

Everyone's Library Service 2022-2026





Contents

Opening Statement	4
What will be different for our residents?	6
Introduction	7
Library Services and Literacy	8
Essex Libraries - Getting children reading	10
Thank you to our library volunteers	11
Infrastructure & Communications	12
Essex Libraries - Skills for the future	15
Supporting Communities and Levelling Up	16
Essex Libraries - Reducing Social Isolation	19





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 that it has a vital and important role to play in improving the lives of our residents.

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, to play. They enable access to a wide range of books, e-books, graphic novels, and podcasts. They support people of all ages who are seeking work by providing access to IT facilities and through volunteering schemes to develop their skills and enhance their CV. They are places where you can learn about your local area, research your family history and access other complementary services. They are places where young children can prepare for attending school, where students can find a quiet space and where residents can access lifelong learning opportunities. Our well trained and experienced staff help you access the services you need. This is my vision for Essex Libraries. We do much of the above already, but through adopting this plan, we are going to do even more, and we are going to 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 an ever-expanding fleet of mobile libraries. Due to our wide reach, we can connect to and support every community

across the county and enhance their lives. Therefore, we are committed to keeping all Essex County Council libraries open and delivering a high-quality service across all our locations.

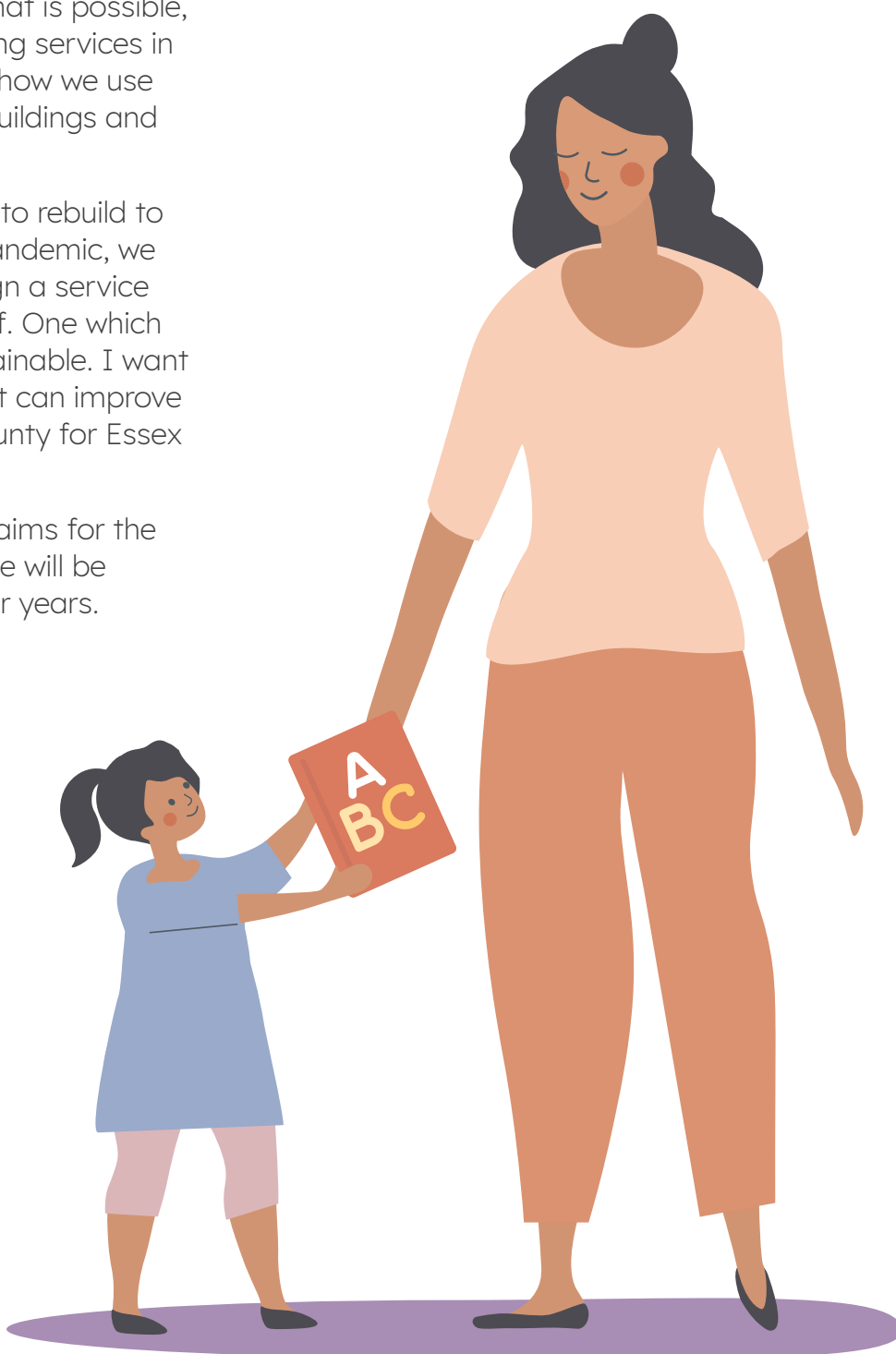
When the country was in lockdown, our libraries adapted to continue operating under very challenging circumstances and became a lifeline for many people. This has taught us a lot about what is possible, from transitioning to delivering services in different ways, to rethinking how we use under-utilised space in our buildings and facilities across the county.

However, we don't want just to rebuild to where we were before the pandemic, we want to go further and design a service that we can be very proud of. One which is modern, vibrant, and sustainable. I want us to seize opportunities that can improve the different parts of our county for Essex residents.

This plan sets our high-level aims for the service and the areas that we will be working on over the next four years. These are:

- 1. Library Service and Literacy**
- 2. Infrastructure and Communications**
- 3. Supporting our communities and Levelling Up**

To ensure we can achieve our aims, we will be developing costed and evaluated proposals for all activities that support the delivery of this plan. We will be exploring ways we can work together with other organisations with similar aims. Most importantly we will engage and work with our users and the wider community to develop further the services on offer.



What will be different for our residents?

By the end of this plan, we will be...



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 that will engage and inspire new and existing library service users



Developing further our volunteering opportunities to expand the additional services we can offer through our libraries



Benefitting from a programme of refurbishments to libraries across the county



Making use of our updated Digital and IT services to improve the customer experience



Continuing to work with partners to provide joined up and equal access to additional services



Forwarding the Levelling Up agenda by targeting new and existing resources to specific areas in order to support families and communities



Providing support and skills to residents to help them achieve their aspirations regardless of where they live



Delivering further local and national initiatives and programmes to encourage residents to get reading, e.g., Essex's Year of Reading



Using data and other information to better understand the trends, habits, and interests of our library users



Ensuring marketing of our services is dynamic and engaging using relevant platforms e.g., Instagram



Identifying opportunities to use the library service to help educate and inform on global subjects such as climate change



Engaging with residents as we shape the service and encourage local promotion of events

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 - from babies and toddlers coming to our Rhymetimes, to school children joining the Summer Reading Challenge: students studying in libraries, and to our older residents who may need help with modern digital technology or to 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.



Chapter 1



Library Services 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 such as finding job or support for their health.

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 and other reading materials, 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 services and organisations.

“Lovely displays particularly in the children’s library”

Library customer

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>

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

ABC Support children to be ready for school and develop their reading skills

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



Help adults to improve their literacy for everyday life

The library service is there for everyone, that's why we are partnering with a range of organisations, which support adults to improve their literacy skills for their everyday lives. This can have a positive impact on job opportunities, aspirations, and independence.



Deliver a new and exciting programme of events and activities

The library service already runs a wide range of events and activities to encourage residents of all ages to enjoy reading and use the huge variety of services on offer. We will work with local partners and volunteers to develop a new programme of events and activities for all ages, to ensure that our current and future library users can develop a lifelong love of reading and use of the library service.



Provide books and resources in formats that meet changing needs

Our online collections and resources like Find My Past and Ancestry as well as our wide range of e-books, newspapers and magazines proved extremely popular during lockdown, and we need to respond to this change in customer borrowing patterns. We will continue to provide access to a wide and rich range of hard copy books, special local collections, large print formats and audio books. We are, also, now part of The Libraries Consortium, providing Essex residents with access to an additional 6 million items of stock.



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.



Get residents more involved in shaping the service

Library users are at the heart of the service. So it is important that the service we are offering reflects the diverse interests and needs of our residents. We will look at new ways for residents to share their views and get involved in helping to shape the service, help inform the stock and titles on offer, and provide regular feedback and input.



Ensure that our staff have the right skills and support to deliver the best possible service

As the service continues to evolve, it is essential that our staff have the skills needed to deliver a high-quality service. We will explore new ways to develop staff to ensure they have the right technical skills and service knowledge, can promote, and upsell the service, and are flexible and adaptable to meet the changing needs of our customers.



Explore new roles and opportunities for volunteers to enhance our service

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



Explore new opportunities to generate additional income

Additional income supports the service and enables us to invest in new facilities and initiatives for our communities. We will continue to look for opportunities to bring in extra income that can be used to deliver more services to our residents. This will be in addition to our core offer and will be developed with input from local residents and organisations.

Essex Libraries - 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 your child's development from picture books which they will love, and 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 families such as our Baby and Toddler Rhymetimes, Story Time sessions, and family reading activities. Following on from the pandemic we have resumed in-person activities but have also kept some of our activities online for families who might find it harder to attend in person.

Thank you to our library volunteers

(The final version of the plan will include photos and special thanks to our library volunteers)

Chapter 2



Infrastructure & Communications

Our physical library spaces are a vital part of how we deliver library services, and we are committed to the continued operation of the 74 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.

We will think differently about how we work with other organisations to support our communities on wider issues. We will develop flexible library spaces that are able to accommodate complementary and value adding services for the community in which they are based. We will also consider when it may be beneficial to relocate to a new building entirely.

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, and stable, fast access is essential for ensuring real benefits for work, education, and communication. We have already begun a Wi-Fi improvement programme across 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.

Finally, we are developing our ability to 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.



To improve our infrastructure & communications, we will:



Develop a planned programme of improvements for our buildings

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



Look at options to reduce the carbon footprint of our library buildings

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



Develop our mobile library offer to support service outreach and community engagement

We will consider how we can use our library vehicles differently (including our new smaller ones) to support a wider range of services and activities in the community including promoting health and wellbeing initiatives, adult skills, and looking at how we can connect with other priorities such as the holiday camp scheme.



Launch a new online library platform

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



Update our printing services on offer to customers

We will introduce Wi-Fi and self-service printing to develop services to support library customers and reduce the need for expensive, non-eco-friendly home printing.



Rollout better mobile technology for staff and volunteers

We will provide fast, reliable, and adaptive mobile technology to support staff and volunteers out in the community who are working with vulnerable and isolated residents. We will also provide access to new technology for colleagues who are working in our library buildings so they can interact with and support customers away from desk spaces.

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

Library customer



Improve our communications to help engage with our existing users and new audiences

We will develop a communications strategy that will improve engagement and two-way communication between the service and our users; promote the range of services and activities on offer through the library service and at different locations; ensure we highlight the right local events and promotions to local people; and help us target our communications at different groups and communities at appropriate times and encourage them to participate in library events and join their local library.



Improve communications and engagement with our staff and volunteers

With a workforce that is spread across the county, working face-to-face with customers and out on the library floor, keeping people informed about what is happening across the service or the wider organisation can be a challenge. We will explore ways to improve our communications and engagement with staff and volunteers looking at practical tools and as well as working practices needed to deliver this.



Essex Libraries - Skills for the future

Our libraries offer a range of services and activities to help our residents develop new skills from job-seeking skills, computer literacy and coding to creative writing.

Our Work Clubs provide computers, software and technical support for jobseekers who need help to access and use online job seeking resources and signpost them to other sources of advice and support. Our Code Clubs are a volunteer led service for young people interested in creating digital content not only learning to programme, but also learning about computational thinking, problem solving, planning, designing and collaboration. Through the funding available from our Levelling Up Programme, we will be looking at how we can further expand the targeted skills support on offer to help more residents and communities to access and develop the skills they need.



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

Galina, Volunteer at
Braintree Library

Chapter 3



“The return of the Knit and Natter group has put a smile on many people’s faces”

Sharon, group organiser

Supporting Communities and Levelling Up

We believe that the library service is more than just a place to borrow books, it is a service which brings people together to interact with other members of their community, fosters culture and creativity, helps people to learn and develop lifelong skills, provides resources to help people improve their health and wellbeing, and provides a place where residents come to access information and support from a range of other organisations.

Our library service provides residents with access to additional services like baby weighing sessions, Essex Sight drop-ins, support for people with hearing impairments, programmes to support people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing, and clubs to help reduce social isolation. We work with partners and volunteers to run work clubs to help residents to search for jobs and skills sessions to help people to improve their employability. We offer digital skills courses for people who lack the knowledge or confidence to get online, and coding clubs for young people with an interest in IT development. Through the new plan for libraries, we aim to develop this further and carve out opportunities to provide additional support to our vulnerable communities and those residents in need of extra help.

Essex libraries also are helping to address climate change and the environmental impacts of our daily lives. The Essex “Library of Things” pilot enables residents to borrow household items such as tools or small appliances instead of purchasing them for a single use. We issue recycling bags on behalf of local councils and litter picking kits as part of our work with Love Essex. We also facilitate recycling of small electrical items and soon will include ink cartridge recycling points across our sites. As we develop our action on climate change, we will seek to ensure the library service plays its part in supporting both the council and local communities in making a difference.

Our library service will play a crucial role in helping to support our communities to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, and as part of our ambition to level up the county and increase opportunities across Essex. From improving access to a quality education, training, and employment to better health and wellbeing for our families, our libraries can help achieve our ambitious goals for the county.

“Very helpful staff”

Library customer

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

Library customer



To support our communities to level up our libraries will:



Expand our outreach services further for other users and communities which need it

Although most of our customers access our library services through our physical sites, there are many who are unable to visit us in person for several reasons. We will expand our range of additional outreach activities in the community from our mobile library service, and the home library service, and consider new ways to support those hardest to reach and with the greatest need.



Provide support for people to improve their employability

We will work with partners including Adult Community Learning, business groups, and community organisations to expand our existing employment support programmes and explore new ways that our libraries can be used to help adults gain new skills and improve their employability, launch their careers or to help them back into employment.



Support residents to improve their health and wellbeing

Through our range of books and other resources, together with activities already on offer, the library service will work with partners to look at the additional support for residents that can be offered to improve their health and wellbeing, particularly on issues of mental health and social isolation.



Help reduce digital exclusion and improve digital skills

We will use our libraries to narrow the divide between those who have access to and can use new technology and those who do not. We will explore opportunities to increase training on technology for Essex residents to develop new skills and access services and information online. We can also help to reach those hard to access communities by developing our outreach programme – taking the library service and the digital experience out to the community.



Connect residents with other services that can support and enable them to live better lives

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.



Explore options for providing chargeable activities alongside the existing free activities

Libraries already offer a range of activities outside the core service. These include activities and services such as holiday activities for children and young people. We will explore options for broadening these activities possibly by running chargeable activities alongside the free of charge activities already on offer. We are not proposing to charge for the activities we currently provide. We will also explore the interest from other age groups for the provision of chargeable activity sessions such as arts and crafts to increase the use of our libraries by the local community.

“Good resources for studying and research”

Library customer

Essex Libraries - Reducing Social Isolation

“I have been feeling very isolated during lockdown and almost forgotten how to talk to

people, so this is a lovely icebreaker as a great opening for conversation.”

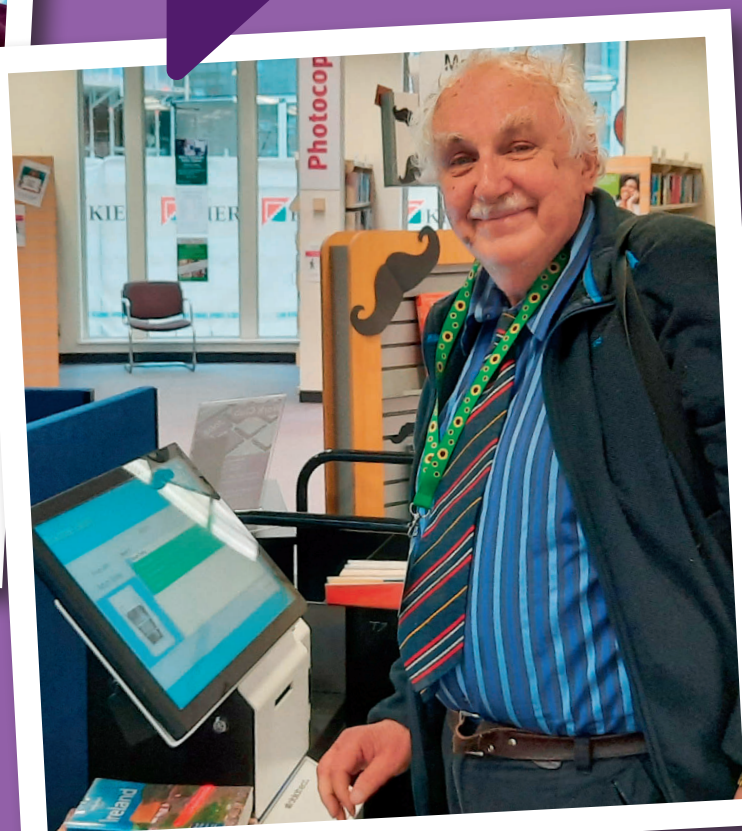
Reading Friend participant.

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 - to start chatting, share stories and build social connections between people who are vulnerable, isolated and at risk of loneliness, especially those most affected by the pandemic.

“Helpful opening times”

Library customer



This information is issued by:
Essex County Council
Essex Libraries Service

Contact us:
libraries@essex.gov.uk
essex.gov.uk/everyoneslibrary
0345 603 7633

Essex Libraries Service
Essex County Council
County Hall, Chelmsford
Essex, CM1 1QH

 Essex_CC
 facebook.com/essexcountycouncil

The information contained in
this document can be translated,
and/or made available in alternative
formats, on request.

Published November 2021