £495k award from Arts Council England
- Provision of Digital Volunteers sessions run by Reading Voluntary Action (RVA) at libraries has returned and developed – these run at 2 sites and help around 30-40 people per week to build their digital confidence.
- We have introduced a better, broader e-lending offer with new providers and shared stock with other authorities.
- We have increased the usage of the lending services to pre pandemic levels and issue more overall titles now than we did pre-Covid. Our digital offering now issues 5-6,000 titles per month and is our second busiest library after Reading Central. This is 30% more use than during full lockdown.
- We have introduced a library app that brings all our online services, including e-books, magazines and a digital library card, together in a convenient place improving the service to customers.
- We have provided online walkthroughs of the spaces at 6 libraries via our website.
- We have upgraded the public printers at all libraries. We have introduced the ability to quickly print directly from personal devices at all libraries, allowing printing of one off type items such as tickets, appointments and documents, Printing is possible from home for later collection.
- We have undergone projects to improve the speed of connections to sites and to make existing computers run faster.
- We are involved in helping to develop the national Library On web presence.
- We have contributed to wider UK library work on providing comparative data and an accreditation offer.
- We produce an annual showcase film to highlight our excellent local history offer

Supporting improvements in Health, Wellbeing and Literacy

- We have introduced monthly 'Welcome to Reading' sessions with a variety of speakers – welcoming everyone to our town with a chance to make a friendly contact with other new residents and guest speakers – concept created and developed by a frontline member of staff.
- We partner with Compass Recovery College and New Directions College, as well as other agencies to provide high quality education skills and training in neighbourhood locations.
- Funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund we are improving the overall offer at Southcote and South Reading hubs, which are anchored by libraries
- We have contributed to sharing public health messages, either by attendance at events, displaying or circulation of information

Bringing arts, culture and heritage to library spaces

- We have worked with our partners at the British Library to bring versions of British Library exhibitions to Reading, including Black British Music, Writing and China – typically 2 exhibitions per year.

- We are using libraries as display space for community based projects such as High Street Heritage Action Zones to showcase and highlight these projects.
 - We are members of the Reading Cultural Partnership and promote as much cultural activity as we can through library spaces, our communications channels and across the town.
 - We have hosted theatre, comedy, author, dance and musical events over the period and continue to take opportunities where we can afford to do so.
- 3.3. It should be noted that one year into the programme, in early 2023, we received the news that the bid for funding for a new Central Library had been successful. We could not have anticipated that this opportunity would arise in 2021 and this has taken up a large amount of officer time. We have also had to spend a large amount of time on changes to the visa offer due to a contractual change. Nevertheless, progress has been made in the strategic offer and the overall improvement programme.
- 3.4. We also had a successful bid for £495,000 funding from Arts Council England notified to us in early 2024. This aims to ensure that the branch library network benefits and sees similar provision to Central Library. Our bid was entitled 'Making all our spaces amazing' and this project will deliver by summer 2026. Similarly, this has involved a large amount of officer time.
- 3.5. The Service has not reduced library opening hours, stock budget or provision since Autumn 2018, and has been able to deliver and fund improvements by growing income, largely through provision of a visa service. A period of uncertainty with this has recently concluded and this service will continue to be delivered with a new provider.
- 3.6. We will develop a new set of strategic principles to align with the 2025-28 planning cycle and maximise the investment from the Libraries Improvement Fund and the New Central Library. A report will come to Committee in March 2025 with the draft priorities proposed for consultation.

4. New Central Library

- 4.1. Progress is ongoing regarding the Central Library project. This transformational project is aiming to give Reading a much updated Central library, with provision of books, IT and improved work/study spaces, together with much better provision for children, compared to the existing building.
- 4.2. The library design has been concluded and will be shared soon. This design has incorporated all feedback received to date.
- 4.3. We have addressed feedback received during consultation, and will be able to provide:
- More items in publicly shelved areas compared to now
 - A much improved provision for children and families, our largest user group
 - Better ICT provision
 - Over 100 seated areas with access to power for study
 - A local studies collection and space as a key feature
 - Improved toilets and security compared to current provision
- 4.4. Work is ongoing with the contractors for the project and the project will be concluded in early 2026.

5. Proposed future operating location and model of Reading Toy Library

- 5.1. The Toy Library was opened with external funding in 2003 and was originally located at Southcote library. It moved to Central library when Southcote library moved in 2018.

- 5.2. We noted the feedback regarding the service, which was received in 2023 as part of wider Central library consultation, which reported that the toy library was valued but not open enough. We are also aware of feedback received since 2018 that parking is difficult and appreciated if larger items are being borrowed.
- 5.3. Whilst not part of the statutory provision of the Library Service, the Service has worked to address concerns regarding access. The Toy Library was used by 132 borrowers in the year from 1/9/2023, recording 719 loans of 261 items. From looking at use when the service was located at Southcote, and at Central library, usage is highly dependent and draws from the immediate local area it is located in. RG30 usage was high when service was in Southcote, RG1 usage has been higher since it moved to Central.
- 5.4. Three main options have been considered for the future of the toy library service. No option delivers any substantial saving. The move is not driven by cost but an attempt to maintain the service.
- a) The service could be stopped, either altogether, or transferred to an interested partner
 - b) The service could be provided at the new Library in a smaller space
 - c) The service could move to a new location as was the case in 2018.
- 5.5. Stopping the service would deliver a small saving in staff administration of <£500.year, however the service did show as valued in the consultation, and finding a new home would retain the valued service
- 5.6. Retaining the service within the Civic Centre would keep the service in the town centre and main library but would mean a suitable space would need to be found, and would also not solve issues which had been raised since the 2018 move about access with cars. It would not deliver a saving, but would also not improve the service.
- 5.7. Moving to a new location would present a chance to rethink the service offer and potentially improve. We identified space at Palmer Park Leisure Centre & Stadium and had informal discussions with GLL as the Centre operators, and with Reading College/Activate Learning, our partners at Palmer Park Library. These discussions indicated that this would be a good place to base the service, and would provide, at no additional cost:
- more space for items and customers
 - a better service with easier collection for customers
 - another opportunity for students within the Reading College Lifeskills Faculty, in addition to the successful Palmer Park Library partnership, which has run since 2017.
- 5.8 We are therefore recommending to committee that the service moves from the Central library to the Stadium at Palmer Park.
- 5.9 If committee agrees we will work to confirm arrangements with our partners at GLL and Activate Learning with the aim of opening in the new location in September 2025 if all parties are in agreement.
- 5.10 In addition, our aspiration is for longer opening hours for customers in the future, as well as the opportunities this better space gives us.

6. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 6.1. The Council's Corporate Plan has established three themes for the years 2022/25. These themes are:
- Healthy Environment
 - Thriving Communities
 - Inclusive Economy

- 6.2. These themes are underpinned by “Our Foundations” explaining the ways we work at the Council:
- People first
 - Digital transformation
 - Building self-reliance
 - Getting the best value
 - Collaborating with others
- 6.3. Full details of the Council’s Corporate Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the Council’s website - [Corporate plan - Reading Borough Council](#). These priorities and the Corporate Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.
- 6.4. The proposals to move the Central Library form part of the Corporate Plan. The provision of a Library Service supports all themes of the Corporate Plan, and the strategic direction links into all the Foundations listed above.

7. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 7.1. The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 7.2. There is a net nil positive environmental and climate impact arising from this report. The Toy Library seeks to share and recycle items. Its relocation to a multi use location that is easily accessible by public transport will contribute to the Council’s environmental aspirations..

8. Community Engagement

- 8.1. The Library Service carried out a consultation regarding the library move in 2023.
- 8.2. We received feedback which has been used to shape the design. We did receive feedback indicating concern regarding the future and accessibility of the Toy Library.

9. Equality Implications

- 9.1. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 9.2. An Equality Impact Assessment is needed for the element of this report relating to the toy library. The EqIA can be found at Appendix 1.

10. Legal Implications

- 10.1. Under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums act, local authorities are bound to provide a library service that is ‘comprehensive and efficient’. This report meets that aim, and the local authority will continue to comply with the Act.
- 10.2. The provision of a Toy Library is not statutory. In making this recommendation officers are seeking to improve the service provision currently provided.

11. Financial Implications

11.1. There are no specific financial implications arising from this report. Any developments within the service will be funded from existing budgets, moving funds between areas where necessary.

11.2. The net budgets for the library service are as follows

Reading Libraries	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Net budget	1,019,100	1,125,200	1,203,300

12. Timetable for Implementation

12.1. If agreed, the Toy Library move would be planned alongside Reading College as an expansion of the existing relationship with Palmer Park Library and Activate Learning. As the provision would be supported by a cohort of students, it would make most sense to move in September 2025 at the start of term. The service is therefore proposing closure for a short period in Autumn 2025 to facilitate the move.

12.2. The strategic principles will be developed during early 2025 and will report to Committee in Summer 2025, together with a general library update, focused on the move of Central Library.

13. Background Papers

13.1. There are none.

Appendices

1. Equality Impact Assessment for the Toy Library move

Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)

Name of proposal/activity/policy to be assessed:

Directorate: DEGNS

Service: Culture > Libraries

Name: Simon Smith

Job Title: Reading Libraries and Museum Manager

Date of assessment: 27/8/24

Version History

Version	Reason	Author	Date	Approved By
1.0	Initial	SS	27/8/24	DP

Scope your proposal

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

Move of Reading Toy Library from Central Library, RG1 3BQ to Palmer Park Sports Stadium, RG6 1LF

- **Who will benefit from this proposal and how?**
-

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

Continuation of a toy library lending service for Reading's libraries

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

Customers (132 borrowing 700 items, 1/9/23-31/8/24) would like to see the service reprovided. We cannot reprovide at the relocated Central due to space.

Assess whether an EqIA 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 groups may be affected differently than others (due to race, disability, sex, gender, sexuality, age, religious belief or due to belonging to the Armed Forces community or care experience)? 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 service will be reprovided at a location that allows better access for the majority of people in Reading.

X

Completing Officer

X

Lead Officer

Assess the Impact of the Proposal

Your assessment must include:

- **Consultation**
- **Collection and Assessment of Data**
- **Judgement about whether the impact is negative or positive**

Think about who does and doesn't use the service? Is the take up representative of the community? What do different minority groups think? (You might think your policy, project or service is accessible and addressing the needs of these groups, but asking them might give you a totally different view). Does it really meet their varied needs? Are some groups less likely to get a good service?

How do your proposals relate to other services - will your proposals have knock on effects on other services elsewhere? Are there proposals being made for other services that relate to yours and could lead to a cumulative impact?

Example: A local authority takes separate decisions to limit the eligibility criteria for community care services; increase charges for respite services; scale back its accessible housing programme; and cut concessionary travel.

Each separate decision may have a significant effect on the lives of disabled residents, and the cumulative impact of these decisions may be considerable.

This combined impact would not be apparent if decisions are considered in isolation.

Consultation

How have you consulted with or do you plan to consult with relevant groups and experts. If you haven't already completed a Consultation form do it now. The checklist helps you make sure you follow good consultation practice.

[Consultation manager form - Reading Borough Council Dash](#)

Relevant groups/experts	How were/will the views of these groups be obtained	Date when contacted

Collect and Assess your Data

Using information from Census, residents survey data, service monitoring data, satisfaction or complaints, feedback, consultation, research, your knowledge and the knowledge of people in your team, staff groups etc. describe how the proposal could impact on each group. Include both positive and negative impacts.

(Please delete relevant ticks)

- Describe how this proposal could impact on racial groups
 - Is there a negative impact? No
-

No impact

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Sex and Gender identity (include pregnancy and maternity, marriage, gender re-assignment)
 - Is there a negative impact? No
-

No impact

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Disability
 - Is there a negative impact? No
-

No impact – to note that the location is different but that the provision of access, opening, access for vehicles should all improve compared to the current location

- Describe how this proposal could impact on Sexual orientation (cover civil partnership)
 - Is there a negative impact? No
-

No impact

- Describe how this proposal could impact on age
 - Is there a negative impact? No
-

No impact

-
-
- **Describe how this proposal could impact on Religious belief**
 - **Is there a negative impact?** No
-

No impact

- **Describe how this proposal could impact on the Armed Forces community (including reservists and veterans and their families)**
 - **Is there a negative impact?** No
-

No impact

- **Describe how this proposal could impact on care experienced young people and adults.**
- **Is there a negative impact?** No

No impact

Make a Decision

If the impact is negative then you must consider whether you can legally justify it. If not you must set out how you will reduce or eliminate the impact. If you are not sure what the impact will be you MUST assume that there could be a negative impact. You may have to do further consultation or test out your proposal and monitor the impact before full implementation.

(Delete numbers below which don't apply)

- 1. **No negative impact identified** – Go to sign off

- **How will you monitor for adverse impact in the future?**

Can continue to assess user groups and where service users live, whilst noting that usage is focused on the library itself based on the previous move in 2018.

X

X

Completing Officer

Lead Officer