LIBRARY SERVICE
STRATEGY 2021-2026

WIRRAL

Contents

Foreword

Public libraries are trusted, free to enter and open to all, they are safe spaces and are gateways to literature, information, knowledge, and opportunities. Public libraries play a crucial role in ensuring the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of individuals and communities. They help jobseekers find opportunities, offer courses and digital skills training, provide essential support to people applying for welfare benefits, and provide spaces in which people can be creative. They can act as venues for concerts, exhibitions, or performances, and enable groups with shared interests to meet. Public libraries can provide information about health and health services, and reading well programmes, as well as being neutral spaces for third sector organisations to provide information and advice.

In October 2019 the Council Plan 2025 was agreed, that set out what we would do to make Wirral a place that residents were proud of and deliver better outcomes for local people. In light of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the borough a radically refreshed Wirral Plan 2021-2026 – Equity for People and Place was developed. The focus of this plan will be to ensure the people of Wirral receive the services they need and want, based on what people said matters most to them.

Wirral Libraries is central to this plan and it will underpin future service developments. We have plans to modernise our libraries to ensure that they meet today's needs, whilst looking towards the future. We want to ensure that we deliver best value through pooled resources across the public and voluntary sector wherever possible, creating community hubs where the library plays a key role, working with our public sector partners, communities and third sector organisations. In the context of a significant reduction in Council resources in future years, we need to transform services to make them sustainable and fit for the future. We need to think differently about how we operate, and as plans develop we will seek to operate more innovatively and be more commercially minded. This strategy is about the service as a whole, not just the buildings, but we know that library buildings are seen as a valuable community asset and people could be concerned about their future use. We will explore co-locations, community supported libraries, community owned/managed and outreach services where appropriate; a mixed approach addressing local needs. Library staff, partners and volunteers have worked fantastically to support communities and deliver the library service throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so. However, the pandemic has regrettably opened up some of the inequalities that the library service strategy seeks to address and accelerated changes in the way many of us use the library service. Wirral Libraries will also need to meet these additional challenges of a post-pandemic landscape, continuing to build relationships with service users and partner organisations, whilst contributing to community recovery through a sustainable library service.

We are proud of our library service and our new strategy reflects our ambition and commitment to deliver a sustainable library service that reflects local priorities.

1. Introduction

1.1   In response to the Libraries Connected review of the Universal Offers in 2019, we have refreshed our library strategy and taken the opportunity to align it to the Wirral Council Plan. This new strategy will ensure that the service continues to provide relevant services that meet the needs of local people and support the Council to deliver its priorities.

1.2   In 2017 we carried out significant research and developed a detailed needs analysis and strategic analysis. It provided us with local evidence and insight to help shape our previous strategy. In 2021 we completed a new needs analysis and internal and public consultation to further inform our strategic decision making. We recognise that a number of our libraries are vibrant community facilities but others are underutilised and in need of investment and revitalisation. Wirral's libraries, like many others across the UK, have seen a decline in the traditional usage of book issues and visits, whilst e-lending has increased.

1.3   Increasing access to the services, facilities and opportunities on offer at our libraries is a key part of improving outcomes, particularly amongst some of our most vulnerable communities and groups. As previously noted, variety in resident usage of libraries across Wirral persists. To deliver the outcomes we want to achieve, we need to do things differently; adapting what we do to meet the needs of different communities in Wirral and modernising the way in which we work to reflect the impact of COVID-19 and the changing world in which we live in.

1.4   Over the last ten years there have been substantial changes to how libraries are commissioned across England. These changes have been driven by factors including financial austerity, technological change, local need and community empowerment.

1.5   We have developed our partnership and community networks in recent years and we want to build upon those relationships to encourage increased participation in the delivery of the service. This will support the development of an increasingly strategic and responsive library service; listening more carefully and using data and intelligence in more sophisticated ways to deliver improved outcomes and opportunities for residents. The service intends when appropriate, to explore and provide alternative delivery models and we will continue to review options over the strategy period.

1.6   This strategy sets out our priorities and objectives for the service, outlining the key elements for residents and partners.

2. What we know

2.1 Data

Wirral Libraries is a statutory service of 24 libraries, virtual library and a home reader service.

Benchmarking data provided by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) shows that Wirral's library service has an above average cost per head of population and has more service points per head of population than the national average. Wirral's opening hours at the busiest library are below the national average and visits per annum at the busiest service point are also below the average visits per annum figure at the busiest service points nationally. Wirral's library service also has a slightly above average number of active library borrowers per head of population.

KEY FACTS FOR APRIL 2019 TO MARCH 2020

24
LIBRARIES

33,440
OPENING HOURS

782,386
ITEM ISSUES

110,663
WEBSITE SESSIONS

52,891
E-LENDING DOWNLOADS

6,942
TALKING BOOK ISSUES

37,631
ACTIVE BORROWERS
(minimum one item in the year)

323
PEOPLE USING THE
HOME READER SERVICE

11.6%
OF WIRRAL RESIDENTS
ARE ACTIVE BORROWERS

6,400
LIBRARY EVENTS HELD

933,369
PHYSICAL VISITS TO A
WIRRAL LIBRARY

180
VOLUNTEERS

The way customers use the library service is changing and this has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Books are still the mainstay of the service, but physical loans are declining, whilst downloading digital e-lending material continues to rise. Furthermore, digital usage within our libraries varies across the borough and we are also seeing some libraries increasingly be used as a community space for groups and organisations, demonstrating that the need for the service is continually evolving to meet a changing local need.

Total Annual e-Lending Issues

Number of e-Lending Issues vs Financial Year

Financial Year	Number of e-Lending Issues
2012/13	3,711
2013/14	20,432
2014/15	25,634
2015/16	30,067
2016/17	30,926
2017/18	36,523
2018/19	42,111
2019/20	47,156
2020/21	81,714

Total Loan Transactions

Number of Loan Transactions vs Financial Year

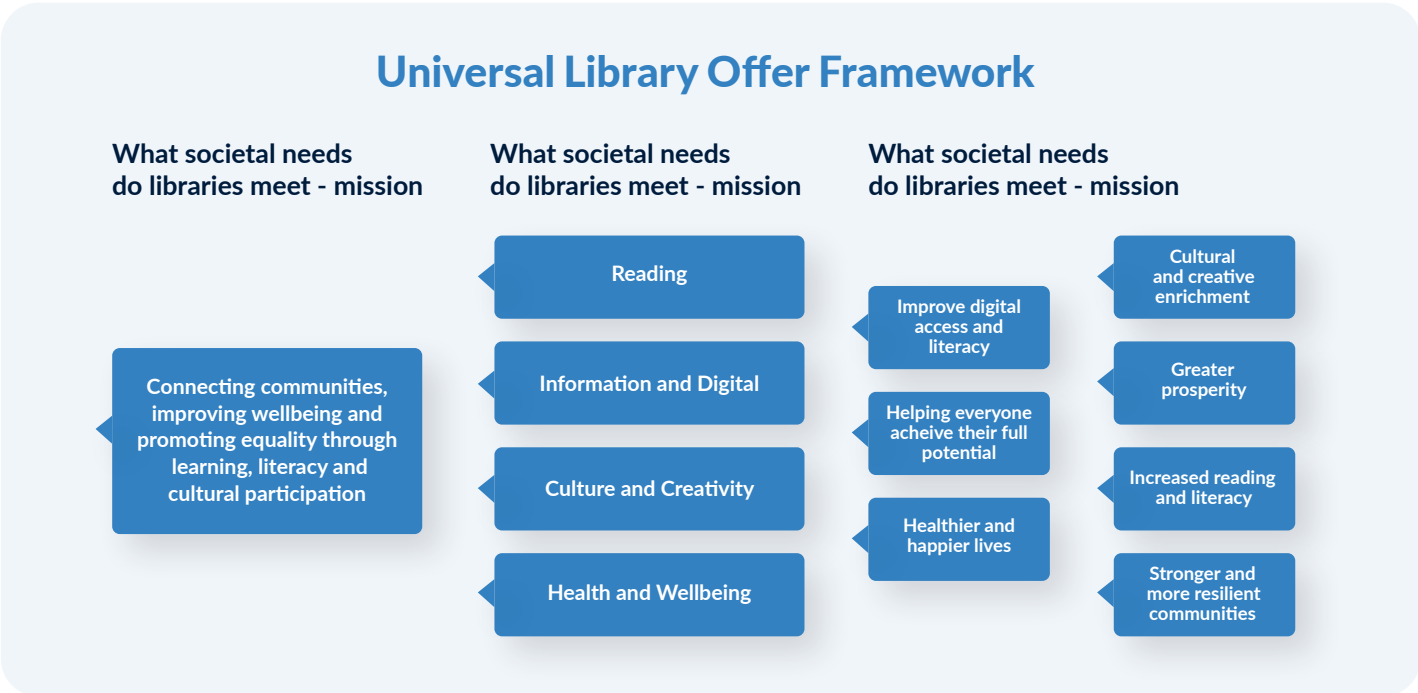| Financial Year	Number of Loan Transactions
2012/13	1657121
2013/14	1470528
2014/15	1256538
2015/16	1071226
2016/17	974152
2017/18	887598
2018/19	826836
2019/20	782386
2020/21	364503

The service is now able to rebuild from the impact of Covid-19. This will present challenges as we continue to keep users and staff safe, but we recognise the key role libraries will play in community recovery from the pandemic.

2.2 Context

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to deliver a public library service. The main obligation is to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' service available to everyone, to promote this service, and to lend books and other written materials free of charge.

The national development agency for libraries is Arts Council England (ACE) and Libraries Connected provides strategic support to the library sector. In 2013, The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) launched the Universal Offers to demonstrate the power of public libraries and their ability to enrich the lives of individuals and the communities they serve. Furthermore in 2016, the national Libraries Taskforce published "Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021" in which it set out the strategic vision and commitment for public libraries in England, recognising the challenge councils face running library services, calling for a different way of thinking and acting to transform library services. The Universal Offers were reviewed and relaunched in 2019 by Libraries Connected (formerly SCL) to create a new framework. In addition, "The Children's Promise" developed with The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) underpins the Universal Offers, with Libraries Connected also developing the "Six Steps Promise" with RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People) and Share the Vision to ensure libraries support people with reduced vision.

The new Universal Library Offers are outlined in the second column of the diagram below.

Universal Library Offer Framework

What societal needs do libraries meet - mission

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- Connecting communities, improving wellbeing and promoting equality through learning, literacy and cultural participation

- Reading
- Information and Digital
- Culture and Creativity
- Health and Wellbeing

- Improve digital access and literacy
- Helping everyone acheive their full potential
- Healthier and happier lives

- Cultural and creative enrichment
- Greater prosperity
- Increased reading and literacy
- Stronger and more resilient communities

Together the outcomes and offers outlined by Libraries Connected provide a robust framework for the development of an efficient and strategic library service that is relevant and accessible.

3. The Strategy

3.1 Our vision

"Our vision is to provide first-rate reading, digital, learning and cultural opportunities for our residents; creating vibrant community hubs to inspire and enrich our residents' lives and enhance community belonging and wellbeing"

3.2 Our values

Wirral Council staff work to a clear set of values. Our values define how we work with each other, how we work with members and residents, and how we go about our daily business to give Wirral residents the best possible service.

We are:

- **Customer focused** - We put our customers' needs first and listen to their views to make informed decisions
- **Accountable** - We are answerable for our actions and the actions of our team and will be accountable for the delivery of this strategy
- **Ambitious** - We strive to innovate and focus on the best ideas to deliver exciting, relevant and varied programmes and services that raise the aspirations of our users
- **Professional** - We are open, honest and respectful with our colleagues, customers and stakeholders. We are enthusiastic and optimistic about our service

3.3 Our design principles

In developing our future library service, we will use the following design principles identified by the Libraries Taskforce (*DCMS - Libraries Taskforce, 2016)*:

- meet legal requirements
- are shaped by local needs
- focus on public benefit and deliver high quality user experience
- make decisions informed by evidence, building on success
- support delivery of consistent England-wide core offers
- promote partnership working, innovation and enterprise
- use public funds effectively and efficiently

4. Strategic Priorities

In 2021, we completed an internal consultation, a 12-week Wirral Libraries public consultation and needs analysis. This gave us further insight and demonstrated what services you value the most and would like to access from the library service, whilst meeting local need in the context of available resources. This evidence has strengthened our new 5-year strategy, whilst being able to deliver a sustainable service in radically changing circumstances.

A set of four key priorities underpin this strategy and are designed to ensure a modernised library service which seeks to respond and align to the Universal Library Offers and the Wirral Council Plan.

4.1 Strategic priority one
Reading

Engage, Imagine, Discover

We will deliver resources and activities to build literacy skills at all levels and ages and promote a love of reading within libraries, community settings and via online platforms.

We know that lacking vital literacy skills holds a person back at every stage of their life, and we want our service to support children and adults to develop reading skills for school, leisure and work.

Research also suggests that children and adults who read are healthier, happier and more confident than those who do not, whilst reading for pleasure has been found to be important for children's cognitive development.

Objective: Offer children of all ages an opportunity to read and discover

Actions:

- Provide affordable and engaging interactive activities and resources aimed at supporting language, communication, and developmental opportunities for pre school children
- Work in partnership with schools, focusing resources where uptake and attainment levels are lower, to demonstrate the value of creative reading activities and supported programmes that impact on literacy attainment and wellbeing
- Design, develop and review, with key partners, diverse and inclusive literacy resources, supporting programmes of work virtually, within libraries and communities, with a specific focus on targeted audiences

Objective: Provide affordable and engaging resources and activities to promote and celebrate reading for pleasure for adults

Actions:

- Use national and regional initiatives to promote reading for pleasure
- Work with community volunteers and reader development organisations to grow reading for pleasure activities and initiatives in accessible community places, ensuring they are appealing and relevant, whilst supporting resident led groups and community adhesion

Objective: Provide an engaging and diverse book stock and reading focused materials for all ages and abilities

Actions:

- Encourage resident involvement in book selection and ensure that the book stock is managed effectively to ensure greatest value and evolves to reflect local need
- Provide access (physically and remotely) to a range of inclusive and diverse books in accessible formats to allow engagement with reading, and work with partners to support adults to engage in reading
- Implement inspiring, imaginative book and reading-focused promotions within our libraries and community settings, whilst employing complementary social media campaigns

4.2 Strategic priority two
Information and Digital

Inform, Inspire and Innovate

We will support digital skills learning and deliver activities and resources to ensure that all residents have access to quality information and digital services.

Information literacy has relevance for everyday life, citizenship, health, education and the workplace and libraries have a key role to play in supporting individuals to access accurate and unbiased information.

As individuals increasingly use digital devices and the internet, not all individuals will be able to go online. Some may also lack the skills, confidence and motivation to use such devices. Libraries can break down some of these barriers to increase digital inclusion, by increasing awareness, improving the design of its digital services and enable users to have the skills and motivation to confidently go online and unlock more opportunities.
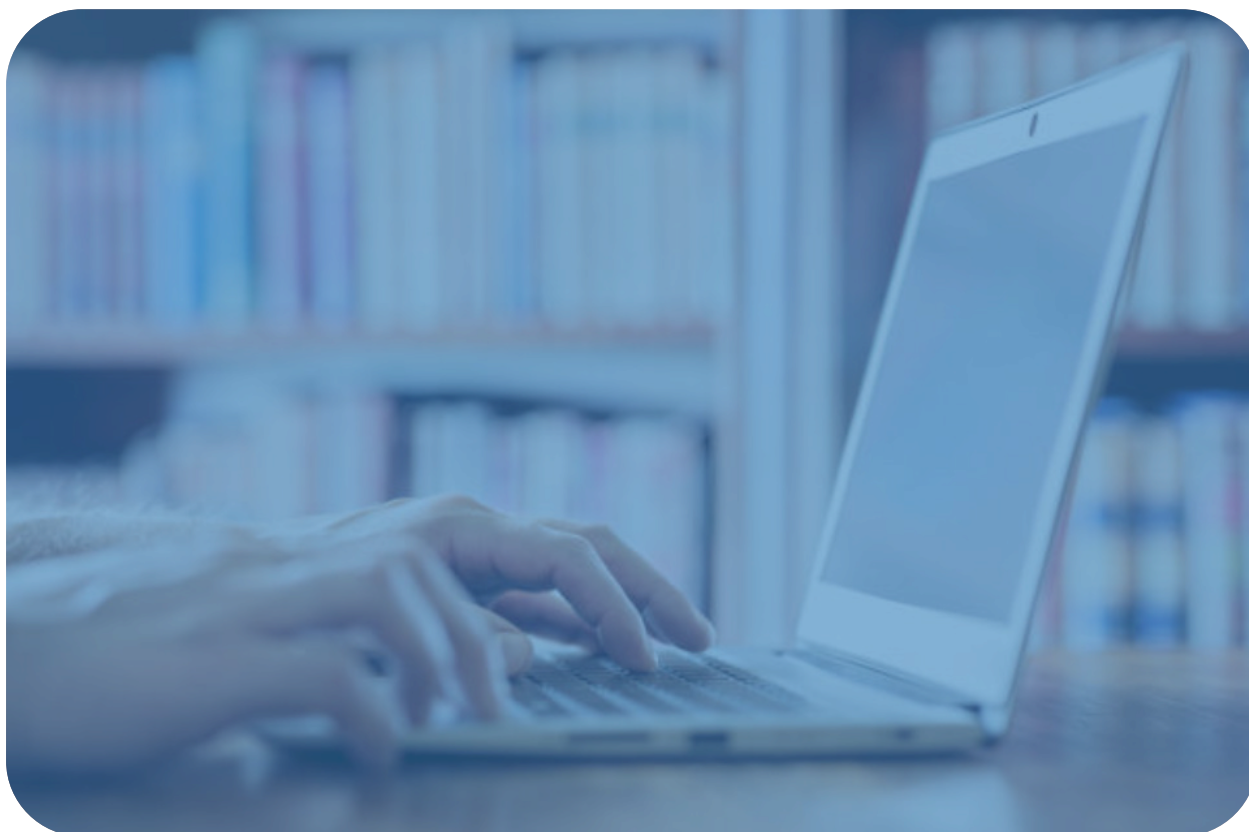
Objective: Provide a range of resources and activities that promote digital inclusion and support residents with their learning and digital skills

Actions:

- Use local and national programmes to offer digital activities to encourage digital inclusion and digital literacy, particularly in areas of identified need, using our network of staff, partners, volunteers and online resources
- Work with partners and those that have an existing presence within communities to enable individuals and communities to develop inspiring learning offers
- Seek opportunities when appropriate that invest in technological improvements for users

Objective: Provide access to quality information and digital services

Actions:

- Develop and refine our online services to ensure they are relevant and accessible
- Work with partners to assist users to choose the right sources of information
- Explore opportunities to develop and implement a digital programme to increase accessibility to local history resources
- Continue to develop an imaginative programme of workshops and exhibitions with other public services and partner organisations
- In partnership with the British Library offer a Business and IP Centre to provide local residents and businesses free access to relevant databases and business advice

4.3 Strategic priority three
Culture and Creativity

Explore, Create, Participate

We will support an increase in cultural and creative experiences bringing culture to communities and inspire residents to connect with culture.

A report by Wirral Public Health (2019) supported the case that engagement and participation in arts and culture supports health and wellbeing. Libraries can reach audiences from all backgrounds and ages and provide a focal point for cultural and creative activities within local communities, whilst also supporting the development of the local cultural economy.

Objective: Provide opportunities for residents to engage in inclusive cultural and creative experiences, relevant to the local community

Actions:

- Work with partners and volunteers to develop new ways of engaging targeted groups through cultural and creative activities and events
- Explore opportunities which will support young people's participation and talent development
- Develop a marketing strategy that includes service promotion of activities and events, and the library space, to encourage cultural and creative participation by users and the wider community
- Support local cultural groups to grow by curating and promoting information about their cultural and creative community activities and events
- Being aware of opportunities, and when appropriate, support the development of creative spaces within libraries

Objective: Develop strong partnership working to deliver joined up working around culture and creativity

Actions:

- Share programmes of work with key partners including Wirral's Culture team and Liverpool City Region library authorities to identify areas of collaboration
- Being aware of opportunities for Wirral Libraries to participate in national and regional cultural initiatives and identify and maximise external funding opportunities
- Forge new partnerships with health services, further and higher education, third sector organisations and technological and commercial industries to deliver new initiatives
- Identify success stories to promote Wirral Libraries locally and further afield and apply for awards to recognise achievements and best practice to support future funding applications and partnership working

4.4 Strategic priority four
Health and Wellbeing

Healthier, Happier, Connected

We will provide access to trusted health information and resources and will support the development of connected communities to improve wellbeing.

Libraries have long been a trusted destination for information, including information about health conditions, their treatment and prognosis. Keeping people well and supporting people to manage their illnesses through accessible information, signposting to additional support and reading for wellness & self-care, promotes healthy living and self-management.

Research from the Reading Agency has also found that the benefits of reading include, increased empathy, better relationships with others, reduced symptoms of depression and dementia, and improved well-being throughout life. It is also widely recognised that social connection improves physical health and psychological well-being, with strong social connection leading to a 50% increased chance of longevity.

Objective: Promote access to trusted information on a range of health issues including specific medical conditions and public health issues and provide self-management support

Actions:

- Innovate and share existing programmes that support physical and mental health, and develop new initiatives with volunteers, third sector and public health partners to deliver resources and services to people with physical and mental health conditions
- Continue to develop and provide accessible, high-quality health information and signpost and offer extended support for public health initiatives
- Work with key partners to provide staff and volunteers with relevant health training

Objective: Provide a range of reading opportunities and creative and social activities, which engage and connect communities, to reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing

Actions:

- Work in partnership with health colleagues and volunteers to provide activities and events that support communities with health and wellbeing outcomes
- As part of the development of the social prescribing approach, we will work with health partners to design an offer connected to libraries that supports health and wellbeing
- Provide volunteering opportunities, whilst proactively encouraging and supporting people with health and wellbeing needs
- Seek investment where opportunities present themselves, to enhance library spaces

5. What next and how will we know if we are getting it right?

5.1 An implementation plan for the delivery of this strategy will be developed upon approval of this document. A set of measures will be included in the plan to monitor progress and success. The delivery will be overseen by our Management Board. The Board will receive quarterly reports to monitor our progress.

5.2 Progress and success will be measured in several ways including:

- **CIPFA key performance indicators**

- **Strategic priority 1   - Reading**
    - Support reading attainment in areas of identified need
    - Increase in community and resident led reading initiatives and activities in areas of identified need
    - Increase in book issues for targeted areas of stock (physical and electronic)

- **Strategic priority 2   - Information and Digital**
    - Increase in uptake of library online services
    - Increase in the usage of the digital collections
    - Increase in engagement satisfaction and service awareness

- **Strategic priority 3   - Culture and Creativity**
    - Increase of and attendance at cultural and creative activities and events in areas of identified need
    - Increase in community usage of libraries by local cultural groups in areas of identified need
    - Increase in new partnerships and externally funded initiatives in areas of identified need

- **Strategic priority 4   - Health and Wellbeing**
    - Increase in health and wellbeing book issues
    - Increase in activities and events that have a health and wellbeing focus in areas of identified need

5.3 We will also see people benefiting from a joined up Wirral Council offer aligned to the Wirral Council Plan 2021-26, in which we will work with other public services, third sector organisations and communities. We will do this by devising new ways to measure preventative activities and services whilst demonstrating the added value and impact that the library service can bring.

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