

Essex Future Library Services Strategy

2019 - 2024



Essex County Council

This is a strategy for the provision of library services in Essex over the next five years, from 2019/20 to 2023/24. This document was considered by Essex County Council's Cabinet in July 2019, in the context of a range of supporting documents including a Equalities Impact Assessment, and the Essex Future Libraries Consultation Report. All these documents can be found [here](#).

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Foreword

Libraries educate, entertain and inform. They play a unique role in our society, providing us with learning resources, safe community spaces and digital access. They are both an entrance way to fictional new destinations and help us to gain greater knowledge of our own world.

I am incredibly proud of the public library service in Essex and both the employees and volunteers who deliver it.

The use of libraries in Essex has declined over the last ten years – book borrowing has almost halved, fewer than one in five Essex residents are active library members and memberships, visits and demand for library computers are all down by a third or more. Customers' expectations have continued to evolve as more of us read, learn, shop and seek entertainment online.

I take my role as Cabinet Member with responsibility for library services incredibly seriously. I have visited every library in Essex to understand the challenges they face. What quickly became clear was that the library service needs to be more ambitious in order to better meet the needs of its users.

Between November 2018 and February 2019, Essex County Council conducted one of our largest consultations ever when we asked the people of Essex to comment on the draft Future Library Services Strategy. Nearly 22,000 people responded to the survey, with many more sending in letters and e-mails expressing their views on the new ambitions and what the library service means to them.

I am grateful to all the individuals, families and organisations that took the time to respond to the consultation. I am grateful to the schoolchildren who sent in pictures of what a library of the future would look like. I am grateful to every single person who expressed their views.

We have listened and the final strategy reflects this.

We will work with our communities, employees and volunteers to ensure that we create a modern library service that is fit for the 21st century, whilst also continuing to explore the opportunities that innovative technology affords and being open to new and creative ideas.

We have heard that libraries are not just about books or computers – but that they are spaces too for people to meet, learn and exchange ideas. And we have heard and seen the passion of communities that want to keep a local library. So, we have changed the strategy.

We will invest in the library service to create new vibrant, modern spaces in council-run libraries in towns, villages and suburbs across the county. And we will work strenuously with local people to set up community-run libraries and provide funding and support to help make them a success.

We are convinced that there are better ways to run the service and by working with communities we can keep a library service in every current location. The passion and energy of local people can also revitalise library services and community spaces, bring communities together and help tackle social isolation and loneliness. So, we will keep all libraries open while we work together to transform the service. We are still concerned about the declining use but believe a combination of council-run and community-run libraries offer the best hope to reverse the trend.

We have received 80 expressions of interest already from communities to manage community-run libraries. These community groups and organisations include parish councils, residents associations, pre-schools and village hall trusts.

We will provide guidance to each of those who have submitted an expression of interest and welcome any new ones, so that they can develop a robust proposal. This document also details the significant support offer we will provide, which includes grant funding, an initial donation of books and stock rotation, to get these proposals off to the best start.

We will also develop a wide-ranging outreach programme, to provide library services and activities where they are needed most, including schools, playgroups, village halls and other community venues. We will use our mobile libraries and Home Library Service to reach those who may otherwise struggle to access library services.

I am excited to see a library service that communities are part of too; that continues to play a role in the lives of people of all ages and that appeals to new and old users alike.



Cllr Susan Barker

Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate,
Culture and Communities

Summary

Essex County Council (the council) has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to deliver a comprehensive and efficient free library service to all who live, work or study in the county and who desire to use it. It currently meets this duty through a network of 74 libraries, two mobile library vehicles, eLibrary services and a home library service delivered by volunteers to people unable to get to a library due to age, disability or caring responsibilities. The council is the second largest library authority in the country, serving a population of approximately 1.5 million.

Over the last 10 years (2009-2019), as part of a national trend, use of Essex libraries has declined, with loans more than halved and membership down by a third. Loans fell 53%, from just under 8.4m in 2008-09 to 3.9m in 2018-19. Active membership fell 33% over the same period, from 331,482 to 221,640 (this figure excludes mobile library and online only services); this includes a fall of 5% in 2018/19 alone. Usage and visitor numbers continued to fall in 2018-19.

In early 2018 we asked Essex residents what they thought about the service. What Essex people say is set out on p20. We used this to produce a draft strategy for library services.

Between 29 November 2018 and 21 February 2019 we consulted Essex residents and library users on a draft strategy for future library services. This was informed by previous research and engagement to find out people's views and priorities for libraries, national policy and examples from other authorities, and a needs assessment of each current library.

To help identify where the council needs to provide library services in future, the needs assessment took account of proximity to other libraries, usage, population, social deprivation and social isolation. The assessment then drew a conclusion on the overall priority ranking (need) for a library location.

There was a significant response to the consultation. More than 21,900 people and organisations completed the survey, giving their detailed views. You can read a summary of the results on p21 and full details [here](#). During the consultation, the council also received more than 1,000 letters and emails and 57 petitions containing around 60,000 signatures.

Every response, comment and representation has been read and carefully considered and the insight, ideas and suggestions have been valuable in helping to prepare this final version of the strategy.

We also invited groups to express interest in running community libraries. By the end of June 2019, 80 expressions of interest had been received, covering 39 existing locations and two new locations that don't have libraries. These came from a range of groups including town and parish councils, residents' associations, pre-schools and trusts.

The council has listened to the feedback received from the consultation - it is very clear that libraries are valued by those who use them not just for books but also as safe social spaces and hubs for a range of activities. In many locations there is community support for retaining some form of library service.

While the provision of council-run library services must be driven by evidence of need for them, our intention is that by working with communities, we can together keep a library service in every current location.

Taking account of all this feedback, national policy and what Essex people have previously told us, our strategy will be to focus on:

- developing an investment plan to improve libraries prioritising, at least initially, larger libraries, and
- working with and supporting community groups or other partner organisations to set up community run libraries, with the aim of ensuring a library service is retained in every current location.

Over the life of this strategy, 2019 -2024 (the strategy period), we will continue to deliver our core offer, whilst also seeking new ways of working to ensure we achieve the following ambitions:

- Place books and reading at the heart of our library service offer
- Provide a modern library service and library spaces, which are fit for both now and the future
- Empower and support communities and groups to shape and manage community-run library services that best meet the needs of the community they serve
- Offer a consistently good customer experience
- Have a comprehensive eLibrary offer and embrace digital technology.

The council will also continue to explore opportunities for community hubs, either within its own libraries or through community-run libraries.

The council will offer a significant support package to organisations wishing to take over delivery of library services in a location served by a current library. This includes grant funding over three years, an initial donation of books, quarterly refresh of reading materials and support to community-run library groups to train their volunteers and cascade information

Proposals for community-run-libraries with council support

We will maintain a comprehensive and efficient library service across Essex. We will retain a network of council run libraries, particularly in larger towns but it is evident that there is community interest in running libraries in locations where this council currently runs them. From the start of the strategy, we will work closely with community groups or partners to transition libraries to community-run where there is local support for that. We do not envisage that libraries will close as a result of this strategy.

In the next few years, we hope that, with our support, community-run libraries will have been established or will be in the process of being established in many locations. It may be that early adopters will encourage others to come forward and the trend in the decline in usage may have changed.

We need to ensure we spend money wisely and we believe the expressions of interest shown will help ensure this by reversing the decline in the usage of the library resources. If this does not prove to be the case and the decline continues, then there will be a time when it will be difficult to justify continuing with the same level of service, and at that point, we will need to reconsider the approach

This new strategy also commits to:

- Developing an investment plan to improve libraries prioritising, at least initially, larger libraries to deliver a consistent high-quality look and feel across libraries in the council-run network
- Implementing an up to date and flexible library management computer system
- Upskilling staff and volunteers to improve the service to users
- Embracing new technology and ‘smart libraries’ functionality that enables users to choose when and how they access books and learning materials.
- Deliver more outreach than ever before – taking the library service into a wide range of communities.

Our vision and ambitions

Our vision over the next five years is to create a 21st century library service that is inclusive and efficient, which enables all users to engage with a wide range of reading materials, participate in learning activity and connect with their community.

Over the strategy period, we will continue to deliver our core offer, whilst also seeking new ways of working to ensure that we achieve the following ambitions:

- Place books and reading at the heart of our library service offer
- Provide a modern library service and spaces, which are fit for both now and the future
- Empower and support communities and groups to shape and manage community-run library services that best meet the needs of the community they serve
- Offer a consistently good customer experience
- Have a comprehensive eLibrary offer and embrace digital technology.

Public services do not operate in isolation – they are greater than the sum of their individual parts and this strategy has a key role to play in enabling the council to deliver on its strategic aims, be that through providing spaces and resources to help people in Essex to increase their skills and prosper, or through providing safe, welcoming and stimulating spaces for users to engage with others.

This strategy helps to meet the four key strategic aims in the council's Organisation Strategy 2017-21.



The Essex Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-22, a strategy owned by a range of organisations across the county including the council, identifies the challenge and priority of social isolation.

Social isolation can affect any age and can affect older people, young parents, carers, disabled people and people living with mental health issues.

The library service will continue to play an important role in tackling isolation, as places to meet or through outreach work in communities. However, it is important to recognise that this is only one part of a response to tackling isolation from across the service, the voluntary sector and within the community. Library services will continue to work closely with education services and schools to contribute to children's literacy, school-readiness, learning and development.

What will be different in five years?

We will consider this strategy to have achieved our ambitions for libraries if by 2024:

- Essex residents and community groups are much more involved, with many libraries run by or run jointly with community groups/partners and volunteers
- We have transformed how people access library services and how reading materials are borrowed and distributed
- People are able to access library services online more easily 24 hours a day via the eLibrary
- We make much better use of insight from our customers and systems to ensure that the quality and range of books, eBooks and materials on offer is high and books are rotated when possible to ensure choice
- We have a strong programme of outreach, providing library services and activities where they are most needed, including schools, playgroups, day care centres, village halls and other community venues
- We have extended opening hours through volunteer support and the introduction of smart library technology, where viable and in line with local community need, to enable people to use libraries at times that are convenient to them
- Customers understand the core library offer and make good use of it, as measured by customer surveys and user insight
- Customers receive consistently good service
- Income from activities helps to reduce costs or to enhance the service we provide
- The service is reaching new communities, increasing service usage and bringing in new customers through outreach, marketing and providing a service that is appealing and relevant to them
- The library service helps people to live full and independent lives
- We have increased effectiveness through co-location with community-based services such as Job Centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Post Offices and voluntary and community groups.

National context

The council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service that lends books and other materials free to people who live, work or study in Essex and want to use it.

We have looked at best practice around the country and guidance from the Government's Libraries Taskforce, which includes the seven ambitions below.

The 7 Outcomes: Ambition for Public Libraries in England (Libraries Taskforce). ¹

- Cultural and creative enrichment
- Increased reading and literacy
- Increased digital access and literacy
- Helping everyone achieve their full potential
- Healthier and happier lives
- Greater prosperity
- Stronger, more resilient communities.

Most importantly we have listened to the views of Essex residents and their needs. This is a library strategy for them.

Library services in Essex in 2019

Essex Libraries serve a population of approximately 1.5m through 74 library buildings, an eLibrary service, two mobile libraries, home library service volunteers and support for seven volunteer-run community libraries. The location and spread of libraries are a result of historical decisions rather than design and do not reflect current demographics or community need. In 2016-17 (the most recent comparison available), Essex was the second largest library authority in England, with a higher than average number of outlets and the fourth highest spending per head of population.

The national average ratio in 2016/17 was one library per 22,425 people; in Essex the ratio was one per 17,325. ² The comparison with other local authorities reflects a point in time and cannot be used to forecast future comparison with other local authorities. This is a strategy for the next five years and other local authorities have already started to review or will review their service offers during this period.

The mobile library service was reviewed and changed after public consultation in 2017-18. This strategy does not propose another review of mobile libraries, but routes and timetables may be adjusted over the strategy period to meet changing needs.

Library services have evolved and changed over recent years. As well as being a source and lender of books, magazines and other learning materials, libraries play a role in preventing health and social problems by providing safe spaces where people can access or find out about other services, meet others and socialise or simply spend time.

Some of the many things that happen in libraries



Books and magazines



Job clubs and job search help



Free public network computers



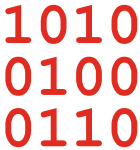
Baby and Toddler Rhymetimes



Book readings, music and events



Language books and classes



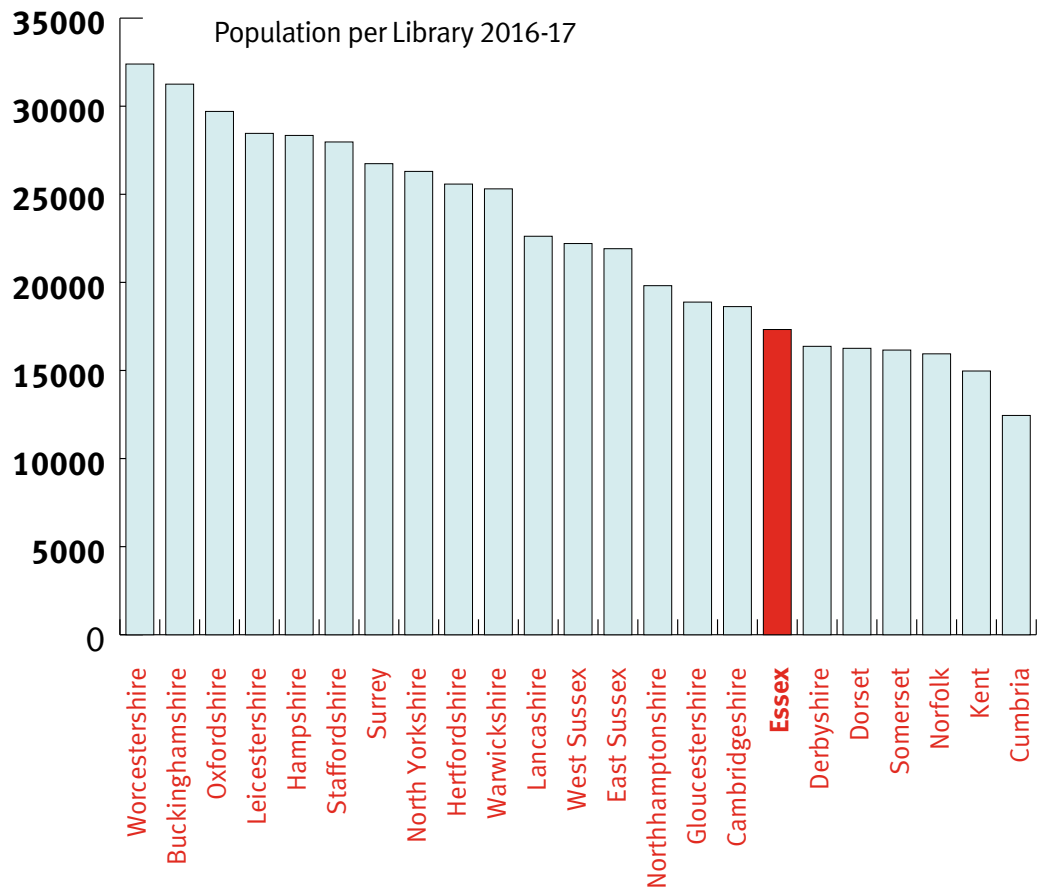
Code Clubs



Wifi access

How Essex compares with other counties 2016-17³

This comparison is from 2016-17, the latest year for which comparison figures are available. It is a snapshot in time and cannot be used to compare what we and other counties provide now as populations have changed and other authorities are reviewing or have reviewed and changed their own library services.



Source: Cipfa Benchmarking 16-17. Population / Authority run libraries (includes mobiles).
Outlier Lincolnshire excluded due to only having 2.

County	Total Population	No of libraries	Council run libraries	Population per library based on current number of libraries	Population per library based on number of council run libraries
Lincolnshire	743,400	51	2	14576.47	371700.00
Worcestershire	583,100	23	18	25352.17	32394.44
Buckinghamshire	534,700	30	17	17823.33	31452.94
Oxfordshire	683,200	43	23	15888.37	29704.35
Leicestershire	683,000	51	24	13392.16	28458.33
Hampshire	1,360,400	53	48	25667.92	28341.67
Staffordshire	867,100	43	31	20165.12	27970.97
Surrey	1,176,500	54	44	21787.04	26738.64
North Yorkshire	604,900	43	23	14067.44	26300.00
Hertfordshire	1,176,700	48	46	24514.58	25580.43
Warwickshire	556,800	31	22	17961.29	25309.09
Lancashire	1,198,800	47	53	25506.38	22618.87
West Sussex	843,800	36	38	23438.89	22205.26
East Sussex	547,800	26	25	21069.23	21912.00
Northamptonshire	733,100	36	37	20363.89	19813.51
Gloucestershire	623,100	40	33	15577.50	18881.82
Cambridgeshire	651,900	42	35	15521.43	18625.71
Essex	1,455,300	75	84	19404.00	17325.00
Derbyshire	785,800	46	48	17082.61	16370.83
Dorset	422,700	33	26	12809.09	16257.69
Somerset	549,400	34	34	16158.82	16158.82
Norfolk	892,900	47	56	18997.87	15944.64
Kent	1,541,900	99	103	15574.75	14969.90
Cumbria	497,900	40	40	12447.50	12447.50
Suffolk	745,300	45	0	16562.22	
Devon	779,800	50	0	15596.00	
Nottinghamshire	810,700	60	0	13511.67	

Our foundations - Essex Libraries in 2018/19



5.3m

Visits made to Essex libraries



221,640

Active library members



4m

Loans of books and other items



2,400

Residents received a home library service



15%

Of Essex residents are active library members



1,200

People volunteered with libraries, 700 regularly, 500 for the summer reading challenge



25%

Public network computers are used 25% of the time available



31hrs

Is the average amount of time libraries are open each week



92%

Of users are satisfied with their library (CIPFA children's survey 2017 and adults 2016)

Why do we need a need a new strategy?

“The way people use libraries and their expectations of public services are changing. Financial and demographic challenges are increasing. Standing still is not an option.”

Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England, 2016-2021, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. ⁴

Libraries remain a valued part of the communities they serve. We have continued to invest in the service, including opening a new children’s library in Chelmsford, offering eBooks and eComics and improving our online catalogue. But in the last ten years, traditional use of libraries has significantly fallen.

We know there are significant budget pressures ahead. As such, the council must consider all options to deliver library provision in new and more efficient ways to create an active and sustainable service.

The use of the library service has dropped by 53% from almost 8.4m loans a year in 2008/09 to 3.9m loans in 2018/19. Demand to use public network

computers in libraries has also fallen 38% over the same period. This reducing demand for libraries follows the national trend as people have greater access to alternative information sources with improvements to broadband and mobile technologies. In March 2019, 221,640 people, were active members of Essex libraries (this figure excludes mobile library and online only services), down 33% in ten years. An active member is defined as somebody who has used their library card in the last year. ⁵

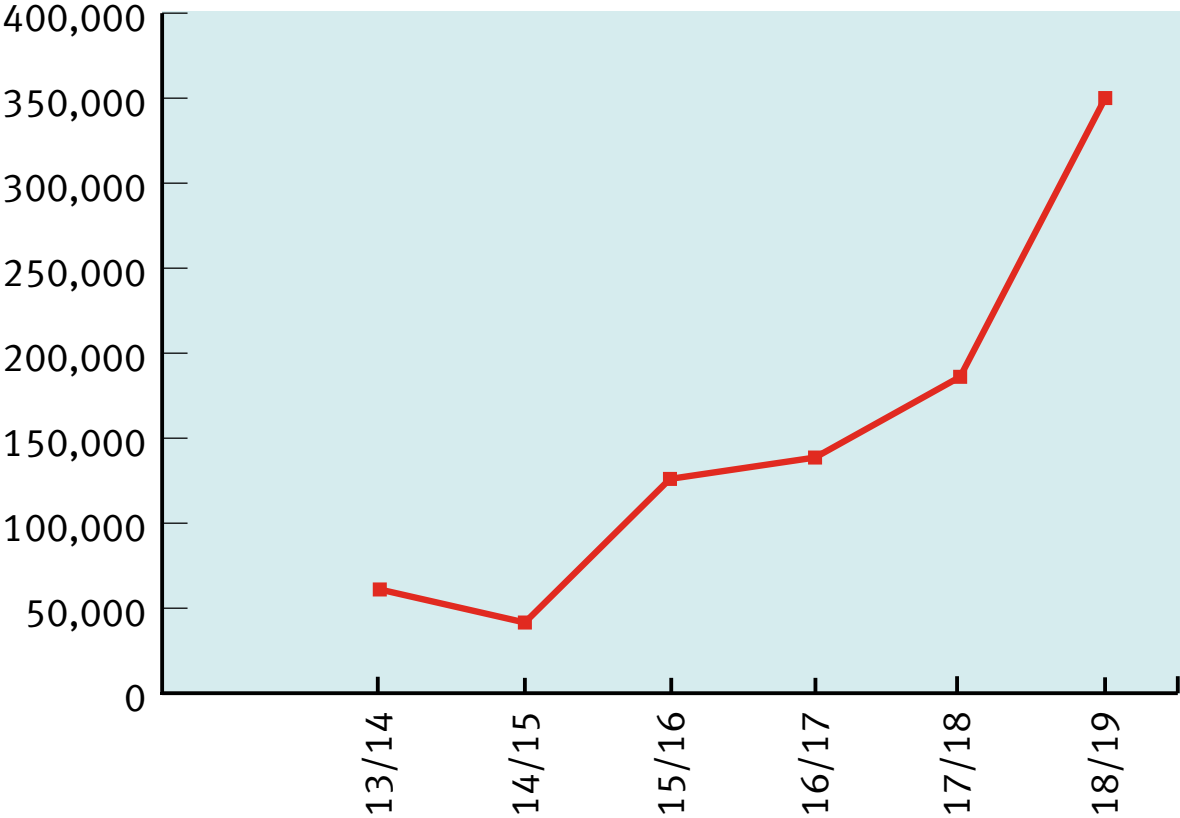
At the same time, we have seen growth in our online services. Loans of eBooks, eAudio and eMagazines have increased almost six-fold since records began in 2013/14, from 61,000 loans to 350,000 loans in 2018/19.

According to an annual survey of electronic device use in the UK, 87% of adults owned a smartphone in 2018, up from 52% in 2012; 79% owned a laptop (up from 73%) and 64% owned a tablet (up from 16%). The study also found that 33% of adults use an eReader daily and the percentage of 55 to 75 year olds that own smartphones rose from 40% to 77% between 2013 and 2018. It forecast that this upward trend would continue. ⁶

90% of the consultation respondents said they had internet access at home, work or on a mobile device; 5% said they could only access it in a library or public café; 4% did not use the internet.

Graph 1: E-loans

Year	Amount
2013-14	61,018
2014-15	41,571
2015-16	126,042
2016-17	138,620
2017-18	186,099
2018-19	350,064



The population of Essex is changing too. The county's population is forecast to grow by 20% between 2014 and 2039, to 1.7m. ⁷ It is currently approximately 1.5m. One in five of the population are aged over 65. By 2039 it is predicted that there will be 61% more over 65 year olds and 16% more under 16 year olds.

The challenges facing Essex communities are varied and not consistently spread across the county, so our library service therefore needs to be able to 'flex' to recognise and respond to differing needs.

We know that many Essex residents experience feelings of loneliness or isolation. These feelings do not discriminate by age or gender but we know people in rural areas, older people and new parents can be particularly affected. Library services have a vital role to play in this. For example, Rhymetime sessions for babies and toddlers are activities where new parents can meet and socialise, be that in library buildings or other community venues.

We will work with other council functions and partner organisations as part of a joined up response to tackle loneliness and isolation.

Rhymetime in Southminster

Continuing to deliver Baby and Toddler Rhymetimes for local families was a priority as Southminster Library moved to smaller premises. The library sessions attracted an average of five families.

The Head Teacher at Southminster Primary was delighted to offer a light and airy space with access to outside space and tea making facilities for a small remuneration and also offered support to promote Rhymetime within the school networks.

The new school based Rhymetime is building gradually and after just a few weeks is attended by a similar number of families as when it took place in the library and is now also enjoyed by staff and children visiting from the Pre-School next to the Primary School.

Libraries reach and support the whole community regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status or educational attainment. This is reflected in what people want from their library, be that a quiet place to study, a shared space for community events, or access to books to encourage a love of reading from early years to old age. This does however create challenges. We need spaces that work for all these audiences and needs.

Whilst we do not underestimate these challenges, the opportunities to create a sustainable service that has a lasting impact on the lives of Essex residents are great.

The financial outlook for all local government is challenging and as a public body it is important we spend taxpayers' money wisely. Demand for many services is increasing and becoming more complex, whilst government funding is reducing.

Over the last four years the council has generated savings to taxpayers of £311m and is budgeting to deliver a further £60m of new savings by the end of 2019/20 (6% of net budget). The council has an outstanding track record both in terms of delivering savings, generating income and delivering value to our residents, with a constant focus on strategic outcomes

and financial prudence. This track record has enabled the council to maintain services and invest for the future. However, we still face substantial challenges.

By 2021/22 the council will need to identify £100 million a year of savings, of which £72m must be found in 2020/21. We are fully aware of the challenges that we face but are determined to continue to transform how we operate to tackle this enormous financial shift. It is important that the library service contributes along with other council services to achieving this by implementing new delivery models.

We also expect the costs to maintain and refurbish the aging estate of library buildings will increase over the next five years. We need to target investment towards improving the library spaces that are most in demand and to take opportunities to generate financial benefits.

Essex Libraries budget		
	2018/19	2019/20 ⁸
Gross expenditure	£12,953,000	£14,067,000
Income	£1,590,000	£1,607,000
Net expenditure	£11,363.000	£12,460.000

How it is spent	
Employees	59%
Premises	22%
Books	14%
Supplies and services	3%
Transport related	2%

Doing nothing is not an option. If we did not transform the service, within five years it is highly likely that the decline in usage would continue; the service and buildings would not be modernised or be fit for purpose and communities would have less opportunity to be involved in shaping local services to suit their needs, as less resources would be available to them. Efficiencies and greater convenience associated with sharing space, embracing digital technology and other planned improvements would not be achieved.

Essex libraries are currently delivered in-house and managed by the council. There are alternative delivery models that some other authorities use, such as setting up a local authority trading company, transferring the whole service to a commercial company or charitable trust, or partnering in a joint venture. The council intends to keep the council-run service in-house and support community-run libraries. We will continue to review options over the strategy period.



What Essex people say

The development of this strategy has been informed by two important and wide-ranging engagement activities.

2018 Engagement Sessions

In spring 2018, the council ran public engagement and research to find out what people think about libraries, what they value and what their priorities were for future library services (the 2018 Engagement). This included a countywide survey, interviews with users, focus groups with young people and public events for community groups, elected representatives and the public. More than 3,000 people responded. A summary of the research and engagement can be found [here](#).

Key points from the 2018 Engagement:

- **Books and reading** are still far and away the top priority: that's what 90% of users visit libraries for and what survey respondents said is a priority for the future
- **People use library services at different stages of their lives.** Children and young people are most likely to use them; women use them more than men. Life changes such as becoming a parent, losing a job or retiring are triggers for using them more. People who don't use library services say they either don't need them or don't have time. Working age men are least likely to use them
- **People value well-informed employees and volunteers** to help them. Users are satisfied with the service they get
- **People value having a local library.** Two out of five visit more than one library, either because they are near home and work, to access the books or materials they are interested in or, because the opening hours at different libraries are convenient to them
- **Libraries are valued as safe social spaces** to find quiet space, help, information, learning, social activities or simply shelter
- **People want to get involved.** Around 1,200 people already volunteer in libraries. One in four would consider volunteering and seven community-run libraries are now open
- **Some people want activities, some want quiet.** Some people want to be able to access more services and do more things in libraries; others worry that too many activities take the focus away from books and reading and libraries are no longer the quiet spaces they value. They suggested having quiet booths, zones, days or designated 'quiet libraries'
- **Libraries are seen as valuable public spaces** that could be hired for community use in the evenings and at weekends: as rehearsal spaces or performance venues, for art exhibitions, for meetings and public celebrations
- **Many recognise the budget constraints** and that hiring out spaces generates income to support the service. But there is a tension between this and the impact that charging for space might have on voluntary groups
- **Young people do not feel libraries are designed and delivered to meet their needs.** The layout of libraries is a priority for them, to give space for study, reading, games and chilling out. They also want more digital provision and libraries open in the evenings.

Consultation on draft Future Library Service Strategy

The proposals in the draft version of the new Future Library Service Strategy (the draft strategy) were consulted on between November 2018 and February 2019. This proposed placing libraries into four tiers, based on an assessment of need for them.

More than 21,900 people and organisations responded to the consultation survey. The response rate equated to 1.5% of the Essex population and 9% of active library members.

The consultation on the draft strategy provided many important messages to help shape our work:

- 52% of consultation respondents use more than one library frequently
- The majority - 97% of individuals and families, 90% of organisations - had visited an Essex library in the previous year and most had used a library card to borrow items, use the wi-fi or use the public computers
- 62% of users of tier 4 libraries said they would be able to use an alternative library service if tier 4 libraries were not retained
- 6% of respondents said that they used only one tier 4 library and would be unable to access any alternatives
- 90% of respondents have internet access at home, work or on a mobile device
- More individuals and families agreed overall with the ambitions of the draft strategy, evaluation criteria for assessing need for libraries, and community library proposals
- More respondents felt that the draft strategy, which proposed closing some libraries, did not provide a reasonable range of ways to access the service
- The preferences expressed for opening hours support the strategic intention to combine staffed opening with volunteer supported opening, and to explore the potential of smart library technology to enable library users to access libraries outside staffed opening hours
- From comments in the survey and correspondence, library users value the use of libraries as social hubs for a range of activities beyond borrowing books, the social benefits they provide and how they contribute to mental health and wellbeing
- Community groups and organisations were invited to express interest in setting up community libraries in locations identified as tier 3 and 4. By end of June 2019, the council had received 80 such expressions
- Nearly 3,000 respondents, 13% of individual and 26% of organisational respondents, were interested in finding out more about volunteering roles.

Through the consultation survey and other correspondence, the council received thousands of comments including suggestions for ways to improve the service, generate income or make savings. The full consultation findings can be found [here](#).

Our priorities

The council is committed to delivering the strategy's ambitions and our priorities over the strategy period are aligned to them.

These priorities are informed by our data about library usage, the results of our public engagement and the consultation exercise.

Put books and reading at the heart of what we do

Despite the decline in number of books borrowed, books are still at the top of the list of things people expect from libraries. Book borrowing remains by far and away the main activity that people use libraries for: 90% of users say they come in to borrow books and one in four do so at least every two weeks.

Create great social spaces where people can read and study quietly or socialise and do activities without disrupting each other

Whilst some engagement respondents stated that they would like to be able to access more services and do more in library spaces, others worried that they would lose the quiet space that is so important to them. A clear message from the consultation was that users value libraries as social spaces. Our priority is to

understand these views and to develop a plan to invest in and improve libraries prioritising, at least initially, larger libraries to create flexible spaces that can meet a whole range of needs.

Invest in and support our employees and volunteers so they remain well informed and have the right skills and equipment

We heard about the value that people place on well-informed employees and volunteers. People are at the heart of the library service and ensuring that they have the right skills and equipment is a priority (see p35 for more about this priority).

Enhance the service to attract more Essex residents

Good customer experience is fundamental to this. Users of Essex libraries rated customer satisfaction highly: 88% of library users in the 2018 household survey are satisfied with their local library service. But satisfaction varies from site to site and we know we can improve the online service.

Create a library service that fits people's lives and is convenient

Opening hours and convenience are important to library customers. Our priority is to work with communities, as well as to use eLibrary and 'smart library' technology to create library services that continue to meet the needs of current users, whilst also encouraging new and returning users. We will review the current reservations system, management systems and logistics network to ensure our service is provided as efficiently as possible.

Support community-run libraries to get off to the best start possible

A passion for local libraries and interest in running community libraries or volunteering to support the service came across loud and clear in the consultation. We believe that communities hold the key to revitalising the service and have the expertise to run community libraries in ways that work best for their local residents. Our priority for the first part of this strategy will be ensuring that these individuals and groups are supported in the best way possible to contribute to library services in Essex. The details of this support offer to community libraries can be found at p28.

Work seamlessly with other service providers, organisations and communities to ensure that the positive impacts of library outreach services are maximised

In 2018/19 Essex library services provided outreach services in settings including schools, playgroups, daycare centres, village halls, community settings and other community venues. As part of delivering the strategy, we aim to also work closely with both district, town and parish councils and other service providers to deliver a more joined up service.

Better engage with residents

we will review our communication channels and develop a communication and marketing approach that complements our outreach offer, maximises digital communication and makes accurate and timely information about our services, activities and events available to customers to easily access in a self-service way. We will market library services to attract new customers and improve the future sustainability of the service.



Our core offer

We propose to deliver a core offer through a range of physical and online services through council-run libraries.

Over time, the range of activities taking place in libraries has expanded. We think it is useful to redefine our core offer, which is available to everyone and free at the point of use.

The council's future library service core offer will reflect the national Universal Offers⁹ from libraries and the priorities that our customers told us about.

As we work to support community-run libraries we will offer guidance, resources and support to help them reflect the core offer but it will be up to each community-run library to determine their offer to best suit local needs.

The core offer comprises:

Books, DVDs and audio – we will use data on what our customers want to inform the range available. We will review the library stock and how we spend the Book Fund to keep our stock modern, fresh, available in a range of formats and responsive to customer needs and trends. We will use insight from customer usage

and best practice to define stock levels for each service and to target our spending on books. We will provide access to the library catalogue to search available materials, request materials, make payments and renew loans.

Children's promise – we will continue to inspire children from their earliest years to discover a love of reading and to learn and develop. This includes free Bookstart packs for babies, toddlers and school-starters, work with schools, Summer Reading Challenge, Rhymetimes, story times, clubs and activities for children as well as books for all ages and dedicated study zones and online resources.

Space and place – we will seek investment to provide modern, fresh, flexible spaces where people can easily find the information and resources they need, and which are welcoming and practical for a range of age groups and diverse needs.

eLibrary (includes online services) – customers can already access a wealth of eBooks and reference material, browse our catalogue, reserve items and book events online. We will explore new technologies and how we can optimise current technologies to make it easier for customers to access library materials

anywhere, anytime from their own devices. We will continue to invest in e-Content, using data and insight to ensure customers can access material that is relevant to them

Digital access – We will continue to offer public computers – targeting the resources where there is the highest need – and help people to develop their digital skills and confidence.

People – employees and/or volunteers will help people access library services and materials, and signpost services offered by partners. We will support employees and volunteers to develop new skills and work in different ways as library services evolve.

Activities – our employees will continue to deliver activities for the community that provide cultural and creative experiences such as the Essex Book Festival and will encourage community-run libraries to get involved with this too. We will continue to provide story times, Rhymetimes for young families, Summer Reading Challenge and other activities for children. We will look to continue to provide space for community-led activities such as knit and natter and local book groups.

Essex Book Festival

Originally developed by Essex Libraries and now in its twentieth year, Essex Book Festival is a month-long series of arts events held in venues across the county each March. Essex Libraries works in partnership with the Festival partners, hosting a variety of author events in libraries across the county.

These feature both established and debut authors writing in a variety of genres and appealing to broad audiences. From small town libraries, to flagship venues, the Festival takes culture directly to people's communities and is extremely valued by library customers.

Learning – our employees will signpost learners to reference materials and our libraries will provide great space for study.

This core offer will be delivered through the following network:

- council-run libraries
- eLibrary services
- mobile libraries
- home library service.

Community run libraries may wish to run these core offer activities, and this will be discussed and developed with the relevant communities

To ensure best value and best fit of our future service, we will review non-core services, for example:

- interLibrary loans (loans from library services outside Essex)
- performance sets (music scores and play sets) including collection at any location

- newspapers - physical and digital
- access to online courses.

In addition, the home library service will be available to all library users who are unable to access alternative library services due to age, disability and caring responsibilities.

We will manage and maintain council-run libraries and offer a significant support package to communities to assist them in setting up and running community-run libraries around the county. This creates the opportunity for library services to be run by people who live and work in the community and who best understand the unique needs of their area. You can find out more about this package of support on p28.

The council will actively work with the parties that have submitted an expression of interest (EOI) to develop proposals and any new community groups or organisations wishing to set up a community-run library.

Table 2: Library core offer

	Council-run	Community-run
Brief description	Libraries normally in a main town, may also rent/lease space to other service provider.	Library services where the council supports community organisations or other partners to set up community-run libraries.
Management and Support	Managed by the council and could be delivered in partnership with the community or other partners.	Managed and run by the community or other partners with council support as set out in our offer.
Opening times	Current opening hour range is 12 - 24 hours a week for the smallest libraries and 31 – 59 hours a week for larger libraries. We will look to extend opening hours (where there is community need), including into the evening, through smart library access or resourced by volunteers where possible or can be made affordable. No change for the first year to allow time to review, then set hours based on usage data and insight.	To be agreed by community-run library but there will be a negotiated minimum number of hours if the community-run library is to receive council support.
Range of books and stock	Mid to wide range of stock with opportunity to search and request stock from other libraries in the council-run network.	To be agreed in partnership with community-run library.
Digital access (computers and advice)	Yes.	To be agreed by community-run library.

The council's offer to community-run libraries

Many community-run libraries already operate successfully across the country. Seven community-run libraries currently exist in Essex. They are volunteer-run and owned and managed by local groups, not the council. Some have existed for many years, others are new. In 2017 alongside the mobile libraries review, we supported some communities to set up community-run libraries in places that didn't already have one.

Current community-run libraries are based in: Chrishall, Finchingfield, Great Bromley, Jaywick Library Access Point, Lamarsh, Ramsey and Steeple Bumpstead.

We recognise that there are challenges in setting up a community-run library. This is why we have developed a comprehensive support offer, rather than a simple one-off grant, to support the formation of all new community-run libraries.

Interested parties are encouraged to submit a formal proposal setting out their case for running a community-run library. Upon adoption of the strategy, the process will begin to agree and set up as many community-run libraries as possible. The submission and agreement process will be published on the [Essex Community Library](#) Services website.



Table 3: Support offered to community-run libraries

Item	Offer description	Detail
Grant	3-year grant to assist with establishing a community-run library. Could be used for: • maintenance • furniture/furnishings costs • property rent/associated costs • purchasing additional stock • purchasing/funding public computers and internet access.	Grant for 3 years - Year 1: £8,000 Year 2: £7,000 Year 3: £3,000
Stock	Initial donation - one-off donation of book stock.	The number of books will be agreed on a case by case basis and proportionate to usage.
	Regular refresh - An additional ongoing bulk-loan of books from the council's stock, in proportion to usage which will be rotated quarterly.	The council deliver to and collect from community-run library
	Community library card - Access to full ECC library stock.	The council will provide a library card allowing the community-run library to reserve and collect from the council's stock from council-run locations on behalf of its users.
ECC Outreach & Engagement	Activities - Ongoing support and visits by council staff to deliver outreach activities in the best place for children and adults.	Designed on the basis of community need.
	Support and guidance - Ongoing council support through advice, guidance and training to the community-run library to train and cascade information to their volunteers such as Equality and Diversity training, stock editing and management, collaboration between community-run library services and delivery of activities such as Rhymetime.	Included.
	Sharing of best practice - The council will create a community library forum/network which will be available for community-run library representatives.	Included.

Resources and investment

In the context of significant budget pressure over the coming years, the council needs to do more than simply identify savings each year. It must transform services to make them sustainable and fit for the future. We need to think very differently about how we operate, be more innovative, entrepreneurial and commercially minded.

As plans develop, we will seek investment to modernise and enhance library spaces in council-run library services. These will prioritise, at least initially, larger libraries.

We will explore additional sources of funding for our services, including:

- grants for specific projects such as the recent redevelopment of Chelmsford Children's Library funded by Chelmsford City Council through the Community Infrastructure Levy and Arts Council England/ Libraries Taskforce
- encouraging local fundraising to support local delivery of library services
- generating income from hire of library space, chargeable events, sale of complementary products and by reviewing our current chargeable services
- moving some services to lower cost digital delivery channels where appropriate
- seeking contributions from developers such as section 106 funding.

During the strategy period we will invest in new technology and library space by:

- refurbishing council-run libraries to deliver a consistent high-quality look and feel across the council-run network
- implementing an up to date and flexible library management system
- upskilling staff to improve the service to users
- embracing new technology and 'smart libraries' functionality that enables users to choose when and how they access books and learning materials.

What about the buildings

This strategy is about the service, not the buildings. But we know that library buildings are often seen as valuable community assets and many people will be concerned about their future use. We will work to make the most efficient use of public buildings, whether owned by the council, other public bodies or community organisations. Most library services will be in shared spaces by 2024.

We will review running costs and the condition of library buildings in council-run libraries, with a view to bringing all services up to a consistent, modern standard and finding the most effective ways to respond to local needs. This includes considering the most appropriate location for the service.

In the future, library services could be provided from a range of outlets, such as shared locations with other services, new spaces provided as part of housing or retail developments or co-located in community centres, shops, leisure centres or other locations. In most cases, we would expect library services to be provided in alternative, better locations.

We would expect community libraries would be run from premises owned or paid for by the community groups. Buildings that are no longer required by the library service because the community has opened a library in other premises will be considered under the council's usual way for dealing with properties no longer required for their current use.

Our eLibrary

We use the term eLibrary to cover a range of online services. Customers can currently browse the catalogue and reserve books online to collect at their local library. They can download ebooks, read newspapers and magazines, book events, volunteer or find out about the home library service or mobile library timetable.

[Public engagement](#) has highlighted a need to target and tailor our services to new generations of tech-savvy users. Younger users in particular have told us they use technology on a daily basis and want to be able to study and access services online.

To make this a reality, we will review our processes and technology to make it easy to do as much as possible online: access our stock and services, communicate with our employees, book and pay for things we charge for, such as room bookings and some events (core services are all free).

New digital library service

In early May 2019, Essex Libraries launched a new [digital service](#) comprising over 180 comics and graphic novels that customers can download in the same way as our existing emagazines, either online through a browser, or via a mobile application.

This fantastic service has been launched in response to customer interest in this genre and format and allows access to a great range of top comics from the publishers Marvel, IDW, Disney and Dark Horse which we hope will be of appeal to all ages, but particularly to a younger audience.

Early statistics show a daily increase in subscribers to the RBdigital e-reader (which includes emagazines).

Improving our digital offer will include:

- Improving our management system to enable efficient operating processes and deliver a high-quality customer experience
- Bringing e-content, such as eBooks, into the main library catalogue so that all resources can be searched and accessed in one place
- Exploring “smart library” technology to enable access to library buildings, materials and services outside of staffed opening hours (see highlight box below)
- Improving the range of payment options available to customers
- Updating our website
- Reviewing our electronic communication channels and ‘online chat with a librarian’ service
- Reviewing the content and availability of eBooks and eAudio Books

- Investing in our public computers and more responsive digital access so that it is more flexible to need; and reviewing print services
- Exploring the option of loaning eReaders to increase the range of accessible materials and access to eBooks
- Exploring options for improving access to library services on mobile devices such as smart phones
- Helping customers to access eLibrary services by reviewing our help and guidance, which may include adding step by step video guides on the website e.g. downloading eBooks, searching the catalogue.

Smart libraries

Smart libraries can increase opening hours and use of library services by enabling customers to use their library card to enter the library outside staffed hours. It is similar to the secure ATM lobbies some banks have. People could browse, study, borrow and return books using self-service machines or even hire the library for meetings or activities. We will explore the potential this technology offers.

Several other authorities are already running successful smart libraries, such as [Leicestershire](#) and [Peterborough](#).

Opening hours and access

Opening hours are important to our customers: 62% of respondents to our 2018 engagement said convenient opening hours were important to them. Alternative opening hours, for example, evening or weekend opening, would encourage 39% of respondents to use libraries more.

In the draft strategy consultation, respondents were asked to rank a range of options for opening hours in order of preference. Fully staffed opening, even if that meant libraries were open less overall was the top choice, with volunteer supported opening a close second and self-service access using smart library technology third. More evening opening and 24/7 eLibrary access were least favoured. Individuals and families were more in favour than organisations of the idea of self-service access using 'smart library' technology outside staffed opening hours, whilst organisation respondents preferred more weekend opening hours.

It is not financially viable for the council to provide more staffed opening hours and if we change opening hours to suit some users, they won't necessarily suit others. Since we last reviewed opening hours in 2011, technology and lifestyles have changed, affecting what library users need and what they see as convenient.

Our aim is to create an overall pattern of library opening in council-run libraries that will maximise access to libraries through a combination of:

- staffed opening hours
- volunteer supported opening hours
- smart library technology
- improved eLibrary which people can access 24 hours a day.

By staffed hours, we mean paid council employees and unpaid Essex library volunteers. Some libraries are already opened outside the staffed hours by volunteers from other groups or organisations that share space with libraries. We will seek to encourage more of this where there is demand.

We will not make any changes to opening hours in council-run libraries for the first year of this strategy.¹⁰

We will then draw on a wide evidence base, including usage data, to develop a consistent approach to opening hours across the council-run service and to respond to changes in demand over time, including the impact on locations where nearby libraries may have become community-run libraries.

Community-run libraries will be able to set their own opening hours, subject to a negotiated minimum number of hours

You can access library services in the following ways:

- library building
- mobile library
- home library service
- outreach including schools, early years settings and care homes
- e-library.

Our people

Employees

Our library employees are at the heart of our business. Research and engagement feedback shows they are hugely valued and trusted by our customers. Having well informed staff or volunteers was the 2nd highest priority for respondents (70%) to the countywide engagement exercise in 2018. This was the view of both library users and non-users.

Essex Library Service is committed to ensuring that our employees have the skills and competencies they need to help deliver our future vision.

The key skills and capabilities required are:

- Delivering excellent customer service – putting needs of library users at heart of what we do
- Digital knowledge and expertise to support customers in accessing information
- Outreach and Engagement with community members and organisations
- Collaborative working – working with partner organisations to deliver the library service.

To support new ways of working, we will provide support, training and development for the community-run libraries so that they can train their volunteers. This approach will enable us to offer a consistent experience for our customers across library services.

A review of the current operating model of libraries and work to define the future target operating model will inform the future size and shape of the council-run library workforce.

We also intend to create new roles that will specialise in engaging with partners and communities. These will support the upskilling of our workforce.

Volunteers and community involvement

Essex library services are intrinsically connected to the communities they serve. This includes a wide variety of volunteering opportunities and close work with community groups and partner organisations across the county.

In 2017-18, 1,200 residents, aged from 14 to 94, volunteered in our libraries, delivering services ranging from running the library outside staffed opening hours to supporting the home library service, to running clubs and activities and supporting the annual Summer Reading Challenge.¹¹

Public engagement shows there is an appetite among residents to be more involved with libraries, be that shaping our approach to stock purchasing to volunteering in libraries. Through draft strategy consultation, encouragingly there were strong levels of interest shown in volunteering opportunities with 13% of individual and family respondents (nearly 3,000 people) expressing an interest to volunteer in future library services in Essex.

Volunteers play a vital role in supporting and enhancing the library service in council-run and will continue to do so in the future. It is important to Essex libraries that our volunteers complement the work delivered by our paid employees and work alongside them, enabling us to develop and improve the experience of our customers whilst helping to meet our budgetary challenges. Training and guidance will be offered to community-run libraries in how to recruit, train and support volunteers. This will include advice on ensuring DBS (safeguarding) checks - which are free - are completed on community-run library volunteers if necessary

We aim to ensure our volunteers feel valued and get something worthwhile from the time they give us. In order to do this, we will work closely with Volunteer Essex to ensure their interests and skills are well matched to our opportunities and that they are fully trained and properly supported by our paid employees and fellow volunteers.

We will also take every opportunity to recognise and celebrate the contribution they make to the library service and our customers.

Our volunteers will also be supported to ensure that our customers experience a consistent level of service wherever they access our services.

Customers

We know that our customers are diverse. They are of all ages, backgrounds and abilities and have different aspirations. Equally each has their own preference for how and when to access services, and the types of services they access.

We will continue to provide our services in a way that has regard to our duty under the Equalities Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. An equalities impact assessment has been prepared to inform the development and ongoing implementation of this strategy and can be found [here](#).

This includes having a range of stock that reflects and celebrates our diverse community in Essex, and promotes good relations across all equality areas, including race, disability, gender, religion and sexual orientation.

We will make library spaces and services accessible to all and provide a home library service for people who can't easily access libraries owing to age, disability or caring responsibilities. We will continue to seek feedback and use insight about customer preferences to update our stock and services over time.

Glossary

CIPFA

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy; collates bi-annual survey data from library users across England and Wales; analyses data from library authorities and provides benchmarking information for library authorities.

Community-run library

Defined by the Government's Libraries Taskforce as community led and largely community delivered libraries, rarely with paid staff (but with some professional support) and some form of council support.

Digital access

Ability to see and use library services and information online; within a library: access to public network computers and help or advice to learn digital skills.

eBooks

Books available in digital format online.

eLibrary

Essex Libraries' online offer; includes the website, online catalogue, eBooks and eMagazines to download.

Expression of Interest (EOI)

Initial, non-binding online form submitted to express an interest in providing community-run library.

Online services

Another term for eLibrary. Also refers to being able to access other websites and services.

Proposal

A formal application or business case made by the community to manage and run a community-run library - may also be known as 'formal expression of interest' (EOI).

Smart library

Technology that enables card holders to swipe in to gain secure access to libraries outside staffed opening hours; connects membership, security, power and lighting systems so they can operate without employees present.

Appendices

- ¹ Source: Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England, 2016-2021, Libraries Taskforce.
- ² Source: CIPFA Library Statistics 2017-18.
- ³ Source: The number of Essex council-run libraries in 2016/17 included 9 mobile vehicles. The number of static libraries is listed as 75, as this table included Jaywick library in their figures, which is already community-run.
- ⁴ Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Libraries Deliver, 2016.
- ⁵ Source: Essex Library Services Needs Assessment 2018-2019.
- ⁶ Source: <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/mobile-consumer-survey.html>
- ⁷ Source: Headline statistics from Sub-National Population Projections 2014, Essex Insight.
- ⁸ Source: The Council Organisation Plan and Budget, Approved by Full Council in February 2019.
- ⁹ Source: www.librariesconnected.org.uk
- ¹⁰ Source: Until July 2020.
- ¹¹ All volunteering opportunities are advertised online at www.volunteeressex.org.uk/news/library-volunteers

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