

Annual Report

Financial year

1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025





Introduction

Our vision is for an inclusive, modern, sustainable, and high-quality public library service at the heart of every community in West Berkshire. This is our eighth annual report, and it is intended to give you an idea of what libraries do, who uses them, our staff and volunteers, what the service costs, and how much town and parish councils contributed in the financial year April 2024 to March 2025.

Libraries continue to play an important role in promoting wellbeing and community cohesion through offering a range of cultural activities and providing many people with free access to vital online services. We continue to work hard to ensure that West Berkshire libraries reflect and respond to local needs and provide a safe and trusted space for all.

We recognise the importance of being a part of our local community, responding positively to the needs of that community. We aim to ensure that our service, including the events and activities that we hold, the library buildings, and the provisions that are available, reflect inclusivity and provide a welcoming experience for all who visit, live in, or work in West Berkshire.

“Our Library service continues to provide a great service for our residents, despite continuing budget pressures.

Pop-up libraries and community bookshelves are proving popular within the district.

We have found they provide great social value for all residents, especially when the library is open at the same time as a coffee morning! We continue to work with our Parish Council partners to expand the roll out of pop-up libraries, building on the experience gained by our library staff and volunteers, to further enhance the service.

Our main libraries continue to thrive with increasing visitor numbers and book loans. We have streamlined our e-library provision to a single online provider, making it easier for users to access digital resources while also achieving cost efficiencies.

The Summer Reading Challenge is once again proving a hit with families. West Berkshire has consistently led the way across the southeast, and we're hopeful that 2025 will be another record-breaking year.

Thank you to all our staff, volunteers, and partners for helping us deliver such a vibrant library service”.

Councillor Nigel Foot

Have you got a suggestion or query?

Email: Elizabeth Beverley, Libraries Manager,
West Berkshire Council
Elizabeth.Beverley1@westberks.gov.uk

About the service

The library service is FREE to join for everyone, of any age, living, working, or studying in West Berkshire. We have 8 libraries: Newbury, Burghfield Common, Hungerford, Lambourn, Mortimer, Pangbourne, Thatcham and Theale, as well as pop-up libraries in Compton, Leckhampstead and Upper Basildon, along with a children's community bookshelf at Upper Basildon. We also provide an Outreach and At Home Library Service for housebound readers. We provide free access to over 126,000 books, which are available to borrow. Our stock includes e-books, large print books, graphic novels, quick reads and world fiction.

Key Statistics for 2024-2025



750,721 items
loaned



18,250 computer
sessions accessed



21,447 active
borrowers

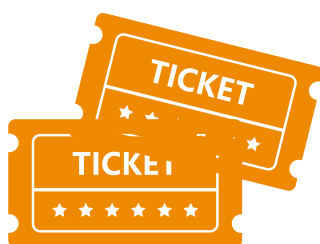
311,393
e-library loans



78,301 reservations placed



5,627 new
library members



2,614 events held with
34,958 attendees

11,802 items
added to stock



321,507 library
visitors



329 volunteers
contributed 13,259 hours



3,241 children took
part in the Summer
Reading Challenge

2024-25 Achievements

The following objectives were included in our Annual Report for 2023-24 and this is what we achieved:

- ***"Engaging with Town and Parish Councils to improve the offering of library services in their areas and develop opportunities to purchase enhanced services."***

Town and Parish councils have been offered the option of adding additional opening hours to libraries within their catchment. Alternatively, if there is no library within the town or parish, they were offered the options of a pop-up library, community bookshelf or outreach visits.

- ***"Working with Public Health, Children and Family services, and wider health partners to introduce a targeted programme of activity to improve school readiness and reduce health inequalities."***

West Berkshire Libraries contributed to the wider school readiness initiative by helping raise awareness of the Flying Start programme and the 50 Things to Do Before You're 5 app. We also introduced a pilot of Read and Learn Bags in libraries. These bags offered carefully chosen books and resources to encourage early literacy, language development, and playful learning at home.

- ***"Streamlining our shared library catalogue, to improve its performance and speed for library customers, in conjunction with the SELMS consortium."***

The streamlining process was completed in August 2024. It has enhanced the catalogue through new item categories, and has significantly improved performance times. It has made the customer experience simpler, especially for those that use more than one SELMS authority.

- ***"Piloting a weekly Ageing Creatively Community Café at Theale Library in association with the Corn Exchange, with a view to rolling out the model to other libraries across the district."***

The Ageing Creatively Community Café at Theale Library, piloted in partnership with the Corn Exchange, has been a successful and well-received initiative, with survey feedback highlighting increased social connection and creative confidence among participants. The weekly café will be continuing at Theale Library.



- ***"Expanding the West Berkshire Libraries At Home Library Service to cater for families without transport in rural areas, as well as those residents who find it difficult to visit their local library because of age or disability."***

West Berkshire Libraries have successfully expanded the At Home Library Service to better serve families in rural areas without access to transport and residents facing barriers due to age or disability. By connecting users with DBS-checked volunteers who deliver tailored book selections, the service has strengthened community engagement and ensured library access reaches those who need it most.

- ***"Running the Summer Reading Challenge in association with The Reading Agency with an additional focus on the Mini Challenge for pre-school children to improve school readiness for seldom heard communities/families."***

Over 3,200 children under 11 took part in the 2024 Marvellous Makers Summer Reading Challenge across West Berkshire Libraries. It was a celebration of creativity, aiming to inspire a love of reading in children with themed activities, certificates, and medals for those taking part.



- ***"Launching the West Berkshire Libraries Children's App to encourage interest in reading."***
West Berkshire Libraries launched Planet Library, a new children's app that uses storytelling, games, and interactive features to inspire young readers and boost enthusiasm for library visits.



- ***"Piloting a digital escape room with focus groups of young people, to provide an interactive tool which promotes awareness of the libraries' offer to secondary school students in an innovative way."***
We held focus groups in local secondary schools and attended online Student Council meetings with elected representatives to promote our libraries and gather feedback on services, facilities, and stock. Additionally, students beta tested the Escape Room at Newbury Library, which was praised by both students and their teacher as a fun and effective way to learn about West Berkshire Libraries.
- ***"Ensuring library buildings are net zero ready to meet the council's 2030 deadline."***
Energy-efficient lighting upgrades were completed in four locations: Pangbourne, Mortimer, Lambourn and Burghfield Common during January and February 2025. These upgrades involved replacing outdated fluorescent fixtures with modern LED lighting systems.



**YOUR
LIBRARY**

Share Your Story

"When I can't be bothered to physically read, I borrow an e-book . . . Having access to e-magazines is also a delight."



**YOUR
LIBRARY**

Share Your Story

"Brilliant staff and volunteers and all very helpful. So simple to order a newly published book – great service."

Highlights from West Berkshire Libraries' Universal Offers 2024–25

Universal Library Offers are core services that public libraries across the country are expected to deliver. In 2024–25, West Berkshire Libraries made significant progress across all four Universal Offers: Information and Digital, Health and Wellbeing, Reading, and Culture and Creativity, demonstrating our commitment to enriching lives and supporting our communities.

Information and Digital Offer

“Ensuring communities can access quality digital services, learn new skills, and feel safe online”.

- **IT Help Sessions** Newbury Library continued to offer free one-to-one IT help sessions for mobile devices and online tasks, plus affordable weekly tuition for those seeking in-depth digital skills support.
- **Online Study Resources** West Berkshire Libraries continued to offer free access to online tools like Britannica and Brillder, supporting learning and revision for all age groups, and Access to Research, to support academic study and research.
- **Pension Credit Awareness Sessions** West Berkshire Council held drop-in sessions at Newbury and Theale libraries to support residents aged 66+ in checking their eligibility for pension credit, including winter fuel payments. Sessions saw strong engagement from the community, with staff from the Council, Age UK, and DWP providing advice and one-to-one digital support.
- **Digital Switch Over Drop-in Sessions** were held in partnership with BT's Our Digital Voice Project at several libraries.
- From October to December 2024, Educafe partnered with the Multiply programme to run a free weekly **Money Saving Service** at Newbury Library, equipping residents with expert advice and practical support to tackle the cost-of-living crisis.
- **The West Berkshire Council Waste Team** held information sessions in all libraries on their waste management strategy and distributed free food waste bin liners to residents.
- **BFI Replay** Access to digital archive content was made available on library computers from November 2024 onwards.



LOVE
YOUR
LIBRARY
Share Your Story

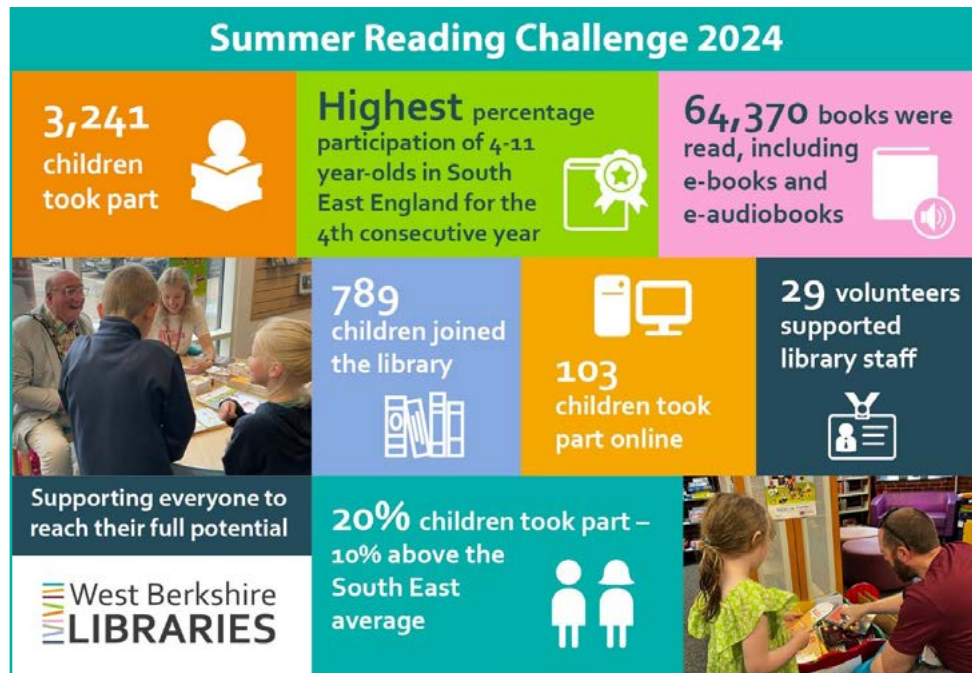
“I adore the library being one of the few places to find resources such as internet access, printing and literature et cetera.

The staff have always gone above and beyond to help me, and I have always found something of use from visiting.”

Reading Offer

"Building a literate and confident society through creative reading activities in libraries".

- West Berkshire achieved the highest participation rate in the South East for the national Summer Reading Challenge (ages 4–11) for the fourth consecutive year, reaching 21% of the target age group - 10% above the regional average. Alongside this, the Mini Reading Challenge introduced pre-schoolers to stories through fun, age-appropriate activities, and 534 adults took part in the West Berks Book Challenge, with prizes awarded at each library.



- Bookstart Programme** West Berkshire Libraries received 1,488 Bookstart packs from the charity BookTrust to gift to babies in 2024–2025, alongside resources for dual language and SEN support, targeting early literacy development and inclusion.
- School Class Visits to Libraries** Throughout the year, schools from across West Berkshire actively brought classes into our libraries, fostering a love of reading and learning outside the classroom. These visits helped children explore new books, develop information literacy, and build confidence in navigating library resources.
- Bookstart Build-A-Bear Project** In partnership with BookTrust and Build-A-Bear, West Berkshire Libraries gifted Early Years Bookstart packs and special bears to children at local nurseries and The Castle School, supporting early years reading and inclusion.
- World Book Night 2024** Thanks to a successful application to The Reading Agency, we gifted copies of *The Jealousy Man* by Jo Nesbø to Educafe, West Berkshire Family Hubs, and Newbury College in celebration of World Book Night.

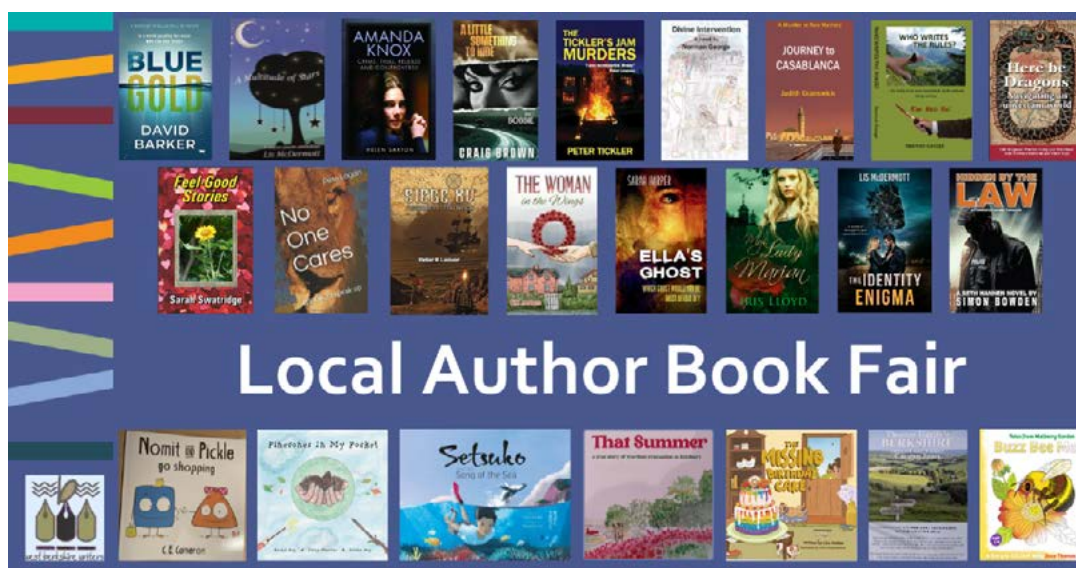
- **Read and Learn Bags** These themed bags, featuring three books and additional activities, supported the getting ready to start school programme by providing parents and carers with tips and tools to prepare children for their first school experience.



- **Author Chats** Newbury Library launched a successful series of Author Chats for adults, featuring writers including Eve Smith, Ruth D'Alessandro, Simon Mason, and Olivia Kiernan.



- **Local Authors Book Fair** Following the success of the West Berkshire Author Showcase, we developed this into a Local Authors Book Fair at Newbury Library in November 2024, creating a vibrant platform for authors to promote and sell their latest works. The event featured a diverse mix of books, including children's literature, adult fiction, and local history, with authors on hand to chat with visitors and personalise purchased copies. The expanded event also featured engaging author talks, readings and children's activities.



Culture and Creativity Offer

“Helping communities experience and participate in high-quality arts and culture”.

- **Educafe at Newbury Library** This thriving weekly drop-in community café continued to offer English language support, employability workshops, baby-friendly activities, wellbeing sessions, and visits from experts. In early 2025, Educafe launched an 8-week language and culture course tailored for the Hong Kong community in West Berkshire.
- **Refugee Week** In June 2024, Newbury Library partnered with Educafe to create a reflective exhibit exploring the theme Our Home, featuring stories and artwork by volunteers and visitors. As a recognised Library of Sanctuary, this initiative deepened connections with refugee communities.
- **The Gingerbread Man Theatre Show** In partnership with the Public Health Team, three performances of this show for young children and families were delivered at Newbury and Hungerford libraries by The Watermill Theatre, including a relaxed performance at Newbury Library in June 2024.
- **The Tiger Who Came to Tea Storytime** A special storytelling session by the Corn Exchange brought Judith Kerr’s classic tale to life for young audiences.
- **Paddington Celebration** To honour Newbury-born author Michael Bond, a life-sized sculpture of Michael Bond was displayed in Newbury Library in October 2024. Paddington-themed storytime and craft sessions at Newbury and Hungerford Libraries invited children to create their own bears.
- **Festival of Archaeology** A Bronze Age beaker-making workshop was held at Burghfield Common Library, led by Berkshire Archaeology Service. They welcomed 132 attendees to explore local heritage through maps, artefacts and clay.
- **D-Day 80th Anniversary** Several of our libraries arranged displays and events to celebrate this anniversary. Pangbourne Library hosted a popular exhibition curated by the Pangbourne Heritage Group celebrating the village’s D-Day connections. Originally planned for 10 days, its extended run drew 225 visitors.
- **Dinosaurs Week** A lively October half-term trail at Newbury Library included fossil-themed challenges, Jurassic Coast treasures and a 7ft pterodactyl soaring in the atrium—sparking excitement and increased dinosaur book borrowing!
- **Cards for Good Causes Pop-up Shops** From 1st November to Christmas Eve 2024, Thatcham and Theale libraries hosted festive pop-ups supporting UK charities and the local community through seasonal card sales.



Craft and Chat group summer party at Theale Library

Health and Wellbeing

“Supporting wellbeing through services that connect and inform”.

- **All Yours Period Support Event** Hosted at Newbury Library, this event distributed free, reusable period products to visitors, encouraging sustainable wellbeing choices.
- **Wellbeing Bags** In partnership with the Public Health Team, our free-to-borrow Wellbeing Bags were refreshed. The bags, which are available to borrow through all West Berkshire libraries, include engaging activities like colouring sheets, card games, and tips for learning new skills.
- **Seated Wellbeing Sessions** Weekly sessions run by Educafe at Newbury Library offered a calm, welcoming space for relaxation and community connection. We also continued to work with Get Berkshire Active to offer chair-based exercise sessions at Hungerford and Theale libraries.
- **Reading Well for Dementia** A new, curated booklist was launched during Dementia Action Week in May 2024, supporting individuals and caregivers with accessible, informative reading.
- **Menopause Information Session** This was held at Newbury Library to share health insights and resources for women’s wellbeing.
- **VIP Book Group** The Visually Impaired (VIP) Book Group at Newbury Library continued to meet monthly. December’s session featured a special visit from local wordsmith Ken Rich, who shared poems and stories celebrating the power of words.
- **NHS Health Checks** Free health checks were offered daily by Solutions4Health at Newbury Library for eligible residents aged 30–74. These included mini checks and consultations on mental health, smoking cessation, diet and fitness.
- **Green Libraries Week** This national event was marked across West Berkshire with eco-themed storytimes and crafts in all of our libraries.



Check out our Top Five most borrowed book titles from 2024-25

Over the past year, our library collections continued to grow and evolve to meet the diverse interests and needs of our community. We added a wide range of new titles across all genres, responding to particular demand for contemporary fiction, health and wellbeing, and children's literature. Regular stock reviews ensured that our collections remain current, accessible, and aligned with what customers like to borrow, while digital formats such as e-books and e-audiobooks continue to be extremely popular.

Adult fiction



Adult Non-fiction



Children's Fiction



Library Service Costs and Income Summary

Revenue Expenditure (Running costs)	£ 2023-24	£ 2024-25
Staff	967,232	998,720
Premises - energy, rates, maintenance costs	328,767	319,997
Supplies and services - ICT, marketing, transport, e-resources	157,533	82,347
Total	1,453,532	1,401,064
Income		
Fees and charges/fines, rent, venue hire, events, sales	(80,071)	(106,697)
Voluntary contributions from town and parish councils	(14,390)	(38,398)
Other income including donations	(4,371)	(5,441)
Total	(98,832)	(150,536)
Net cost of the library service	1,354,700	1,250,528
Capital Investment (Fixed Assets)		
Building improvements	51,264	75,104
Book stock and associated costs	160,616	141,348
ICT improvements	1,621	0
Total	213,501	216,452


**YOUR
LIBRARY**
 Share Your Story

"I treasure the library as if it were my church: with respect, awe and immense gratitude. Thank you for this haven."


**YOUR
LIBRARY**
 Share Your Story

"It's an opportunity to try out new things, explore new books and writers without fear. . . the magical possibility of discovering the perfect book, or even better the perfect series, is always there."

Support from Town and Parish Councils

We always appreciate the help and support we get from town and parish councils in helping us to promote the library service, for example, by publicising libraries to their communities and helping us to recruit local volunteers.

We would like to thank those who made a voluntary financial contribution to the library service. In 2024 - 25 we received a total £38,398 from parish councils.

Compton Pop-Up Library Trial

A six-month trial of a pop-up library service in Compton, held from September 2024 to March 2025, proved to be a success with local residents. Hosted at Compton Village Hall twice a month on a Thursday morning, the sessions coincided with a pre-school group for under-fives and a family hub session, creating a welcoming and family-friendly atmosphere.

Strong links were formed with the pre-school, allowing children to enjoy Storytime and select books during the library visits. As the months progressed, library membership and interest in the initiative steadily grew, with the community expressing enthusiastic support.

Towards the end of the trial, Compton Parish Council conducted a survey to gauge public response. The feedback overwhelmingly endorsed the pop-up library, leading the parish council to approve funding for its continuation into the 2025/26 financial year. While the frequency of visits was reduced to once a month and the session length shortened to 1.5 hours, the service remained a valued fixture in the village.




**YOUR
LIBRARY**
Share Your Story

"The app is so easy to use, so we can request books we want but we also enjoy browsing the shelves. The staff and volunteers are all lovely. We really do love our local library."

Saying Goodbye to our Mobile Library

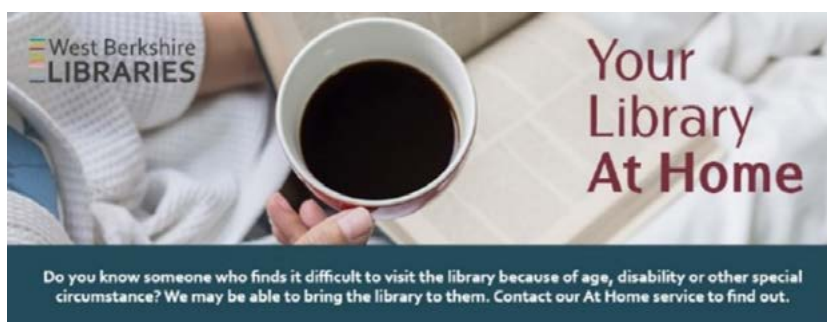
There has been a mobile library service in this district for at least the past 40 years and at the height of its popularity there were three library vehicles operating in West Berkshire. Over the years our staff have been there for residents in rural areas, offering books, advice and friendly words to their customers who waited regularly for the Mobile Library to arrive throughout all seasons.

Without doubt, fond memories of the service will remain for many years to come, but we now look forward to reaching even more residents with a new range of library offers including pop-up libraries and community bookshelves.



At Home Library Service

For those residents who find it difficult to visit their local library, because of age, disability, lack of access to transport, or caring responsibilities, we will bring the library service to them. We match each person with a DBS checked library volunteer who will find out about their reading tastes, choosing and delivering books to their home every three weeks at a pre-arranged time. Favourite authors or particular titles can be requested.



Library Friends Groups

Did you know we have Friends Groups at the following libraries: Lambourn, Mortimer, and Thatcham?

The Friends Groups at Lambourn, Mortimer, and Thatcham Libraries continue to make a valuable impact through dedicated volunteer efforts and community engagement. Lambourn's group supports and coordinates themed events, a winter talks programme and raises funds for improvements; Mortimer's group works closely with local partners to promote library use across all age groups and organise inclusive activities; while Thatcham's group plays a vital role in hosting regular creative events and fundraises for enhancements like garden refurbishment.

If you are interested in joining your local Friends group you can contact them directly:

Friends of Lambourn Library email: folambournlibrary@gmail.com

Friends of Mortimer Library email: Info@mortimerlibraryfriends.org

Friends of Thatcham Library email: friendsofthatchamlibrary@gmail.com

Valuing our Volunteers

We are always immensely grateful to all our volunteers for the help they provide.

During 2024 - 25, 329 volunteers played a vital role in supporting our libraries and the West Berkshire community. Between them they spent 13,260 hours helping us by:

- Supporting staff in ensuring that visitors made the most of their time in the library.
- Assisting PC users with getting online and answering their IT queries.
- Helping with events and activities such as Rhymetimes, Lego and crafts.
- Providing family history support.
- Helping with monthly author events.
- Helping with stock work using our library management system.
- Supporting the At Home Library Service by regularly delivering books and audiobooks to housebound readers.
- Ensuring books were shelved correctly and the library kept tidy.
- Supporting Theale's weekly Ageing Creatively Community Café.
- Supporting the Summer Reading Challenge, engaging with the participants, and chatting about the books they have read.



We have also helped 44 young people complete the volunteering section for their Duke of Edinburgh placement this year.

We are always keen to recruit new volunteers and to review the roles that we offer to be as flexible as possible.

If you would like to volunteer, please talk to library staff or look online:

www.westberks.gov.uk/volunteer

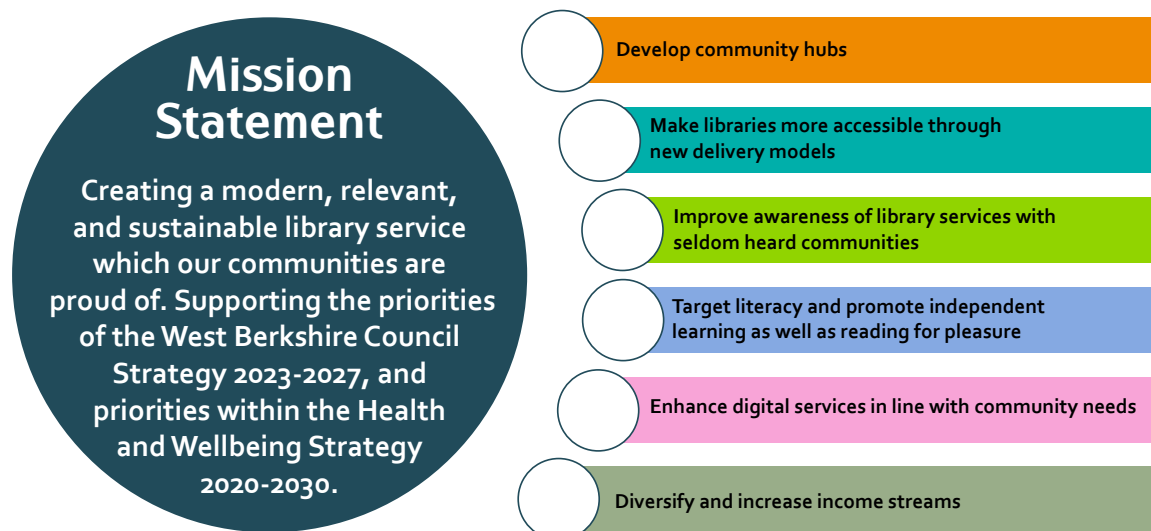


"It gives me a chance to "give back" without taking over my life and to interact with other local people of all ages that I would not normally come into contact with."
Volunteer
from Burghfield Library

"After retiring from a busy career, I found myself looking for a renewed sense of purpose and connection. Volunteering at the library gave me just that—a place where I feel valued, where I've made fantastic new friends, and discovered new skills that keep my mind engaged and active."
Volunteer from
Lambourn Library

Vision for West Berkshire Libraries 2024-2027

Enabling our communities to thrive by providing safe, accessible, welcoming libraries for everyone to access the books, information and services they need.



Develop community hubs

- All libraries becoming part of the Safe Places Scheme within West Berkshire
- Implement Community Hub activities through the Let's Talk initiative
- Engage with town and parish councils to extend library provision through a revised funding model
- Continue to develop partnership projects such as those with Berkshire Music Trust, Educafe, The Corn Exchange and City Arts

Make libraries more accessible through new delivery models

- Continue to promote the At Home Library Service for families without transport and residents with age or mobility challenges
- Collaborate with town and parish councils to provide library offers that meet local needs
- Continue to develop and promote pop-up libraries and the community bookshelves
- Extend library opening hours to offer more flexible access for residents

Improve awareness of library services with seldom heard communities

- Work with Public Health, Children and Family Services, and wider health partners to introduce targeted activity programmes
- Support the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) initiative with library visits and Summer Reading Challenge promotion
- Enhance library accessibility and inclusivity by making libraries more dementia and neurodiverse friendly

Target literacy and promote independent learning as well as reading for pleasure

- Deliver the Summer Reading Challenge in partnership with The Reading Agency
- Support the Bookstart programme by distributing free books to babies and offering targeted programmes for children with special educational needs
- Work with Educate at Newbury Library to reach non-native English speakers
- Run the West Berkshire Book Challenge for adults every summer

Enhance digital services in line with community needs

- Start a Digital Device Loan Initiative
- Promote the West Berkshire Libraries digital Escape Room for young people
- Implement WiFi printing in library buildings
- Offer digital support sessions at libraries to prevent digital exclusion

Diversify and increase income streams

- Support all libraries to host a range of chargeable events such as craft sessions, author talks
- Continue to support Libraries Friends Groups to explore additional funding opportunities
- Explore new income streams within libraries by offering services such as: banking, post office services, DWP support
- Increase room hire bookings for libraries during and outside of opening hours
- Support the Cards for Good Causes Pop-Up shop at Thatcham Library



**YOUR
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"I'll never forget the cry of joy from my toddler daughter when she looked up shouted, "The library!"



**YOUR
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"I get such pleasure from just browsing the shelves, never knowing what I will be taking home to enjoy. When I made an impulse buy of an air fryer recently and didn't know what to do with it, I borrowed some cookbooks and learnt not only how to use it but also mined them for exciting new recipes. "

