



Everyone's Library Service

2022-2026



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Opening Statement



Councillor Louise McKinlay

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance



I am passionate about our library service and believe it has a vital and important role to play in improving the lives of our residents and in helping to level up the county.

Libraries need to be at the heart of our communities. Great libraries are welcoming and inviting, they provide spaces for people to study, to learn, to attend creative clubs, to meet authors, and to play. They offer a wide range of books, e-books, graphic novels and podcasts. They support people who are seeking work by providing IT facilities and through running volunteering schemes which enable them to develop their skills and enhance their CVs.

Libraries are places where you can learn about your local area and research your family history. Young children can prepare for attending school, where students can find a place to study and where residents can access lifelong learning opportunities and our well trained and experienced staff help you access the services you need.

This is my vision for Essex Libraries.

We do much of this already, but this plan will enable us to do even more, and do it better.

Essex is fortunate to have one of the largest library services in the country, with 74 libraries, a home library service and a fleet of mobile libraries. Due to our wide reach, we can connect to and support every community across the county and enhance their lives. Underpinning this is our commitment to keep all our Libraries open as we drive forward our ambitious programme and deliver high quality services across all our locations.

Our libraries are a lifeline for many people and we will look at how to deliver the library service in different ways, as well as how we make the most of under-used space in our buildings and facilities across the county. We will design a service we can be truly proud of. One that is modern, vibrant, and sustainable. One that can improve life for everyone in Essex.

Through talking to residents and partners, it is clear that my passion for libraries is shared. People see libraries as a hub for communities to come together and interact, a vital resource for helping residents improve their literacy, and a place to learn new skills.

Following consultation feedback, this plan emphasises further our ambition to ensure our stock remains up to date and appealing to both existing and new users. It looks at how we can better localise our communications about local library events and clubs, and what we can do to reach more people where they live, study or work. Feedback showed that people understand why charges might be needed for some new facilities, and this plan shows how that might work alongside and complement existing and new free activities.

This plan describes the areas that we will be working on over the next four years:

- 1. Library Service and literacy**
- 2. Communications and infrastructure**
- 3. Supporting our communities and levelling up**

We will be developing budgets to support this plan. We will be exploring ways we can work together with other organisations with similar aims. And most importantly, we will engage with our users and the wider community to develop further the services on offer.

“Literacy sits at the heart of the levelling up agenda. Improving literacy will improve the opportunities of individuals and communities. It is great to see Essex committing to these priorities and placing libraries at the heart of their strategy. Libraries are lifelong centres of literacy, creating reading communities and of vital importance to the one child in 11 from our most vulnerable communities who don’t own a single book. With their commitment to literacy, Essex Libraries are showing themselves to be community activists and national leaders.”

Jonathan Douglas CBE, Hon FRSL,
Chief Executive, National Literacy Trust

What will be different for our residents?

By achieving this plan, we will be...

- ABC** Supporting children and adults to improve their literacy
-  Encouraging people to enjoy reading for pleasure
-  Increasing the range and diversity of online resources
-  Introducing relevant and exciting events and activities to engage and inspire new and existing library service users
-  Growing volunteering opportunities to expand the services we can offer through our libraries
-  Benefitting from a programme of library refurbishments throughout the county
-  Using our updated digital and IT services to improve the customer experience
-  Working with partners to provide joined up and equal access to additional services
-  Supporting the levelling up agenda by focusing resources in areas that most need them
-  Providing residents with skills and support to help them achieve their aspirations wherever they live
-  Doing more to encourage residents to read, for example through Essex's Year of Reading
-  Using data to better understand the habits and interests of our library users
-  Marketing our services in dynamic and engaging ways using Instagram and other relevant media
-  Seizing opportunities to help educate and inform people on critical issues such as climate change
-  Engaging with residents to promote local events

"I have been using this library for a few years now. Very helpful and friendly staff. They always keep the premises neat and tidy. My kids love to go there every week."

Pitsea customer

"The staff are wonderful, so friendly and helpful and we would be lost without our local library."

Library customer

Introduction

The Library Service has a significant role in the community, providing access to reading, training, digital skills, trusted information, and cultural experiences to people at every stage of their lives.

This plan is about improving and promoting the opportunities that the Library Service can offer and placing it at the heart of the community.

Having a Library is a promise to residents that they can access materials from an early age that support developing their reading skills and literacy right through to adulthood.

The library service aims to be relevant to people from birth to retirement. Libraries are places people in Essex should feel excited, happy, and safe to go to whether to read, use a computer, find information or to avoid isolation. We want the service to be valued and well used.

We provide support to families so that they can use and enjoy the library service at key stages in their lives: babies and toddlers coming to our Rhymetimes, school children joining the Summer Reading Challenge, students studying in libraries, residents who may need help with modern digital technology, or those attending one of the many activities in libraries.

Through our mobile and home library offer and community outreach programmes we also improve access for people at risk of being socially isolated, residents with long term conditions or disabilities, communities which are hard to reach, and people who might find it difficult to visit a library.

All residents should know about and feel able to use our comprehensive online library service to reserve items and access our dynamic and exciting e-books, journals, and other resources, and take part in our new online groups and activities.

Our staff and volunteers should feel valued and supported and we will continue to invest in staff development so that they are equipped to deliver the best possible service to our residents.





Library Service and Literacy

The enjoyment of reading is at the core of the services and activities on offer through our libraries, and we need to support and help those who are not confident when it comes to reading and literacy.

It is estimated that around 16% of adults¹ in England have “very poor literacy skills” whilst the UK government estimates that a further 10% of adults² have a condition such as dyslexia. Mencap also estimates that at least a further 2% of adults and 2.5% percent of children have some form of learning disability. For both children and adults these issues can have a serious impact on their self-esteem as well as their ability to access information that can have a serious impact on their life chances - adults with poor literacy skills may be

locked out of the job market, have less access to health information, and, as a parent, they may not be able to support their child’s learning.

The Library Service will build people’s confidence in reading and writing by providing a safe and comfortable space where people can develop their literacy skills. The Service will focus on expanding opportunities to work with people who would benefit from additional support.

Libraries are inclusive and open to all. They provide free access to books, IT, events, and activities that inspire people to engage with reading and information as well as enjoy reading for pleasure. Libraries are knowledge hubs and support residents to connect with other service and organisations.

“Lovely displays particularly in the children’s library”

Library customer

To deliver a high-quality service to our residents, our libraries will:

ABC Support children to be ready for school and improve their reading

We will work with early years providers, parents, schools, charities and the Essex Education Task Force to support children to be school-ready. We will develop their literacy skills, support education catch-up and provide a safe space for young people to study and learn outside the classroom.

Help adults to improve their literacy

We are partnering with a range of organisations which support adults to improve their literacy skills for everyday life. This can strengthen their job opportunities, aspirations and independence.

Run a new and exciting programme of events and activities

We will work with local partners and volunteers to build on our existing programme of events and activities for all ages, so that our current and future library users develop a lifelong love of reading and libraries.

“We visit regularly as a family to take out books and love that the principle of libraries reduces waste and encourages a love of books and reading.”

Library customer

Keep our stock and resources up to date and appealing

We will continue to develop and use a variety of methods to provide us with in-depth information about our stock management choices including: our own system data on users’ borrowing choices and preferences, information from our suppliers, market analysis on national reading trends, alongside direct engagement, and feedback from residents.

Provide books and resources in formats that meet changing needs

Our online collections and resources like Find My Past and Ancestry are extremely popular, as is our wide range of e-books, newspapers and magazines. We will continue to provide access to a wide and rich range of printed books, special local collections, large print formats and audio books. As part of The Libraries Consortium, we can now offer Essex residents access to an additional six million items of stock.

Increase residents’ involvement in shaping the service

We will continue to ensure that our stock and service reflect the diverse interests and needs of our residents and communities. We will look at new ways for them to share their views and shape the service through regular feedback and input.

¹ Adult Literacy Trust <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>
² UK Government <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-disabilities-and-impairments-user-profiles/simone-dyslexic-user>



Give our staff the skills and support to offer the best possible service

Well trained staff are vital. We will explore new ways to ensure staff have the right technical skills and service knowledge, can promote our resources and activities, and are flexible and adaptable to meet customers' changing needs.



Explore new roles and opportunities for volunteers

Volunteers are an essential and valued part of the library service in Essex, helping our paid staff throughout the year in the delivery of everyday activities and special events throughout the year. We want this to continue and will seek to recruit people with diverse life skills and experiences to help our team develop attractive new offers and services.

“My skills and confidence at painting and decorating my home have been elevated by books borrowed from here but sourced from libraries far away from Essex.”

Library customer

Getting children reading



Grandparent and member of Frinton library.

Introducing children to books at an early age can have a big impact on their development.

All our libraries provide a wide range of resources to support children's development, from picture books which they will love to board books especially designed for little hands to hold. Children learn best when they are having fun: that's why we also offer a range of fun group activities for children and their grown-ups such as our Baby and Toddler Rhymetimes, Story Time sessions and family reading activities.

Wickford Library

Since December 2021, Wickford residents have a modern, vibrant library located in the Willows Shopping Centre. The library includes:

- comfortable furniture
- spaces where you can sit, study, work and meet friends
- an area with charging points where you can work with your own devices
- a large table where groups can meet
- baby changing facilities and an accessible customer toilet
- sensory equipment as part of a colourful and welcoming children's library
- free computer and WiFi access
- free use of library tablets

To complement the library service, Citizens Advice (CA) provide a Video Access Advice Point where residents can book appointments with trained CA volunteers.

“The library provides us with a space away from the home environment to complete [my son's] learning tasks. Without this dedicated space, educating him would be a much greater challenge as the home environment affords many more distractions for us both”

Library customer



The children's corner at Wickford Library



Self-service machine at Wickford Library

“[The library service] enables me to borrow a wide range of books including audiobooks which I would otherwise not be able to afford.”

Library customer

Thank you to our library volunteers

We would like to take this opportunity to say a heartfelt ‘thank you’ to our volunteers, who make an immense contribution to Essex Library Service.

Meet some of our library heroes and find out why volunteering is so important to them.

Anthea Symms, Home Library Service Delivery Volunteer and Reading Friends Volunteer, Coggeshall:

“Without exception every one of our customers has been a delight to deal with and it’s humbling when they express gratitude for what we do. It’s they who make the job so rewarding.”

Lesley Robinson, Home Library Service Delivery Volunteer, Canvey:

“I’d enjoyed working in the library and wanted to continue delivering the service to those customers who could no longer get there. I actually deal with some customers on my round whom I used to serve in the library and this service has been a lifeline to them and hugely rewarding for me.”



Anthea Symms (right) with Reading Friends participant Pat Alston



Helen Hardwick

Helen Hardwick, Baby and Toddler Rhymetime Volunteer and Summer Reading Challenge Volunteer, Clacton:

“I have volunteered to help with the Summer Reading Challenge for the past few years and found it very rewarding. It’s truly delightful to watch the children grow, both physically and in confidence week by week. Books are expensive these days, so it’s great to see parents and young children regularly leaving the library with a pile of books!”

Diane Donald, Baby and Toddler Rhymetime Volunteer, Chelmsford:

“I enjoy the reaction from the children when they learn a new song and the joy on their faces when we read a story together. I love watching the little ones grow in confidence, and the children who don’t have English as their first language have increased their vocabulary along with their parents, through rhymes and books.”



Diane Donald running a Rhymetime at Chelmsford Library

Sue Gallone, Home Library Service Delivery Volunteer, Clacton:

“Over the last 10 years I have taken books and talking books to five people, including one lady of 98 who has been with me throughout. It’s made a massive difference to them, ensuring they have stories to read or listen to, and I’ve also made some interesting friends. I enjoy chats with my Home Library Service customers, about books, family and the world in general. I’ve learned about wartime south London, the East Yorkshire coast, the dance halls of Norfolk and life in Florence as a child in the 1930s. I always feel cheered after a visit and come away with an interesting anecdote.”

If you’ve been inspired to volunteer with us, take a look at the volunteering page on our website: libraries.essex.gov.uk

Everyone’s Literacy

Everyone’s Literacy areas have books and resources to help you improve your reading skills. They will help you develop a love of reading for pleasure. You will find them in all Essex libraries.

The Everyone’s Literacy areas contain:

- books for adults on how to support your child to read
- phonics and learning-to-read books
- books for children and adults with dyslexia
- easy-read books for adults and children
- fun resources to help children improve their vocabulary and reading skills
- signposting to other areas of support for reading skills

All areas are clearly marked in each library. They have been developed in consultation with teachers, Adult Community Learning and other experts in literacy skills.



“It’s great to have somewhere families can sit and read together.”

Clacton Library customer



Communications and infrastructure

Ensuring that residents are aware of the services and support on offer through the library service is fundamental to our plans for the future.

We will deliver professional, targeted, marketing campaigns to a range of audiences. Our communications will be dynamic and creative, with a local focus promoting the service offer to existing users, new audiences, and the wider community in a local area.

Our physical library spaces are a vital part of how we deliver library services, and we are committed to the continued operation of all our libraries across the county. We will plan our physical spaces to ensure they are high quality, welcoming and as inclusive as possible and reflect the needs of all our residents.

Our four main libraries are Chelmsford, Harlow, Basildon, and Colchester and these will continue to be our flagship libraries. We will develop a plan to focus on these and the other libraries across the county to ensure that as many communities as possible benefit from improvements to the libraries local to them.

We will consider whether our libraries are in the right locations for our residents today and in the future. We will engage with housing developments and growth areas across the county to ensure support and contributions for a library service is considered for these new communities.

“Good stock of books and a very good request service.”

Library customer

Our technology and digital infrastructure are key components of how we deliver a modern library service. From free access to computers and IT in our libraries to the new digital offer, we recognise the importance in developing this aspect of our library service. As society becomes ever more digital, poor internet and Wi-Fi connection is no longer acceptable, instead stable, fast access is essential for ensuring real benefits for work, education, and communication. We already have a Wi-Fi improvement programme for all libraries, and we will continue to improve our technological offer, such as providing more mobile devices for our residents and staff to use, along with improved printing facilities.

“My library card is my passport to follow courses in subjects that I always hoped to find time to pursue. I’m interested in the Latin names for garden plants, so chose a free course in Beginner’s Latin.”

Library customer



Love Your Library Day at Harwich Library

To improve our communications and infrastructure, we will:



Improve our buildings

We will develop a planned programme of building improvements. We will consider upgrade and cosmetic improvements, how spaces are currently used, opportunities to use them differently and the potential to generate additional income from our estate.



Seek to reduce our carbon footprint

In line with our commitments to become a net-zero organisation, we will review the energy efficiency and environmental impact of our library buildings. Working with other parts of the organisation and our partners, we will develop a long-term plan for environmentally sustainable libraries.



Develop our mobile and outreach service

This could include promoting health and wellbeing initiatives, offering wider skills for adults, and reviewing opportunities for supporting priorities such as literacy and wider council objectives.



Engage better with new and existing users

We will develop a communications strategy to improve two-way communication with our customers locally. We will promote the range of services and activities on offer at different locations and highlight events and promotions relevant in particular neighbourhoods. We will target communications at appropriate times to encourage people to participate in library events and join their local library.



Improve communications with staff and volunteers

With a dispersed workforce, it is vital to keep people informed about what is happening across the service. We will explore the practical tools we can use and working practices we can adopt to ensure our staff and volunteers are always in the loop.



Develop an online platform

We will develop our online service to ensure it is high quality, welcoming and inclusive. Our digital library will have a more user-friendly interface and enhanced functionality, such as online bookings for special events and activities. It will also offer a more personalised service, including bespoke recommendations based on borrowing habits.



Update the printing services offered to customers

We will introduce Wi-Fi and self-service printing for customers to reduce the need for expensive home printing, bringing environmental benefits.



Roll out better mobile technology for staff and volunteers

We will provide staff and volunteers with mobile devices so that they can work more flexibly when dealing with customers, or when working in the community. Other colleagues will also be able to work in our buildings when they are out and about or not based in their usual workplace.

“Helpful catalogue so I can find the books I want”

Library customer



Skills for the future

Our libraries offer services to help residents develop new skills from job seeking to creative writing.

Our Work Clubs provide computers, software and technical support to help people use online resources to find jobs and guide them to other sources of employment advice. Our Code Clubs, led by volunteers, introduce programming to young people interested in creating digital content. They also give them the chance to learn about computational thinking, problem solving, planning, designing and collaboration. Through the funding available from our levelling up programme, we will be exploring how we can further expand our range of support for people who want to increase their skills.



“I enjoy working as a volunteer because I like helping the customers and interacting with people”

Galina, Volunteer at Braintree Library



Environmental initiatives

We are doing our bit for the environment. We:

- distribute and collect recycling bags, batteries and small electrical items
- provide ‘inkbins’ to recycle ink cartridges
- collect old laptops to be refurbished for those in need

In partnership with Active Essex, we lend out sports and leisure equipment, so that you don't need to buy them.

We also consider the environment when we build or upgrade our libraries. Some of our libraries have solar panels and most have LED lighting. Carbon emissions in

new buildings will be at least one-third lower than required by current building regulations. We will install fittings to reduce water consumption. New buildings will have mechanical ventilation and heat recovery systems to prevent overheating and recycle heat, providing clean low-cost energy and air cooling.



Solar panels at Brightlingsea Library



Harlow Library refurbishment

Harlow Library is a large two-storey building from the 1960s in the heart of the town centre. It was extensively refurbished in 2022 and is now a high quality, welcoming and inclusive space meeting residents' needs and accommodating Adult Community Learning (ACL).

The improved library space includes:

- good stocks of books and resources that customers want
- a café serving light snacks and drinks
- a large, vibrant, exciting children's library, with sensory equipment
- a modern, flexible layout that can be used for events and group gatherings
- quiet spaces where you can sit, study, read or work
- a literacy area, with special books and materials for people of all ages who want help with their reading
- an event/exhibition space on the first floor run in partnership with ACL

All windows have been replaced; there is a new heating and ventilation system; new flooring and decoration.

"We didn't have much money and being able to have somewhere free to take them was invaluable, as well as being able to share books that I couldn't afford. It greatly improved my mental health."

Library customer



Love Your Library Day at Harwich Library



Drag Queen Storytime, Colchester

"Good to meet other people. I feel [the Baby Book workshop] has done me a lot of good also. Thank you!"

Dunmow Library workshop participant



“The Knit and Natter group puts a smile on many people’s faces”

Sharon, group organiser

Supporting communities and levelling up

Books and reading are our core offer, but Essex library service also brings people together, fosters culture and creativity, helps people to learn lifelong skills, improve health and wellbeing, and provides a place where people can access information and support.

We offer a huge range of services and activities like baby weighing sessions, support to people with a visual or hearing impairment, and clubs where you can make new friends and learn a new skill or hobby.

In partnership with others, we help residents improve their digital skills and find jobs, while our coding clubs help young people become IT wizards.

We are also passionate about supporting the environment and are continually thinking about how we can do more to make a difference to climate change.

To support our communities to level up, our libraries will:



Expand our outreach service further

Many of our customers visit our library buildings, but we also care about those residents who, for different reasons, cannot get to their local library. We will ensure they know about the Home Library Service and, if needed, we can arrange a visit from one of our friendly volunteers.

We want to connect with local partners and be part of community events and activities so we will expand our mobile and outreach offer and take the library service out into the community.



Improve employability

In partnership with organisations such as Adult Community Learning, business and community groups, we will expand our employment support programmes. We will explore how libraries can be used in innovative ways to help adults gain new skills, improve their employability and find jobs.



Help improve health and wellbeing

We will explore with partners how we can offer residents help to improve their health and wellbeing, through our range of books, resources and activities. We believe we have an important part to play to reduce social isolation and improve mental health.



Help reduce digital exclusion

We will use our libraries to narrow the divide between those who have access to and who can use new technology and those who don’t and can’t. We will explore opportunities to increase technology training so that Essex residents can develop new skills and access services and information online. Through our outreach programme, we will take the library service and digital experience out to the community.



“Very helpful staff”

Library customer

“Will go the extra mile to give a good service”

Library customer



Connect residents to new, exciting services

We will continue to develop partnerships that provide our customers with access to support services that can have a positive impact on their lives such as the Citizens Advice. We will also engage with external partners such as The Literacy Trust, The Arts Council, and Libraries Connected to deliver exciting projects to encourage people to read and enjoy storytelling and the arts.



“Good resources for studying and research”

Library customer

Explore options for providing chargeable activities alongside the existing free activities

Libraries already offer a range of activities outside the core service. These include events such as holiday activities for children and young people. We will explore options for chargeable activities that we could offer in addition to our free sessions. These would provide an enhanced offer, service or experience to our existing customers; appeal to new users of the service; or raise awareness of libraries as a potential partner and venue for other organisations. We will explore the interest from all age groups for sessions such as adult arts and crafts to increase the use of our libraries by the local community.



Reducing social isolation

“I have been feeling very isolated and have almost forgotten how to talk to people, so this is a lovely icebreaker as a great opening for conversation.”

Reading Friend participant.

Delivered in partnership with national charity The Reading Agency, the Reading Friends scheme aims to tackle life’s big challenges, such as loneliness and isolation, through the power of reading.

The scheme brings people together with trained volunteers over the phone, as part of an online group or in person at one of our libraries. Using books, magazines, newspapers, or anything else, the group starts chatting, shares stories and builds social connections. This can be invaluable for vulnerable people.

“I attended Rhymetime sessions with both my children, and it was invaluable for meeting other parents when I may have otherwise felt isolated in my local area.”

Library customer

“Helpful opening times”

Library customer



Mobile library and outreach service

Our mobile library and outreach service provides access to books and other resources to people who don't already visit libraries. It visits places such as retirement communities, traveller sites, schools, preschools, youth clubs and community centres. It provides a service for established and new communities in a flexible and agile way and enables us to target areas identified in the levelling up programme.

The mobile library and outreach service will also support the Summer Reading Challenge, the Year of Reading, and new events, such as summer fetes and holiday activity clubs.

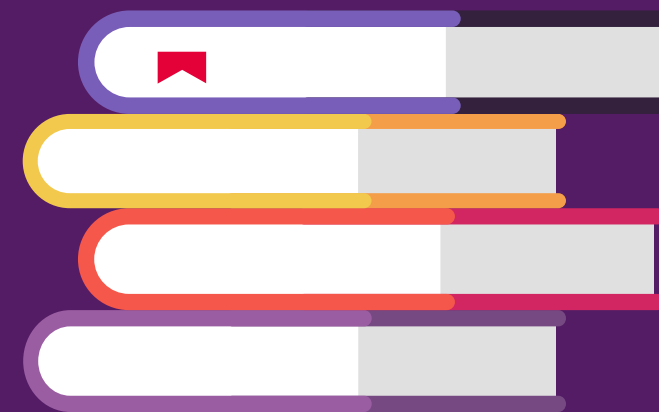
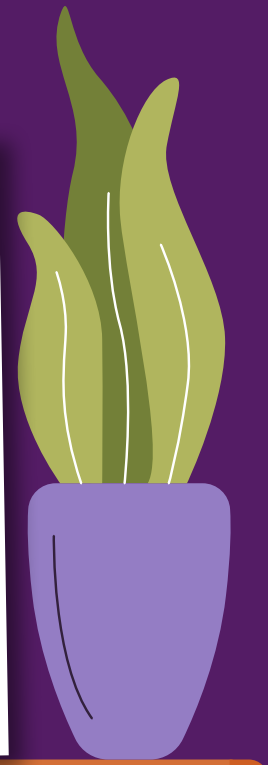
“The library is where I form friendships with like-minded book lovers.... When I’m new to an area, the library is my first destination. There I know I will find a warm welcome and help from the librarians.”

Clacton Library customer



Interior of the new vehicle

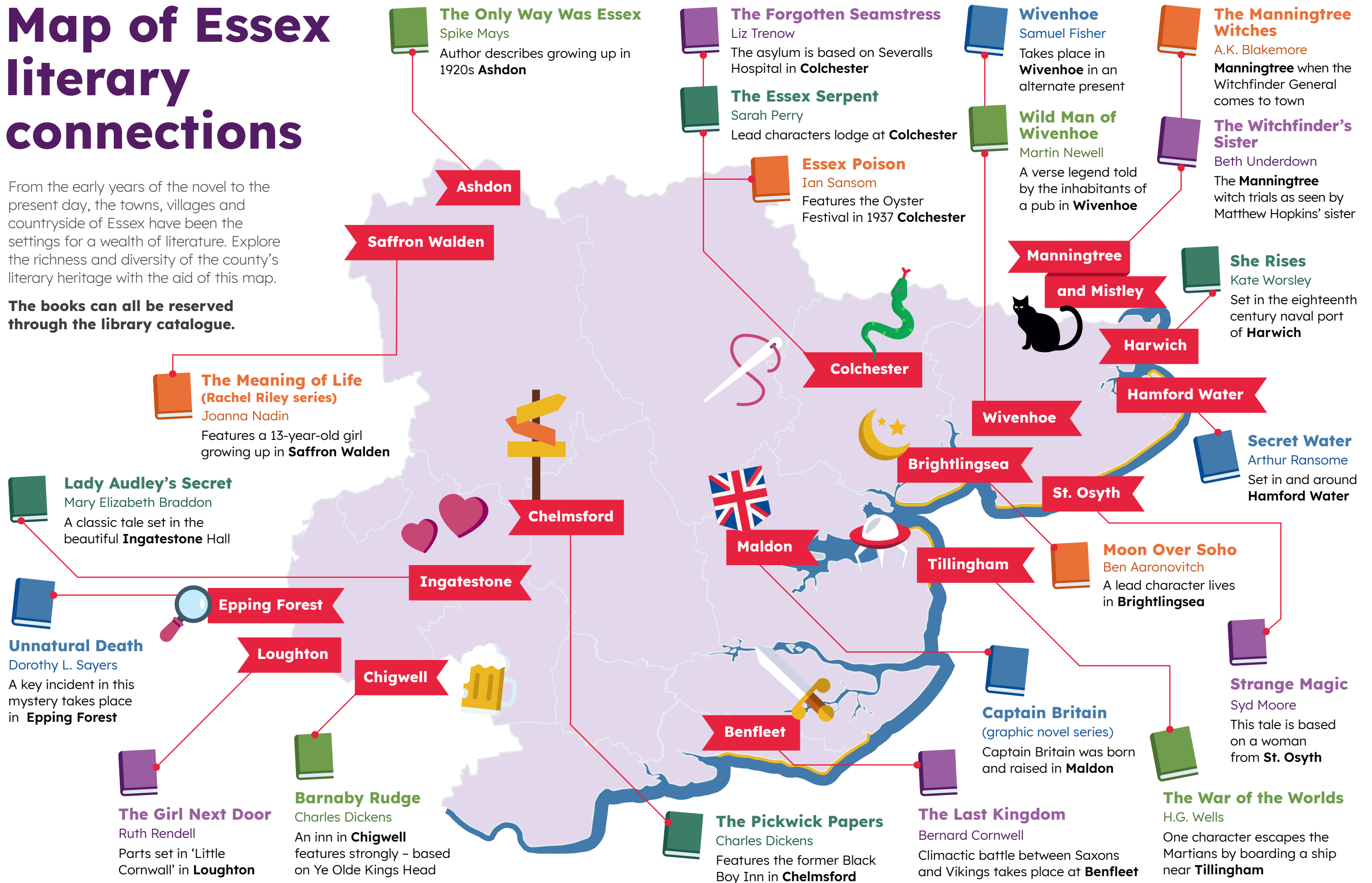
The mobile library at Hylands House



Map of Essex literary connections

From the early years of the novel to the present day, the towns, villages and countryside of Essex have been the settings for a wealth of literature. Explore the richness and diversity of the county's literary heritage with the aid of this map.

The books can all be reserved through the library catalogue.



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