



**12 November 2025**

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| <b>Title</b>                 | Reading Libraries Improvement Programme:<br>Strategic Principles/Themes 2025 – 2029   |
| <b>Purpose of the report</b> | To make a decision  |
| <b>Report status</b>         | Public report   |
| <b>Report author</b>         | Reading Libraries and Museum Manager<br>Assistant Director Culture  |
| <b>Lead Councillor</b>       | Councillor Adele Barnett-Ward   |
| <b>Corporate priority</b>    | Thriving Communities  |
| <b>Recommendations</b>       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That committee agrees to adopt the strategic principles for the library service for 2025-2029 noted at 3.13 following the July 2025 public engagement on the draft principles agreed by committee in March 2025.</li> <li>2. That committee notes the feedback given regarding the new Central library from the exercise carried out in July 2025 and notes the huge opportunity arising from Reading opening a new Central library during the 2026 National Year of Reading.</li> <li>3. That committee notes the success of the library service in delivering against the strategic principles since inception in 2021, meaning that library issues in Reading have increased year-on-year since the pandemic.</li> </ol> |

## **1.Executive Summary**

- 1.1. In November 2024 the library service brought forward a report outlining progress made in developing the library service in line with the strategic principles that committee approved in 2021. The report noted that ‘a report will come to Committee in March 2025 with the draft priorities proposed for consultation’.
- 1.2. The March 2025 committee report stated that following the public engagement, a final version of the principles would come back to committee for formal endorsement. The principles, are noted below at section 3.11 and these are referred to as ‘themes’ for ease of understanding
- 1.3. The Council’s ambition with these new themes is to deliver a library service across Reading with a high quality community offer of books, IT and support. This supports the new flagship Reading Central library in the town centre, with Reading’s residents and organisations using all library buildings for reading, work, digital skills and study, increasing users and usage of Council services. It is proposed that Libraries in the borough will be spaces that further support equality, development and wellbeing achieved, in part, through successfully securing external funding.
- 1.4. The consultation exercise on the priorities also gathered feedback regarding the new Reading Central library design. The output from the consultation and engagement is noted at section 3.15 of this report.

## **2. Policy Context**

- 2.1. At November 2024 Committee, the library service summarised progress made and activities delivered in each of the strategic priorities that were adopted in 2021 and which needed to be revisited to inform the next stage of service development.
- 2.2. Due to the timing of the move of the current Central Library at [insert location], these themes will form the basis of service planning, development and improvement from now until 2029, or the first 3 years in the new library. The primary focus of the service for the next 12 months is the move to and mobilisation of the new Central Library.
- 2.3. Reading has 7 libraries, 1 home service and provides a digital library of online content including books and magazines. The service has around 280,000 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 £1.2m annually. Methodology from Libraries Connected (2022) indicates the value of a branch library to an area in supporting education and health is around £1m. The methodology can be viewed on following this link: <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-living-and-living-better>
- 2.4. The current Council 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
- 2.5. The Council's objective is to refresh these to deliver further improvement and help in planning, particularly as the new Reading Central library opens in 2026.

## **3. The Proposal**

- 3.1. It is considered that as these initial strategic principles were the first to be adopted by the service, based on consultation and, in line with the national Universal Offers that library services are tasked with delivering, they formed a good basis of future principles. They now require updating to reflect where the service is today and to reflect the future direction of the service.
- 3.2. Since the pandemic, usage of library services has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels. The borrowing of items, which pre-pandemic has shown a decline, is now higher than pre-pandemic levels, driven by an expanded digital offer, using the same budget. Libraries have worked hard to grow digital content, deliver library events and activities.



95,000 e-items issued  
*supporting mental health and digital inclusion*



480,000 items issued, 200,000 for children  
*supporting education and literacy*



300,000 visitors,  
*supporting cohesion and belonging*



19 languages in physical books and more in digital - 3 non English language rhymetimes led by parents  
*supporting cohesion*



350 residents supported by at home service –  
*reducing isolation and improving cohesion*



15,000 online language courses accessed annually, 1000 practice citizenship tests and 24000 practice driving theory tests  
*supporting cohesion*



1,250 children started the summer reading challenge, supported by 35 young volunteers  
*supporting education, school readiness and reducing inequality.*



17,500 people attending 650 annual children's sessions  
*supporting speech, language, mental health & school readiness*



23 active book groups supported by service, borrowing 1508 items annually  
*reducing isolation*

3.3. The council has successfully secured large capital investment into the Civic Centre Library project via the £19.1m Levelling Up Fund Round 2 grant and £495,000 from the Libraries Improvement Fund administered by Arts Council England.

3.4. It is proposed that the £495,000 Libraries Improvement Fund will be directed towards additional ICT equipment going in all libraries, as well as some non-library community locations. The objective being to deliver an improved ICT provision and level of service across all of the libraries in the borough and enable all libraries to share in the improvements being made at the Central library. Community locations in Coley, Whitley Wood and Amersham Road, Caversham will see a form of library provision for the first time, using self service cabinets. All equipment will be installed by end 2026. The Libraries Improvement Fund award will deliver:

- Tablets for in-library use (all libraries)
- Borrowable laptops for home use, loaded with free data (all libraries)
- Screens to host screenings and meetings (all libraries)
- Interactive tables
- Games projected onto floors
- Intelligent shelving
- Audio visual equipment (Central library only)
- External lockers to collect reserved items out of hours (Central library only)
- Library cabinets for Coley, Whitley Wood and Amersham Road, Caversham

3.5. It is considered that Libraries will always have a vital role to play in supporting literacy, children and young people, providing equality of access, supporting health and wellbeing and supporting skills development. It is intended that these new themes will facilitate in providing clarity of purpose and assist in ensuring that progress is made in every area, against principles that link to the Council's overall aspirations and plans for Reading.

- 3.6. 137 people took part in the feedback overall, with nearly all of the participants engaging in the section regarding library themes. 'Themes' was chosen as it was considered to have clearer language than 'strategic principles'
- 3.7. The following table shows the response to each theme:

| <b>Theme</b>  | <b>Number of responses (from 137)</b> | <b>Percentage indicating very important or important</b> | <b>Biggest priority within theme</b>                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Supporting children and young people with language and literacy development</b>                                    | 132                                   | 86.8%  | A wide range of free books to borrow (73%)                 |
| <b>Improving digital provision, access and content to support learning and skills</b>                                 | 131                                   | 83.9%  | Providing document printing services (53%)                 |
| <b>Bringing arts, culture, heritage and creativity into library spaces</b>  | 133                                   | 76.1%  | Provision of local history information and resources (47%) |
| <b>Supporting improvements for Reading's health, wellbeing, literacy and cohesion</b>                                 | 131                                   | 78.1%  | Hosting health activities and sessions (41%)               |
| <b>Ensuring all libraries in the network respond to the needs of communities and building these into funding bids</b> | 130                                   | 75.9%  | Using customer groups for feedback (48%)                   |

- 3.8. Participants in the consultation were asked about certain actions within themes given as examples. Overall, those participants gave positive feedback, with some not indicating preferences, and some actions also ranking less favourably than others. The outcome of this consultation exercise will be used to guide the service under the broader themes, noting that some actions are favoured over others.
- 3.9. The consultation process requested feedback on the themes, which generated 62 responses. Many respondents expressed support for the proposed themes. Several highlighted the importance of the library serving as a community hub, offering activities such as creative, craft, building, and reading clubs. There was a strong emphasis on the library being more than just a place to borrow books, and instead becoming central to community life. Overall, the feedback was generally positive, with appreciation for the work being done.
- 3.10. Participants were invited to note any other themes they would like the Council to focus on and 55 respondents commented. The following sets out the popular themes which informed officers' considerations to include books which now forms an emphasis on books as an overarching *theme* for libraries:
- Respondents most frequently emphasised the importance of promoting reading for all ages, ensuring access to new and popular books; and
  - providing a welcoming space where people, especially children, can break away from screens and digital distractions.

- strong desire for the library to be a free, inclusive environment that supports people during the cost of living crisis and does not require spending money.
- the value of activities and events, particularly those delivered by external providers, and suggested a wider promotion of literacy across the town. Additionally, there was a suggestion to
- focus on healthy eating.

Given the feedback, .

3.11. The report showing consultation on themes and analysis is at Appendix 1 to this report.

3.12. Following the consultation, the proposed principles to guide the service from 2025 - 2029, with some example actions are below. It is noted that a number of comments highlighted concern that there was no mention of the Council's core library service of lending books. This has been taken into consideration in framing the themes under a unifying mission statement set out below:

*Mission Statement:*

*Our mission is to ignite a love of reading across Reading. Through a variety of books and digital platforms, we connect people to reading and knowledge in safe, trusted library spaces.*

3.13 The Council's themes for future library service development are:

- Ensuring all libraries in the borough's network respond to the needs of communities and partners and build these into external funding applications.
  - Introduce self service book lending/borrowing in community locations furthest from a permanent library, using external grant funding *to expand library service reach to new communities*
  - Promote library spaces for community activities and events *so that libraries are embedded as a key location for delivery by community partners*
  - Introduce a customer feedback panel/focus groups *to inform and shape progress of the service*
  - Make clearer how feedback can be given by customers *at libraries and online*
- Support children and young people with reading, literacy and language development
  - Continue to provide the Bookstart scheme, Summer Reading Challenge and other national offers *to embed children's reading for pleasure*
  - Link into pathways to support school readiness, *particularly highlighting the library role in developing speech, early language and reading skills*
  - Review after school opening patterns at all libraries, *particularly in areas where the Council is operating Place Based Working*
- Improving digital provision, access and content to support learning and skills
  - Introduce on site tablet lending at all sites *to reduce the digital divide*
  - Introduce take home laptops with free data included at all sites – *to be targeted particularly in areas of highest need*
  - Support partners through group laptop lending to community groups *to allow wider outcomes to be achieved and raise awareness of service*
  - Promote and raise awareness of libraries as spaces for partners and community organisation to deliver activities, *particularly in areas where the Council is operating Place Based Working*

- Supporting improvements for Reading's health, wellbeing, literacy and cohesion
  - Work with partners to host more activities with links to improving health and wellbeing outcomes *to benefit the health of Reading and reduce health inequalities*
  - Work with colleagues to promote libraries as a key vehicle for public health messaging and campaign delivery *to benefit the health of Reading and reduce health inequalities and show that libraries are trusted space that can help with change*
  - Explore lending of equipment *to improve health outcomes and encourage healthy choices*
- Bringing arts, culture, heritage and creativity into library spaces
  - Host regular museum activities in libraries *to increase awareness of the museum service and Reading's history*
  - Continue to develop and build on partnerships with local cultural organisations delivering performances in libraries *to support local cultural infrastructure*
  - Deliver live performances at every library every year *to bring performance into Reading's communities*
  - Reprovision of a quality, well provided local history library at the new Reading Central library *to enhance Reading's sense of place*

3.14 These endorsed themes will start immediately and feed into the next round of service planning for libraries, covering the period including the opening of the new Central library anticipated in 2026.

### 3.15 **New Reading Central Library**

This once in a generation opportunity for Reading as a town and a library service, will be opening in 2026, and is part funded by UK Government.

In the consultation document we were able to show finalised designs, focused on 5 distinct areas, for the first time.

3.16 The survey ran from 27 June-26 July 2025, both online and using paper copies with 137 responses being received. Participants were free to take part in as much or as little of the survey as they desired.

As part of the engagement exercise for the new Central Library participants were asked their views on the design.

3.17 Around half of the total number of respondents commented on the different space allocation. Feedback was most positive regarding the children's library and the local studies section.

3.18 Participants were invited comment on what they were anticipating and what they were concern about regarding the new library.

- Anticipating:
  - most frequently mentioned, a more inviting and comfortable space in the new library, with specific references to enjoying books in a nicer environment and the possibility of relaxing features.
  - a positive change, making the library more accessible.
  - access to new and up-to-date book stock.
  - using the library as a space for study, family visits, and participating in

- Concerns:
  - smaller library , more cramped, and noisier, with less privacy and comfort for users.
  - a reduction in the number of books available on shelves, browsing physical collections is essential and that fewer books would be a significant loss.
  - the design prioritises children and teens at the expense of adult users;
  - a reduction in visible, friendly, and informed staff is another key worry, with some respondents highlighting the importance of human connection and expressing unease about a shift towards automation, as well as the 'clinical' feeling of the images.

### **3.19 Proposals for the New Central Library**

- Children and families are the biggest users of libraries in Reading. The new children’s library at the new Central Library has been designed responsively to be bigger and better stocked than the children’s library in the current central library. The proposal sets the children’s library in one section of the two-floor building, with a more user- friendly shape than the current round design and an inspirational design.
- It is anticipated that majority of the space in the new Central Library will be for adult lending and study
- It is proposed that libraries will have, overall, more books on public shelves, with some sections increasing and some decreasing based on use, compared to the current position.. As per previous committee reports, there are reductions in the stock that is currently not publicly accessible.
- The proposals provide for a range of different types of seating for work, relaxation or meeting. This is intended to include circa 100 study spaces with provision of power for working and charging, which cannot currently be accommodated at current Central library.
- All Central library staff will transfer to the new library

3.20 All comments received as part of the exercise have been reviewed by the project team and the summary report is at appendix 1. The comments about how the space could be used, as well as some areas of focus and concern, have provided valuable feedback that will inform how the new Central Library space will operate when it opens.

3.21 Participants were asked what kind of new activities people would like to see at any library, not just the Reading Central. Responses showed a clear desire for a wider variety of interactive, community-focused activities for both adults and children. Respondents most frequently suggested more events and activities centred around reading and writing, such as author visits, creative writing workshops, and poetry groups. There was also a notable interest in expanding group activities, including more adult reading groups. For children, respondents recommended beginning language classes, themed book clubs (e.g. for popular series like Harry Potter or Percy Jackson), local history sessions, and Lego clubs. These pieces of feedback will inform future planning and will be introduced where achievable to do so, the Council currently offer sessions based around craft, modelling and Lego.

3.22 There were some other questions regarding usage of the library app and the gallery space at Central library which will inform future planning.

## **4. Contribution to Strategic Aims**

4.1. Reading Borough Council’s Corporate Plan 2025-28 sets out the vision:

The Council’s vision is to help Reading realise its potential and to ensure that everyone who lives and works here can share in the benefits of its success.

- 4.2. To deliver this vision the following five priorities are the Council's focus over the next three years:
- Promote more equal communities in Reading
  - Secure Reading's economic and cultural success
  - Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce Reading's carbon footprint
  - Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children
  - Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future

- 4.3.1 The new library themes meet the above by providing a new space, being open to all, with investment in resources that support this, firmly supporting the economic and cultural success of Reading. Libraries, literacy and reading are key ways for Reading Borough Council to deliver better skills in schools and better outcomes for all. The Council has been able to deliver this using external funding.

- 4.4 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.

## **5. Environmental and Climate Implications**

- 5.1. The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 5.2. There are very limited climate implications arising from this report; greater library usage is considered to have a positive environmental and climate impact assuming greater usage of shared resources is more beneficial than a number of one-off purchases.

## **6. Community Engagement**

- 6.1. The principles will act as a framework to support library service development and have been informed by community engagement.

## **7. Equality Implications**

- 7.1. 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.

- 7.2. There are no equality implications arising from this report.

## **8. Legal Implications**

- 8.1. Under Section 7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, local authorities are bound to provide a library service that is 'comprehensive and efficient' for all persons who live, work or study in the area; lend books or other printed material free of charge to those eligible; and encourage the use of the library service by both adults and children . The recommendations in this report are consistent with that aim, ensuring the local authority will continue to comply with the Act.
- 8.2. These Legal Implications have been provided by Strategic Lead, Corporate Law

## **9. Financial Implications**

- 9.1. There are no financial implications arising from this report. The service budget is agreed as part of the wider budget setting report and no additional investment is required in order to deliver the principles laid out in this report.
- 9.2. The net budget for the library service in 2025/26 is £1.2m.
- 9.3. These Financial Implications have been provided and reviewed by Strategic Business Partner, DEGNS

## **10. Timetable for Implementation**

- 10.1. The themes, once endorsed, will feed into and drive the service planning from now onwards, tying into the new library opening in 2026. Whilst this is the primary focus for the service for the next 9 months, we will work to deliver the themes across the library network and factor into planning.
- 10.2. On the current timetable, the Central library will open at the Civic Centre in Spring 2026.

## **11. Background Papers**

- 11.1. There are none.

## **Appendix 1 - New Central Library and Themes for Service – results of consultation**