

Libraries strategy





Contents

- Executive summary 4
- Mission 6
- Objectives..... 7
- Corporate strategy overview 8
- National policy 9
- Regional policy 12
- Local data insights 13
- Internal insights from the service 14
- Information and digital 15
- Community..... 17
- Education, learning and children..... 22
- Adults provision and social connection..... 25
- Health and wellbeing..... 26
- Upcoming new projects..... 28
- Staff development plans 29
- Managing safer libraries..... 30
- Endnotes 31

Executive summary

Portsmouth City Council's Library Service plays a vital role in delivering inclusive, preventative and community focused public services. This strategy sets out how the service will continue to evolve in response to national policy, local need and changing patterns of use, while fulfilling its statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.

Vision and purpose

Portsmouth Libraries aim to provide welcoming, safe, inclusive and accessible spaces for everyone, offering access to reading in all formats, information and digital services. The service seeks to empower and connect communities through transformative library experiences that support learning, creativity, health and wellbeing and help individuals fulfil their potential.



Strategic objectives

Following public consultation, six strategic objectives have been agreed:

- 1 Provide a comprehensive selection of books and digital resources for all ages**
- 2 Deliver a strong and inclusive offer for children and young people**
- 3 Offer a broad range of community services and opportunities**
- 4 Equip staff and volunteers with the skills needed to support communities**
- 5 Enable adults to develop social connections, skills and wellbeing**
- 6 Make better use of data to inform service delivery and decision making**

These priorities align closely with the **Plan for Portsmouth 2024–26**, the **Imagine Portsmouth 2040** vision, and national expectations for modern public libraries.

Policy context

The strategy is shaped by national, regional and professional frameworks, including:

- Government policy on public libraries, literacy and digital inclusion
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) guidance on safe, ethical and inclusive library services
- Libraries Connected *Universal Library Offers*
- Evidence demonstrating the preventative value of libraries in reducing pressure on public health and social care

The strategy also positions Portsmouth Libraries to engage with key national initiatives, including the 2026 **National Year of Reading** and Arts Council England's **Libraries Development Framework**.

Responding to local need

Local data highlights significant challenges in Portsmouth, including child poverty, lower educational attainment among disadvantaged groups, digital exclusion and increasing demand for free, welcoming community spaces. The strategy demonstrates how libraries respond to these pressures through:

- Early years and school age literacy support
- Free digital access, IT support and training
- Trusted, impartial information and signposting
- Inclusive cultural, social and learning activities
- Targeted outreach to vulnerable and seldom heard groups

Core areas of delivery

The strategy sets out how Portsmouth Libraries will deliver impact across:

- **Information and Digital:** tackling digital exclusion and supporting access to online public services
- **Community:** acting as trusted, welcoming hubs and co located service points
- **Education, Learning and Children:** early intervention, school partnerships and literacy programmes, including the Summer Reading Challenge
- **Adults and Social Connection:** addressing loneliness through reading groups, creative activity and lifelong learning
- **Health and Wellbeing:** supporting mental and physical health, including dementia friendly and visual impairment services

Workforce, safety and future development

The strategy recognises the changing nature of library work and commits to:

- Structured staff development and skills auditing
- Ongoing training in digital skills, customer service and managing challenging behaviour
- Strong partnership working to maintain safe and welcoming library environments

Looking ahead, the service will deliver new initiatives including auto enrolment of Year R pupils into libraries and a programme of activity linked to Portsmouth 100 and key library anniversaries. This strategy reinforces Portsmouth Libraries as essential civic infrastructure, supporting literacy, inclusion, wellbeing and community cohesion. It demonstrates how the service will continue to adapt, innovate and deliver measurable social value ensuring libraries remain relevant, resilient and responsive to the needs of Portsmouth residents now and in the future.

Mission

Portsmouth Libraries aim to provide welcoming, safe, inclusive and accessible spaces for everyone, offering access to reading in all formats, information and digital services.

We seek to empower and connect our communities through transformative library experiences that inspire creativity, support learning, promote health and wellbeing, and enable individuals to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential.



Objectives

We will deliver our mission through the following six objectives. In our consultation, the public responded to confirm the priority of these objectives as follows:

Priority 1

Provide a comprehensive selection of books and digital offers to all ages

Priority 2

Provide a comprehensive offer to children

Priority 3/4

Deliver a broad range of community services and opportunities

Priority 3/4

Provide library staff and volunteers with training so that they have the skills they need to support their communities

Priority 5

Offer a broad range of options and opportunities for adults to develop social connections, skills and improved wellbeing

Priority 6

Make the best use of data to inform service delivery

Corporate strategy overview

Plan for Portsmouth

The Imagine Portsmouth 2040¹ vision is a collaborative forward plan that developed as a joint project with businesses, organisations and voluntary bodies across Portsmouth from 2019 and launched in 2021.

The vision has several strands including:

- Physical and mental health and wellbeing;
- Lifelong learning – young people to develop aspirations and adults to have opportunities throughout their lives;
- Culture and creativity including things to do and venues to benefit our people and the city.

This strategy will show how our Libraries can speak to each of these strands.

Council Plan 2024–2026

The Council Plan sets out the priorities for the period 2024–2026 and includes the mission to 'champion and celebrate our city' and 'improve the lives of our residents'. Under section 2 of the Plan, the Council commits to 'ensure the city is welcoming, vibrant and inclusive place in which to live, work and visit by continuing to provide good quality and highly accessible libraries'.

The Library Service has therefore been identified by the Council as an important service in delivering its aims.

National policy

Annual Report for Libraries 2025

The government published its Annual Report for Libraries in July 2025.² Libraries have a statutory function and fall under the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The statutory responsibilities are set out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and include a duty to:

- Provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons (section 7 (1);
- Encourage both adults and children to make full use of the library service and of providing advice to its use and making available such bibliographical information as may be required by persons using it (section 7 (2)(b)).

Under section 20 of the Act, the local authority (and in this case, the library service) is also authorised to use the premises to hold events and exhibitions of ‘an educational or cultural nature’.

The government 2025 report includes results from a participation survey, which found on average, the reasons for using a library were as follows:

Browsing, borrowing, returning reading and media material	61%
Took a child to browse, borrow, and return books	26%
Using free wifi, computer and printing facilities	25%
Using the library as study space	21%

Note that some respondents selected more than one reason.

The annual report also notes that whilst libraries are under financial pressure due to the local authority funding outlook, the government are calling for improved datasets on library activity going forward from 2026 and this is currently in a planning phase with support from Arts Council England. This is likely to include numbers related to events, loans, active borrowers and physical visits.

A further round of the Libraries Improvement Fund (LIF) was announced in January 2026, with 27.5m investment. The aim of the fund is to enable libraries to bid for money to upgrade their physical and digital infrastructure and Portsmouth Libraries will be considering an application to the fund.

Lastly, the report highlights the importance of public libraries regarding literacy and support to families and early years. Likewise, the importance of libraries in supporting the government’s project to tackle digital exclusion.³ This strategy will demonstrate the efforts underway by Portsmouth Library Service to support these workstreams.

The Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)

CILIP is the professional body representing libraries. In 2024 it commissioned Shared Intelligence to undertake a project, Future Libraries: Come Rain or Shine.⁴ This report had 3 conclusions:

Digital access and social isolation

Currently whilst the public accesses the library for digital requirements, digital infrastructure could be built around community workshops, to enable people to learn about AI. This would also lead to visit growth, provided funding is available to expand the core offer beyond books and lending.

Governance and leadership

The report acknowledges that heads of library services are no longer as proximate to the top table within local authorities. There is also a requirement to think differently about the library workforce, where staff development needs to consider digital skills and community engagement skills.

Futures literacy

Libraries to be empowered to test their offer with their communities around shared goals. Part of the purpose of this strategy is to test the offer in Portsmouth by way of consultation.

CILIP also published 'Managing safe and inclusive public library services' in 2023.⁵ This is a comprehensive document that provides guidance for all libraries to follow across all their activities.

The guidance is encapsulated across 11 principles that may inform library practice:

1. Take a risk management approach
2. Promote the safety of library staff
3. Understand the law and its limits
4. Engage with professional ethics and values
5. Reflect on your biases
6. Engage your stakeholders
7. Develop appropriate policies
8. Maintain access to appropriate expertise
9. Make evidence-based decisions
10. Train your staff
11. Reflect and learn from experience

Sanderson Report 2024

This independent report was commissioned by Department for Culture, Media and Sport and published in 2024.⁶ The report argues that libraries would benefit from more support from national and local government, to ensure that the modern day library offer is recognised by the general public. The report also recognises the potential of libraries as part of the family hubs network, as they provide such a broad range of services to children, young people, older people and carers and they offer vital signposting services for further help. The report acknowledges the integral role libraries played during the Covid pandemic and also argues that Arts Council England should have a stronger strategic ambition for libraries.

Libraries Development Framework and accreditation 2025

Following this report, Libraries Connected undertook a project to consider the possibilities and practicalities to establish an accreditation scheme for libraries. This was launched in 2025, funded by Arts Council England, as the Libraries Development Framework. The framework comprises an annual programme and will accept up to 30 applications each year. Libraries will be required to demonstrate and evidence their work and best practice across 4 areas:

Policy and practice

Policies

Workforce development

Use of national research and toolkits

Purpose

Vision

Leadership

Innovation

Place

Local priorities

Partnerships

People

Local need

Developing users

Engagement

National Year of Reading 2026

July 2025 also saw the announcement by the Education Secretary regarding the National Year of Reading 2026 as a joint campaign between government and the National Literacy Trust. The aim of the campaign will be to reverse the decline in reading amongst children, young people and adults.⁷

The campaign will include community reading champions and increase library memberships with the aim to increase the numbers of people who read for pleasure. This is in response to the results of the National Literacy Trust's latest survey data (see below). Portsmouth Library Service will be engaging with the campaign, which follows on from the Portsmouth Year of Literature 2025, 'In Our Words'.⁸

National Literacy Trust

The purpose of the National Literacy Trust is to campaign to improve literacy levels across the country. In 2024, a survey undertaken by the National Literacy Trust found that only 1 in 3 children and young people enjoyed reading for pleasure (and was the lowest score for this question since it originated in 2005).⁹ Regarding adult literacy levels, 1 in 6 adults aged 16–65 in England have very poor literacy levels. As literacy levels affect life outcomes, the Library Service is a critical service in Portsmouth for both adults and children.

Regional policy

Libraries Connected South East

Libraries Connected is the membership body for public library services and is funded by Arts Council England (ACE) as an Investment Principle Support Organisation.¹⁰ Prior to 2018, they were known as the Society of Chief Librarians. Libraries Connected works across nine regions and Portsmouth works with Libraries Connected South East.

One of the key projects for Libraries Connected is their Universal Library Offers. These are key workstreams that libraries are expected to deliver and include:

Culture and creativity
Enabling local communities to enjoy arts and cultural experiences via libraries
Health and wellbeing
Providing services that inform, engage and connect to support health and wellbeing
Information and digital
Providing access to quality information and digital services, learning new digital skills and feeling safe online
Reading
Building a literate and confident society by developing, delivering and promoting creative reading activities in libraries.

Two promises sit alongside these offers:

- **Vision and print impaired people’s promise:** a commitment to provide accessible and inclusive library services for people with vision impairment and sight loss.
- **The children’s promise:** a commitment to provide inspiring environments, digital literacy, cultural experiences and active involvement to support wellbeing.

This strategy will show the work in Portsmouth Libraries towards these outcomes.

In autumn 2025, Libraries Connected South-East, together with Shared Intelligence, published an evidence-based report (including evidence from Portsmouth), looking at the economic and wellbeing impact of libraries.¹¹ The particular focus of this report was to look at how public libraries act as a preventative service, reducing pressure on health and social care budgets. The headline conclusions, based on HM Treasury Green Book standards, confirm the equivalent values if the services were provided by the health and social care sector.

Preventative service	Equivalent annual financial value	Portsmouth value
Weekly arts and crafts sessions for over 65s	£491,000 across 8 library services	£57,334
Volunteering opportunities	£342,000 across 11 library services	£26,212
Loneliness reduction activities	£913,000 across 6 library services	£29,375
Total	£1,746,000	£112,921

Local data insights

In 2023 the Council’s annual public health report focussed on the impact of poverty and the cost of living crisis in Portsmouth.¹² This report confirmed that children from poorer backgrounds were at

greater risk of poor educational attainment. This is reflected in the GCSE results for Portsmouth and nationally.¹³

	Portsmouth	National comparator
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieving grades A*–C for 5+ subjects, including core subjects	33%	43%
Percentage of non-eligible pupils achieving grades A*–C for 5+ subjects, including core subjects	66%	71%

FSM eligible grades were on average 1.6 grades lower than non eligible pupils and 2.1 grades lower for non-eligible pupils nationally. This trend is reflected at Key Stage 2 (children aged 7–11) for the expected standard in reading, writing and maths.¹⁴ In addition to grades, absentee rates are higher for Portsmouth than for the south-east and for England.

The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment informs the public health report for Portsmouth and also tells us that:

- The proportion of residents from ethnic minority groups has increased from 16% in 2011 to 22% in 2021.
- 9.2% of Portsmouth residents do not identify English as their main language

The number of households in Portsmouth in receipt of Universal Credit has increased from 2494 in January 2019 to 20,623 in November 2024.¹⁵ This is in part the transition from the old style benefits but nonetheless shows an increase in demand.

Lastly, the House of Commons Constituency data (2023/24) tells us that in Portsmouth North, the

relative child poverty rate is 20.4%, above England and the UK. In Portsmouth South, the relative child poverty rate is 27.4%, above England and the UK.¹⁶

The following conclusions can be drawn from this data:

- That the service considers how it might foster the support of ethnic minorities. For example, work with the Cross Cultural Women’s Group in Central Library. The library service also supplies material in languages other than English or in dual language formats.
- That the service continues its class visit offer to local schools and continues to work in close collaboration with the Education service, in recognition of the education data and literacy levels nationally.
- That the service continues to offer free and low cost cultural experiences and events, cognisant of the levels of poverty and those struggling with the cost of living in the city.
- That the service continues to provide a strong all age family offer, in consideration of the demography of the city.

Internal insights from the service

There are several data sources available to the service which provide further insights.

Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)

Each year the Library Service is required to provide a return to CIPFA. This is required to provide data against several indicators. The most recent published data for 2023/24 confirms that book issues and physical visits to libraries have increased, thereby illustrating the demand for libraries across the country.¹⁷

Council governance

Each Council directorate has a range of indicators to measure performance, which are reported quarterly to Governance and Audit and Standards Committee. There are 10 indicators for the Library Service. In addition to those for CIPFA, these include indicators such as number of outreach visits, home library service issues, engagement with digital media and events for schools. All indicators consistently demonstrate demand for the service and allow the service to examine any peaks and troughs in demand across the year.

To enable a more accurate capture of visitor footfall, the Library Service have in 2025 invested in people counter technology. This will provide up to date data for each library centre, to inform service delivery i.e. which centres are seeing the most demand.

Portsmouth book stock survey 2025

In Spring 2025 Portsmouth Library Service undertook a quantitative survey regarding its book stock policy.

The results of this survey revealed that:

- 69% of respondents visit a Portsmouth library at least once a month
- 62% of respondents spend a dwell time of at least 30 minutes in the library
- The two most visited libraries in Portsmouth are Southsea and Central Library
- The most common reason to visit the library is to borrow books, however, 20% of respondents use the library to attend events / groups and 19% to use printing facilities.
- The majority of respondents borrow from the library to support the service and because it is an affordable way to access books
- 79% of respondents are happy that there are sufficient supply and variety of reading material on offer
- 87% of respondents consider the loan period for books is fair
- 87% of respondents think that children's book provision is the most important function of the library service, followed by 81% think that providing a wide range of reading material is important
- 95% of respondents feel that the book budget should be spent on fiction and non fiction books for both adults and children

This data is used to inform revenue spend across the library service and stock policy.

Information and digital



As already set out in library policy, digital access and inclusion is a key area for libraries moving forward in today's world, where channel shift by services (councils, banks, NHS and DWP for example) exacerbate digital exclusion and put more pressure on library services. Libraries Connected found that over 1 in 5 adults rely on library centres to provide online services such as wifi, computer access or printing.¹⁸

In 2024 the Good Things Foundation produced a report in collaboration with Libraries Connected and supported by Arts Council England.¹⁹ This report highlighted the key role libraries play in providing digital inclusion for their communities. The report noted that one common demand from libraries was help with online form filling for health, benefits, or council services, but this was subject to resource limitations on staff and IT infrastructure. The report calls on the government to 'recognise the role of libraries and community organisations ... as critical social infrastructure for digital inclusion'. It also exhorts local authorities to make efforts to promote the role of libraries as part of digital

inclusion strategy and to support library services with funding to enable them to be resourced to support help with online transactions.

In 2025 Good Things Foundation updated and republished their Digital Nation report.²⁰ This confirms that:

- 7.9m adults in the UK lack basic digital skills
- 1.6m adults do not have a smartphone, tablet, or laptop
- 33% of those offline say it is difficult to use council and government services
- 87% of respondents think there should be local support for online services

Each of Portsmouth's nine library centres provide free access to IT and wifi. This also includes free public access computers, with access to Microsoft Office software and the internet. Library assistants are also on hand to help support. A printing solution is also available for copying, scanning and printing documents for a small fee.

Some libraries also offer free IT training courses. At the time of writing, computer introduction courses are available at Cosham and Southsea libraries, as well as courses on internet safety. These are delivered in partnership with City Of Portsmouth College. This provision is a key part of the offer and the service will continue to work in collaboration with City of Portsmouth College to take this forward.

Other resources include electronic books, audio books, newspapers, magazines and music downloads. These includes special e-collections curated by the library staff in connection with themes and anniversaries.

The particular online resources on offer are:

- BorrowBox – the library collection for eBooks and eAudiobooks
- LOTE4Kids (Languages Other Than English) – this provides children’s stories in a wide variety of languages, to support multi-lingual literacy across culturally diverse communities
- Freegal – a digital music service that allows library members to stream and legally download a number of songs each week, across a broad range of genres
- Pressreader – a digital catalogue of newspapers and magazines, including Portsmouth’s The News. The software includes the ability for the product to be read to the listener. You can also filter your articles by interest.

Portsmouth digital survey 2025

In summer 2025 Portsmouth Library Service undertook a quantitative survey to examine The People’s Network usage to inform a future Windows 11 upgrade. The results of the survey are set out below. The results should be approached with some caution, as there was a small base to the response level.

- 97% of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the public access computer service in the libraries
- 52% of respondents used or intended to use the public access computers on a daily basis and 25% on a weekly basis
- Whilst there is a high demand for the service, only 20% of respondents are using it for over 2 hours.
- Over 60% of respondents are using the service to access email accounts and over 40% of users confirmed they had no alternative digital access if the service was not available.
- 64% of users confirmed that the service was very important to them, with users commenting that it was helping them progress job searches in circumstances where cost of living prevented personal ownership of devices and broadband.
- Most popular requests for improvement were ‘new equipment’ and ‘faster connection’ and ‘headphones’ to borrow.
- The survey revealed no appetite for cloud storage solutions or document editing services to be available, as the most common application required was email.

The survey results suggest that the IT facilities in the libraries are a highly valued service, crucial in the prevention of digital exclusion. As and when funding becomes available, the survey can inform the focus of investment.

Community

It is undisputed, particularly since the pandemic lockdowns, that libraries are essential community hubs. This can be illustrated by various sub-categories which are set out below.

Trusted information

Libraries provide information without bias and support intellectual freedom.²¹ This forms part of the CILIP Ethical Framework 7 Principles, which also includes equality and diversity, impartiality and confidentiality. Intellectual freedom includes freedom from censorship - which is increasingly under challenge.

CILIP 7 ethical principles

1. Human rights, equalities & diversity	
2. Public benefits	
3. Preservation	
4. Intellectual freedom	
5. Impartiality	
6. Confidentiality	
7. Information, skills & information literacy	

Supporting the vulnerable

Everyone is welcome in a Portsmouth library, irrespective of socio-economic or ethnic background. For some people, Portsmouth library centres are a critical warm environment in which to take shelter and receive a free hot drink as part of the Warm and Welcome Spaces initiative. This started in the winter of 2022 / 2023, following growing concerns around the cost of living and energy prices.²² The 2023 government report identifies the following factors in contributing to the success of warm spaces:

- Provision of hot drinks
- Offer of social activities and interaction
- Welcoming atmosphere
- Signposting services in cold weather
- Easy access by public transport
- Flexible opening hours

The library service will continue to contribute to this important provision each winter season.

Sanctuary

Portsmouth Library Service is part of the Libraries of Sanctuary movement.²³ This movement recognised the role that libraries have to play in welcoming refugees and those seeking asylum in our communities. As a library of sanctuary, Portsmouth is recognised for the contribution of its staff and community groups towards:

- raising awareness of the issues faced by those in the asylum system;
- providing support and opportunities for participation;
- contributing a culture of welcome



Places to dwell

Records of physical book loans alone do not provide an accurate reflection of the demand and need for libraries in our communities. Many people visit libraries, but do not take out physical or digital loans. People may visit the library to relax in a 'lounge' type environment for a variety of reasons:

- to access the café offer,
- to participate in games,
- undertake a children's activity offer, or adult club
- to find out 'what's on' locally,
- to undertake study, work or personal administration in a quiet and independent space,
- to access their DWP account
- to contact their GP, or
- to meet friends.

Libraries are ideally placed to complement the city's existing provision of community centres.

Three of Portsmouth's libraries (as the newer centres in service), were opened in direct connection with community centres (Paulsgrove 1985, Beddow (Milton) 1990 and Portsea 2005).

In recent years, the service has added quiet pods to Central, Southsea, Cosham and North End to ensure quiet spaces are available in the busier libraries.

Co-location of services

Due to the relationship that libraries have with many community services, in some areas of England libraries have been intentionally co-located, with a variety of services.²⁴ In Portsmouth, HIVE Portsmouth VCSE organisation and Society of St James (homelessness relief) are also situated within Central Library.

Portsmouth Library Service has also partnered with the NHS in the past year to offer drop in sessions at library centres, to support individuals with using the NHS App.

Compliment and collaborate with other services in the community

The library service has a strong synergy with the museums service. There is an overlap between the strategic aims of both services. In March 2025 the Museums Service published their strategy, which included the following objectives:

- We are welcoming, inclusive and community driven;
- We are listening to and engaging with our audiences;
- We are passionate, inspiring and thought provoking²⁵

There are several examples of collaborative working between the respective services. The Library Service organises and manages the Summer Reading Challenge each year (see Education, Learning and Children) which for many years has been an effort supported by the Museums Service where the Celebration Event has been held at Southsea Castle. Similarly the Museum project Art In The Park involved co-production with several local community groups who are also supported and engage with the Library Service from time to time, including Chat over Chai, Haven (City of Sanctuary), Cross Cultural Women's Group and 432 NOMADS. This included utilising one of the library electric tuk tuks to take to the Park to use as a display and mobile workshop to engage with the community.²⁶

As such both services are community driven, engage in co-production projects and seek to utilise their assets to inspire. For the Library Service, this can take the form of a thought-provoking display e.g. for Black History Month in October 2025, the Library Service held a talk, lunch and workshop with authors Dorothy Koomson, Nicola Williams and Claire Linney, in collaboration with Portsmouth Creates and In Our Words 2025 Festival.

Other services that the Library Services work collaboratively with include the Parks Service. In February 2024, the Parks Service published their strategy,²⁷ which included the following objectives:

- Parks as community spaces
- Parks for lifelong learning

Collaborative working between the public libraries, School Library Service and Parks has included the Key Stage 1 Big Park Reads. These are fun storytelling sessions for pupils in Year 1 and have taken place in venues north and south of city, including College Park and Victoria Park. Children read along with a guest author and all pupils attending receive a signed copy of the book to take away with them.

Public libraries, School Library Service and PCC Countryside Officers have also worked with Parks colleagues for ecology reads (e.g. Emily Gravett's 'Tidy') with primary school children, starting the session in Central Library, then following the story time with a scavenger bug hunt in Victoria Park. Similar sessions have also been held at Baffins Pond and Alderman Lacey Library.

The library service also has a strong working relationship between its School Library Service team and the Council's formal education department. This includes working together to ensure that the school library offer is available and accessible to all schools in the city and that priority work is undertaken to target schools in the most deprived areas.

Libraries are incredibly important to our city because for all the above reasons, they foster community cohesion and build bridges across different cultures.

Social impact and change

Libraries have the power to change lives: by supporting literacy, acting as inclusive social hubs and increasing opportunities through providing open access to educational resources and digital tools. They also support cross cultural pollination and act as refuge safe spaces for vulnerable communities. They are representative of 'seldom heard' audiences – under-represented groups such as people from ethnic minority backgrounds, people experiencing homelessness, digital exclusion or language barriers.

Portsmouth Library Service is a participating service in the Arts and Humanities Research Council Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (AHRC DCP).²⁸ This project is a joint initiative managed by the Victoria and Albert Museum with both the Council (Library and Museum services) and University of Portsmouth engaged.

On behalf of the Libraries Service, the following projects have proceeded:

- Contested space or space for contestation: the changing role of public libraries (commenced autumn 2024)
- Portsmouth Central Library: Architect's folly or Brutalist masterpiece? Assessment, conservation and revitalisation of the public library's impact as an 'urban living room' and community hub (commenced autumn 2025)

Once completed, the findings of these projects will provide useful intelligence into the changing social nature and purpose of our library spaces.



*Libraries have the power
to change lives*

Volunteering impact

There are many ways for the community to get involved in volunteering with the Library Service. Volunteering is an ideal opportunity for people to make new friends, gain employment, life skills and confidence. In Portsmouth, volunteering is open to anyone over the age of 14 (from age 12 for Summer Reading Challenge).

All library volunteer roles are advertised via Together in Hive Volunteer bureau.

Types of volunteering on offer in the library service include:

Summer Reading Challenge

Young people are able to volunteer through the summer holidays each year. The volunteer will register children for the challenge, engage and encourage them with their reading.

Mobile Library volunteers

Including at Victorious Festival and mobile library sites throughout the year, volunteers are on hand to support customers.

Home Library Reading Friend

Volunteering to choose, deliver and return library books based on the interests of someone who is housebound or unable to visit the library due to mobility or caring concerns.

Conan Doyle social media posts

Volunteering to support the Instagram and Facebook pages to market the collection.

Library Friends

These volunteers are attached to a particular library and support planning events, fundraise and promote the library in the local community.

Volunteers for the library service have made a significant impact.

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Library volunteer hours	4296 (2.2 FTE)	5900 (3.1 FTE)	5657 (2.9 FTE)	6905 (3.6 FTE)
Conan Doyle volunteer hours	863 (0.4 FTE)	1334 (0.7 FTE)	1344 (0.7 FTE)	905 (0.5 FTE)

On average, over the course of the period, the volunteering hours are equivalent to 3.5 full time positions per year for the Library team and Conan Doyle team respectively. The Library Service are incredibly grateful to their volunteer cohort, as they bring fresh ideas to the service and strengthen ties between the libraries and the community.

Volunteers for the library service have made a significant impact.

Education, learning and children

Libraries are critical as an early intervention service for the city's families. In 2022 the Local Government Association commissioned a report, supported by The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) and Libraries Connected.²⁹ This report stressed the contribution libraries make to early years, children and families. The following work was highlighted in particular:

- Children's speaking, listening and early literacy;
- Children's early learning and cultural development;
- Children's social and emotional skills;
- Parent and child bonding;
- School readiness for children;
- Improved mental wellbeing in parents and carers

In Portsmouth, the Library Service undertakes regular weekly Rhyme Time sessions at Alderman Lacey, Beddow, Carnegie, Central, Cosham, North End, Paulsgrove and Southsea libraries. This includes weekend sessions at Southsea and Central.

Rhyme times develop bonding between children and their carers, helps young children build confidence outside the home and helps them to learn sharing and taking turns. The young children develop their vocabulary, learn new words and phrases as they explore the rhythm of language.

Portsmouth Library Service also participates in **BookStart**, through the national charity BookTrust. BookStart gives free books to children in England and Wales at several stages before school and also distribute free packs for children with additional needs.

In Portsmouth, BookStart Baby packs are provided via the Registrars Service and offered to all new-born babies. BookStart Toddler packs go to family

hubs and BookStart Pre-Schooler/Nursery packs are provided to children in early years settings in targeted areas of deprivation.

These offers encourage the development of early reading habits and remove financial barriers to low book ownership in deprived areas in the city. The scheme helps develop language acquisition, motor skills, social development and parent/carer attachment.

Storytime also takes place across 6 of Portsmouth's libraries, both in the north and south of the city. Storytime helps children to develop an early interest in books, form close bonds with parents, supports attention and listening skills and vocabulary development.

Activities take place in Portsmouth Libraries for children that help develop good mental health by connecting with others, mindfulness through crafts, learning new skills and being part of a group. In Portsmouth, at Carnegie Library, children can join the Build It Lego Club, which is free with all Lego materials provided.

At Cosham Library, children can join the Code Club. This gives children an early and fun introduction to computer coding, again developing STEM skills in an enjoyable and accessible way.

The Local Government Association has identified that libraries must and should be identified in existing pathways, including the pathway for early help.³⁰ Libraries form an essential part of universal services, aligned to strategic outcomes for family hubs. Libraries are an early prevention service and provider of targeted support and libraries should be included in both early years and school readiness strategies.

As part of this work, Portsmouth has a highly regarded School Library Service. This includes a comprehensive book collection for schools that covers age groups from early years to Key Stage 4. In addition to supplying reading and library services for schools in Portsmouth, they also offer various reader development activities to support schools and pupil development. Reading and literacy programmed activity occurs across the calendar year and includes the following:

Literature quizzes and meet the author

These events are held for years 5 and 6 in primary school and years 7 and 8 in secondary school. Prior to the quiz, pupils are challenged to read 4 books, followed by a competition with other school teams to win the trophy. As part of the literature quiz schedule, pupils are also able to attend Meet The Author events to inspire pupils in their continued reading and creative writing development. Each round of the quiz also gives pupils the opportunity to win book tokens.

Book awards

The service host 3 book award events across the year: Year 1 Picture Book Award, Year 5 Book Award and Key Stage 3 Book Award. Participating schools read and debate their favourite book over the course of the year and nominate 'Reading Champions' (children who have shown an interest in reading) and 'Inspiring Adults' (school librarians who have inspired them). The aim of the book awards is to introduce children to a range of genres and authors, draw attention to the most accessible fiction for particular age groups, develop pupil's critical thinking skills and promote libraries and literacy. This sits within a fun filled celebration event held across different venues in the city, such as the city's performance venues.

Transition reads: mass reading events

These events unite all pupils of an age group around a particular author and book. All pupils receive a copy of the book. Initially, this event focussed on Year 6 but external funding has enabled development to include Year 1 in recent years.

The Year 6 Big City Read is accompanied by an event where the author of the chosen book speaks about his book to the pupils at an in person event, which is also streamed to all Year 6 pupils.

Summer Reading Challenge (SRC)

This initiative, now running for over 20 years, is offered to all families in the city as part of the literacy programme. The aim of the programme is to offer an engaging project, free of charge, to maintain reading momentum across the summer holiday period. The event is promoted to local schools (including bespoke assemblies and digital resources) early in the summer each year, including an invitation to borrow books from local libraries. A celebration event is held in early autumn and children are incentivised through the challenge to keep going. Crucially, it is up to children to set their own target, so that children of all abilities can take part.

Incentives include activities taking place across library centres during the school holidays, prior to the celebration event every autumn.

Participation figures have grown year on year:

Year	Children completing the challenge
2025	1,672
2024	1,658
2023	1,472
2022	1,329
2021	1,266
2020	1,019

Summer Reading Challenge Plus (SRC+)

The service is aware of the complex challenges that face many families in the city and potential barriers to participation. Parents may not be familiar with or be unable to visit the library. Through SRC+, children from schools in areas of disadvantage are directly targeted with invites to visit the library, borrow books and complete the challenge, before the summer holiday period commences.

Summer Reading Challenge celebration event

The annual celebration event takes place in collaboration with the Museums Service. All completers are able to collect a medal and the event is a free family day out, with additional activities on offer including treasure hunts, puppet shows, facepainting, storytelling and craft. Whilst many libraries across the country take part in the reading challenge (it is supported by Arts Council England and the Reading Agency), Portsmouth offers a city wide celebration event which is in contrast to other local authorities, who offer local library based events where their municipal boundary covers a broader area.

The SRC also provides an opportunity for personal development for older children, who have the opportunity to volunteer to listen to young children read.



In Our Words

In Our Words (2025) was a year long celebration of literature, literacy and storytelling organised by Portsmouth Creates.

For older children, In Our Words included an event at New Theatre Royal, for 400 Year 10 pupils from across the city. At this event, Poet Laureate Simon Armitage delivered a talk and question and answer session around poetry and creative writing. The service acknowledges that there could be more provision for teenagers and young adults and is open to discussion with Play, Youth and Community Services to explore this further.

Adults provision and social connection

It is a well established principle that libraries are an essential provision to combat loneliness and social isolation, which has developed particularly since Covid.³¹ The Reading Agency, funded by Arts Council England, helps public libraries to provide services to help address loneliness and improve mental health. This includes Reading Well collections and Reading Friends groups.

Reading groups offer an ideal way to develop social circles and discuss books. In Portsmouth, there are groups that meet both inside and outside the library. The service also provides support to communities to set up their own reading group, to meet in people's homes or community buildings. The service is able to provide free book sets of up to 15 copies to support such initiatives. Reading groups meet monthly across the city and there are 2 groups that focus on audiobooks to support the vision impaired community.

Beyond Words Book Clubs focus on developing literacy and connection through visual literacy, for people who may find the written word challenging, due to learning difficulties, limited English, individuals with dementia and/or those with audio impairment.³² Through pictures stories, group members tell their own stories. In Portsmouth, a Beyond Words group meets at the Central Library.

In Portsmouth, there are various community group activities for adults to join, to develop social connections. At Alderman Lacey, Beddow, Paulsgrove and Southsea libraries, a range of craft, sewing and knitting clubs are available. At Central Library, a poetry club meets weekly for creative writing. Alderman Lacey, Beddow and Southsea libraries all host scrabble clubs. At Southsea you can also join clubs to play mahjong and rummikub.



Unique to Alderman Lacey library, is an oral history group to record memories of the area.

Other non-reading related groups for adults to join include guitar courses at Central band Cosham libraries. These are free six-month courses for beginners and include limited spaces for those who do not own a guitar. Every week at Southsea Library, City of Portsmouth College run free drop in art workshops.

BookFest is the annual flagship event run by Portsmouth Library Service which has been running for over 15 years. This is unique as a library run literary festival. It is held each year in February/ March across a variety of locations and venues in the city. Through its reputation, it has attracted speakers such as Sheila Hancock, Helen Lederer, Jacqueline Wilson and Michael Morpurgo. BookFest offers a full range for adults of talks, workshops and creative writing seminars, including with local authors to develop aspiration. In recent years, it has also included a Children's Week at February half term, which has included rap workshops for older children and events for young children.

Health and wellbeing

As already identified throughout this document, libraries play an important role towards adult wellbeing. In addition to social activities, this also includes supporting individuals with health needs through direct information and signposting. This was highlighted by a Libraries Connected report 'Libraries for Living and for Living Better' in 2023.³³

In Portsmouth, each of the libraries has as Wellbeing Zone which provides books on physical, mental and emotional health, with the biggest collection based at Central Library.

Cosham, North End, Southsea and Paulsgrove libraries all have blood pressure monitors available for loan.

In Central Library, there is a dedicated Memory Collection. The aim of this collection is to help people with dementia, to provide stimulus via items to borrow including books, games, puzzles and DVDs. Reminiscence boxes are also available to borrow from Central Library, which help support the mental health of older people, those with depression and those recovering from brain injury.

Regarding reading material, health and wellbeing, the Portsmouth Library Service is also a member of the Reading Well scheme.³⁴ This Reading Agency scheme helps support individuals with their health and wellbeing by providing helpful reading. All books on the scheme are recommended by health experts and/or individuals with lived experience. The Reading Well booklists are available for mental health, teens, children, dementia and families.

In June 2025 Portsmouth Library Service launched a new mother and baby health collection. These resources are designed to support parent-child bonding and include resources such as cloth books and sound books.

Further in 2025, the library service partnered with the NHS local GP practices to support access to the NHS App, at Southsea and Paulsgrove libraries. The libraries hosted GP practice staff, who, together with HIVE Digital Champions, were on hand to help visitors to access their digital GP health record. This service is directed to help those in the community who might struggle with accessing health information digitally.

The Library Service in Portsmouth also engage with the local DWP Job Centre in the city. This involves supporting work placements which enable the attendees to develop skills to complement DWP initiatives for long term employment.

Visual impairment (VI) and housebound services and disabled community

VI services are a core part of the Libraries Connected policy, 'Vision and Print Impaired People's Promise' to make libraries more accessible. Portsmouth Library Service has a dedicated Visual Impairment Officer, who was honoured in the King's Birthday List 2024 (British Empire Medal) for services to public libraries and the local community. They were also nominated and won the Vision and Print Impaired People's Award for Libraries Connected in 2023. The service offers a broad range of support and advice to people facing visual impairment. This includes:

- Large print and talking books at all libraries, and e-audiobooks available from Borrowbox.
- Visual Impairment Telephone Advice Line (VITAL).
- Talking Newspaper Service (www.tnauk.org.uk)

- Library newsletter and Braille services – the latter includes a transcription service, Braille and computer skills lessons, text to Braille translation and Braille printer

In addition to reading groups for the visually impaired, there are also social groups, (at Cosham, Southsea and Central libraries). These groups hold talks and provide helpful signposting to relevant agencies. They are also key focus groups for community consultation.

Services for individuals who are housebound include a home library service to deliver library books to people who cannot access the library. This includes trained volunteers who choose items based on the preferences and interests of the customer. Regular visits from volunteers to the housebound also provide crucial social contact and support, to combat loneliness and isolation.

Alternatively, the customer may ask the library staff to choose the books and arrange for friends or family to collect. The service is provided free of charge by Portsmouth Library Service, to ensure that there are no barriers to access.

As part of its children's provision, the service also works with Portsmouth Parent Voice, an advocacy group for parent carers of children with additional special needs or disabilities up to the age of 25. The service also liaises with the Portsmouth Disability Advisory Group over provision of services.

In recent years, the library service has secured funding for two Changing Places toilets, at Southsea and Central Libraries. Several of the libraries also have ramped access.



Upcoming new projects

Auto enrolment

In 2024 the Fabian Society, in their campaign booklet 'Arts For Us All' called on the government to introduce a universal library card to be issued to all British citizens.³⁵ The rationale for this was that parents unfamiliar with library services were unlikely to take their children to the library and as such, children were missing out on a variety of experiences. In Portsmouth the service are aware of the many financial and time constraints faced by parents and therefore a project has commenced to auto enrol Year Reception pupils into the library. To achieve this project, the necessary GDPR had to be satisfied (an opt out was provided) and the necessary liaison take place with the Education Service. The project is on track for all Year Reception pupils to receive a library card by Summer 2026.

Portsmouth 100

The Council is working with partners to celebrate the city centenary in 2026 across multiple communities and areas. For the library, the centenary also coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Central Library. Part of the celebrations therefore will include a birthday party for Central Library. In recent years, many of the library centres have celebrated anniversaries and a party has been a great way to engage the community, with children's trails, activities and special visitors. 2026 also sees the 120th anniversary of Carnegie Library.



Staff development plans

As referenced earlier in this document, the Shared Intelligence report from 2024 'Come Rain or Shine' identifies a requirement for libraries to prepare a practical framework for staff development, in view of the changes and opportunities facing the public library sector moving forward.³⁶ It is well documented and illustrated in this strategy that public library services comprise a diverse range of customer service, much broader than book browsing and borrowing facilities, due to the transition over recent years and particularly since the pandemic. This transition has seen library services grow to encompass digital services and support, outreach, health and wellbeing support, early intervention and buildings management in addition to traditional library functions.

For many years now the service has held training days twice a year, to accommodate both weekday and weekend staff. The training incorporates a wide range of areas from IT and digital skills, customer service and managing anti-social behaviour, with sessions being held by both internal and external speakers.

A skills audit is being undertaken across Portsmouth Library Service, to identify the shift that has taken place and recognise where there are skill gaps in the current workforce. The results of the skills audit will be shared with the library staffing cohort to inform training plans. This will build resilience across the library service to prepare for the future.



Managing safer libraries

As already set out in this document, libraries are welcome spaces to all, irrespective of background. Whilst the majority of people have a happy and beneficial experience in the library, challenging behaviours can affect the wellbeing of both customers and staff.

In their publication 'Creating Safer Libraries', last updated April 2025,³⁷ Libraries Connected acknowledged that:

A hard reality of working in public libraries is that, due to their welcome-to-everyone approach, they will have disruptive customers. It is therefore important that library staff are proactive and well prepared. Staff should not feel that they must tolerate disruptive and abusive behaviour.

Due to the changing and evolving role of libraries as safe community spaces, library staff have encountered challenging behaviours, including individuals with moderate to severe mental health and self-harming conditions. Individuals and groups have also protested against library activities, including taking videos of library staff.

There are several mitigations that library staff have available to them to support challenging behaviours.

In 2024 the Council launched a customer promise, which includes the behaviours expected from customers to all services.³⁸ All library branches also display the Library Code of Conduct which confirms:

We cannot allow disruptive, abusive or threatening behaviour. For the safety of other customers and members of staff, anyone behaving in this way will be required to leave the building and may be subject to a period of exclusion.

Any period of exclusion is subject to significant consideration by staff and staff are required to give a clear verbal warning first before a request to leave the premises is made. A period of exclusion, if made, is confirmed in writing.

Staff are required to report challenging behaviours to Health and Safety, Community Partnership Information sharing (Safer Portsmouth Partnership), Hampshire Police online reporting and Community Wardens. Since 2023 all library branches have had CCTV.

Training courses have been provided to all staff on managing difficult customer behaviour and managing difficult situations in public libraries. Senior staff follow up each incident report with staff concerned to provide debriefing opportunity and further support.

These mitigation steps and support from partner agencies enable our libraries to be safe and welcoming spaces for both customers and staff.

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