

Scrutiny November 20th, 2023

Library Services – Innovation Fund and future Strategy

Section 1 Background (Slides 4 – 8)

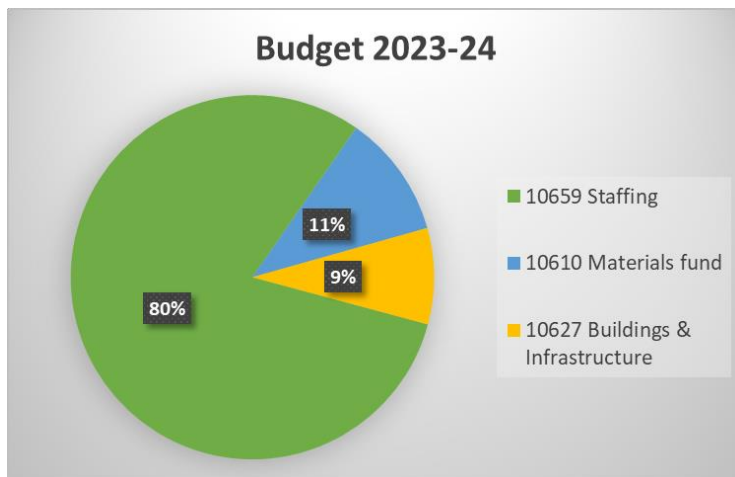
Bristol has 27 public libraries offering a statutory service across the city. As a statutory service we are overseen by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport. It is the third oldest public library service in the UK after Norwich and Ipswich and celebrated its 400th birthday in 2013.

[Libraries as a statutory service - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

The service is managed and funded solely by Bristol City Council. There are no community-run libraries. Our volunteers add value to the service and take on specific roles but do not take part in service delivery.

There is a wealth of information available in the accompanying data pack.

The library service annual revenue budget for budget year 23/24 is £4.66m. This is comprised of spend as below:



Most of the budget (80%) is on staff. There are 183 staff employed by the service which is 109.86 FTE (correct as of 9/10/23). Many of our staff are part time.

The running costs of the libraries is held in Property and Facilities Management budgets. We have included the costs of library buildings in the data pack.

The library service has a remaining £12,000 of capital which is intended to complete the refurbishment project in Henleaze Library which has so far created a welcoming, modern, new, and safe children's library.

Before



After



The library is part of the LibrariesWest Consortium, which is a consortium of seven local authorities who work together in partnership to enable residents to borrow and return and use all the library services of the seven. The consortium is the oldest and most mature of any UK consortium and has a great customer offer, far greater than a single authority. It also achieves considerable value for money as we share costs for the Library Management System, staffing to process books and invoices and electronic resources such as eBooks, eAudio and eNewspapers.

We have an income target of £302,620 per year, which is achieved through a mixture of rents (112K) in Junction 3, Central Library and through the café in Central as well as traditional sources of income such as photocopying, and room hire. We no longer actively buy DVDs as the service did not generate an income.

We have been successful in attracting some external funding in recent years. Two examples are given in the presentation. We now have 4 BIPCs (Business and Intellectual Property Centres) in the Central Library and Knowle, Junction 3 and Southmead. These are part of a British Library network and originally funded by them. In April 2023, we applied for support for a further two years to the Shared Prosperity Fund administered by WECA. The centres provide a front door to business support and start up advice with further workshops in intellectual property and marketing and provide access to specialist online resources.

<https://www.bl.uk/business-and-ip-centre/national-network>

We are also in the midst of a project to refurbish the historic Central Library reading room to create a more flexible event space, exhibition corridor, restore the historic furniture and install accessible tables. The completion of this project in October 2024 will also see installation of digital tablets highlighting our historic collections and improved signage in the building.

Of the 27 libraries, 18 libraries are solely BCC (Bristol City Council) owned. The remaining nine are in leased spaces or buildings and the service pays either rent or service charge (please see the data pack). Some of the rents are peppercorn (e.g., Bedminster and Junction 3), which are very low. The rents total £127,000.

We have 4 libraries that are already co-located in community centres or buildings - Avonmouth, Shirehampton and St Pauls are in Community Asset Transfer buildings where the library service is now a tenant and pays service charge. Hartcliffe Library is in the Hartcliffe and Withywood Community Partnership (HWCP) community-run building @Symes and we pay rent.

We have plans for two future co-location projects. Filwood Library is being considered for a colocation in Filwood Community Centre as part of the Levelling Up Fund successful bid. We are also in discussions with Southmead Development Trust about the eventual move of Southmead Library (currently temporarily housed in Southmead House) to the new build in Glencoyne Square as part of a community-run ground floor service.

Filwood Library

Bristol City Council were successful in the application “Transforming Filwood Broadway” to the Levelling Up Fund in January 2023, administered by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Filwood was awarded £14.5m of funding from the fund. Together with £1.72m of Bristol City Council funding, this will enable the following six projects identified in the Filwood Broadway Framework to come forward:

1. A new Filwood Library.
2. Extensive improvements to the public realm space and high street.
3. A new Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) and football pitch infrastructure
4. Expansion of Filwood Community Centre into a Cultural Hub.
5. Regeneration of properties on the west side of Filwood Broadway.
6. Revitalisation of the parade of shopfronts on the east side of Filwood Broadway.

The current Filwood Library was opened in July 1960 and was refurbished in 2003, with some new shelving added in 2013. The library is located at the end of Filwood Broadway, somewhat isolated from the parade of shops, opposite the existing MUGA site. It has been subject to vandalism and anti-social behaviour. This peaks in school holidays and we have previously had to change the opening hours and in extreme cases, close the library. The library heating is out of life with aging underfloor heating. The library is open for 22 hours a week, offers 10 free public computers and the service is the sole occupier of the building. There is no accessible public toilet, and the mezzanine space is not accessible or fire safe and therefore cannot be used.

The current Filwood Library site has formed part of the Filwood Broadway Framework since 2012, with the site being proposed for redevelopment for housing and greenspace. The framework also set out that the library would be relocated to Filwood Community Centre. Since that point, the potential relocation of the library has been discussed numerous times at the Filwood Broadway Working Group as a key option. The project team have just completed the tender for a multi-disciplinary design team to deliver the Cultural Hub. Due to funding deadlines (Levelling Up spend requires practical completion of all projects by end of 2025), the project will move swiftly from concept design to a planning submission in Spring 2024.

Glencoyne Square - Southmead Library

Southmead Library relocated to Southmead House in October 2022. This was a temporary move with the plan to move again to the Glencoyne Square development being led by Southmead Development Trust (SDT). This is in the design stage, and we are working with SDT who are creating two new housing units and community space on the ground floor of both blocks. The library will be co-located with SDT training and hot desk spaces.



Co-locations have huge positive benefits. Libraries need to be where people are and as a universal statutory service, often in areas of need, we can support communities in shared spaces and eliminate barriers to use when residents use other services in the same space. Often co-locations happen by chance or because of a bigger project. We have worked with Property in the past to identify any possibilities of further co-locations. There is often a varied financial benefit as council-owned spaces are often relatively cheap to run in utility costs and those in a newer or co-located space, more expensive.

Section 2 – Innovation Fund Evaluation Report (Slide 10 -22)

[Library Innovation Fund \(bristol.gov.uk\)](https://www.bristol.gov.uk)

Why was it needed?

The library service has been part of two citywide public consultations about reductions to the library service budget since 2014. These consultations encouraged a period of intense debate about the number of libraries and the services they offered.

In 2019, after the last budget savings proposal was halted, the service embarked on a citywide engagement programme led by anchor community organisations to have more positive conversations about libraries with residents and communities. This led to the development of the Library Strategy 2020–2024.

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/859-bristol-library-strategy-2020-to-2024>

One of the primary aims of the Strategy was to work together with communities to animate the library buildings; buildings that are assets for communities in neighbourhoods, but mainly unused when the library itself was shut. Also, the engagement generated a wealth of ideas for activity in each library and we wanted to bring these ideas to fruition. This aspiration led to the creation of the Innovation Fund, which was a seed fund for Friends Groups and community groups to apply for and then fund activity or ideas to promote their local library.

The Library Service had never managed a grant stream before. The funding for the Friends and the Open Fund was from a Neighbourhoods Reserve Fund earmarked for the Library Service during the 2017 consultation on library closures. It was not part of the Library Service revenue budget but a separate fund of £108,000. In the Cabinet of October 2022, this reserve fund was incorporated into in-year savings for the council to meet a balanced budget and is no longer available.

The library service wanted to test this way of working more closely with the community and hear from the communities and grant award winners of their experience of managing a project and achieving their outcome, whilst working with the library and the council.

Aims of the project for the Library Service:

- To successfully deliver a grant fund to communities for the first time – achieved
- To work more closely/collaboratively with the community – achieved
- To rebuild trust after a period of uncertainty - achieved
- To experiment with community-led projects - achieved
- To challenge the service to respond to community-led ideas – achieved.
- To support communities in their ideas and priorities for their local library - achieved
- To guide communities through the complex council processes to achieve their aims – partly achieved.
- To find out how the service could adapt to a more blurred delivery of community as well as local authority activity – partly achieved.
- To test how residents responded to a blurred offer – partly achieved.

The innovation fund offered a total fund of £108,000 across the 27 libraries in the city, divided into two separate streams.

Stream 1: The Friends Fund offering £1,000 to support Friends of libraries to establish and engage community support for their library with the aims to:

- Provide support and encouragement for the set up and development of Friends Groups in each of the libraries.
- Help fast-track ideas already captured through the conversation process that has been in place since the start of the 2019.

Stream 2: The second funding stream offered an allocation of £3,000 for open applications to support ideas which could impact in one or more of the following ways:

- Bring the library and communities together.
- Improve the space within library buildings.
- Improve how the library service is delivered.

The whole project was severely affected by Covid. The first 30 awards were made in January 2020, and were about events and activities to increase visitors to the libraries. This was impossible in the subsequent two years and whilst some projects were able to move online, a majority were not able to do so. Also, community and Friends Groups' priorities changed during the pandemic, and we lost some groups and some projects that could not restart. Focus and priorities changed for residents, community groups and Friends Groups. Events and activities in libraries only restarted in April 2022.

After 3 rounds of awards £63.5K was awarded and £44.5K remaining. All projects were completed by December 2022 with the Evaluation Report and Celebration Event completed in April 2023.

Friends Groups

The ambition to have a Friends Group for every Library and the support of this network is embedded in the current Library Strategy and was fundamental to the delivery of the Innovation Fund Project. During the period of the Innovation Fund and the concurrent Covid pandemic some groups thrived, some formed where there were none but unfortunately some that were in existence pre-Covid or that came about as part of the Innovation Fund initiative have sadly ceased for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons are mentioned below in the learnings from and findings of the Innovation Fund.

Friends Groups

Libraries with Friends Groups

- Bedminster & Marksbury Road
- Bishopston
- Clifton
- Hillfields
- Henleaze
- Horfield
- Knowle
- Redland
- Sea Mills
- Shirehampton
- Westbury
- Whitchurch

Libraries without Friends Groups

- Avonmouth
- Bishopsworth *
- Central : in progress
- Filwood *
- Fishponds
- Hartcliffe*
- Henbury: in progress
- Junction 3: in progress
- Lockleaze: in progress
- Southmead: in progress
- St George
- St Pauls*
- Stockwood*
- Wick Road*

* Ceased during Covid

OFFICIAL

13

The findings and recommendations

Case Studies (St. Pauls, Bishopston, Horfield) – please see the Innovation Fund Project, Bristol Libraries at the link above.

What the Library Service learnt and were the project aims achieved?

- To successfully deliver a grant fund to communities for the first time – achieved. The mechanism for awarding grants and ensuring fairness and accountability was complex to set up and we were grateful for help from the Arts Team, Audit and Finance. Even with a straightforward process and a simple application form, it was challenging for some communities who had no experience of funding applications or how to match their aims with the funding aims.
- To rebuild trust after a period of uncertainty – achieved. The last two citywide public consultations had been solely about reduction in the number of libraries, and this meant there was hostility and mistrust from groups on the behalf of their communities. This work, however, led to more understanding between the library service, Friends Groups, and residents.
- To experiment with community-led projects – achieved. We were keen to let the community lead on projects that they felt were important to their local library. This varied enormously as

detailed in the report and some are still ongoing. The groups learnt from each other and adapted throughout the Covid years.

- To challenge the service to respond to community-led ideas– achieved. It was a challenge to move from a local authority service led approach to one of co-production and relinquishing control to residents not employed by the service. It challenged our processes and procedures and how we communicate. It uncovered aspects we had not anticipated in how bureaucratic the service and council can be and how this creates barriers. Sometimes those processes are for safety of all residents, but learnt we do not explain that as well as we could.
- To support communities in their ideas and priorities for their local library – achieved. As detailed by the case studies in the report.
- To find out how the service could adapt to a more blurred delivery of community as well as local authority activity– partly achieved. Shirehampton Living Room and Hillfields and Clifton Welcoming Spaces tested this model as they opened the library doors on usually closed days, inviting residents to use the space. The next step would be using the library services, not just spaces, on those days.
- To test how residents responded to a blurred offer– partly achieved. The service had concerns about quality of different activities and the response of communities and customers who may assume that everything done in a local library was overseen or delivered by the service. This perception did not result in any complaints or complexity. However, we maintained a watching brief on publicity and communications to ensure it was clear where the service was involved and where the community of Friends were the lead.
- To work more closely/collaboratively with the community– achieved. Projects developed through the Innovation Fund meant much closer working with library frontline teams and the service. It was not without challenges as the library service is a large hierarchical service, but points of contact were established with Library Development Officers.
- To guide communities through the complex council processes to achieve their aims – partly achieved. This was quite difficult where naturally residents assume the library building, surrounding land and pavement were all under the control of the library service, and where in actuality a multitude of different council departments can often be involved.

Lessons learnt from the award beneficiaries.

1. Covid

For all the projects the impact of the Covid pandemic cannot be underestimated. For the library service there was a need to revise and adapt timelines and accept changes to project plans. There were also changes in staffing responsibilities and in personnel throughout the extended duration of the project.

There was a constant element of revising and reconsidering what could be done depending on Government and local Health and Safety advice and the changing situation with library closures and restrictions.

For the community run organisations there were issues with recruitment of staff and funding cycles which meant that the project had to be delivered within a certain time limit and could not be indefinitely postponed. Community projects were often funded to particular timescales with many staff on time limited contracts. This created challenges as libraries were not open to run the projects and the project deadlines were extended to take account of this.

Some of the projects were able to revise their original plan to work within Covid restrictions whereas some of the projects had to be completely reworked as the plans had become unfeasible with new stricter requirements.

Many projects resulted in small numbers of attendees for events and activities, scaled down due to Covid restrictions such as social distancing and having to change to a more structured set up rather than what had originally been intended at the outset which was to increase engagement through innovative approaches. The data collected through the projects was therefore a snapshot rather than a comparative measure.

2. Evaluation

We were not prescriptive as we tried to be as 'hands off' as possible and let the groups direct the way they felt best suited to run their project.

Some found the additional pressure of collecting evaluation data or survey information on top of organising and running an event, as well as asking for permission to take photos to use for project reporting, too much to coordinate.

3. Communication with the library service

Regular updates were sent from the Library Service Development Manager to keep award beneficiaries and friends groups connected and citywide friends meeting were well attended.

More clarity about communication channels early on would have benefited the projects.

Their ability to communicate regularly with the library team was key to the successful outcome.

The advantages of groups employing the use of a single point of contact or even a project manager was a great benefit in helping mitigate this issue.

4. Navigating Council departments

There were varying difficulties in facilitating communication between council departments and getting sign off to put in place structures or changes e.g., Horfield fence, Clifton projector and music licencing. This was particularly difficult where there were staff redeployed during Covid, or when staff were furloughed or off work.

It was apparent that the complexities of dealing with multiple services and departments, and indeed, even that they would need to be involved at all, with groups assuming that the library service had more control in certain areas than they do, was not well understood, and so not considered with project plans and timescales.

Groups that already had established links with other service areas were much better placed to navigate these complexities but without these contacts considerable time and capacity were needed to navigate council departments, procedures, and policies and in many cases library staff were needed to enable this.

5. Being adaptable

Several of the projects had to change their aims to suit the community – particularly the age range of their audience. Organisations such as Imayla, an established agency working with young people, already had the necessary procedures and DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) clearance in place for staff to work with under 18s. The young person project at Bishopston considered the additional time to set up for working with under 18s and opted not to. One of the projects (Knowle Friends of) worked with other established organisations who came in to deliver elements of the project with young people. Henleaze reported an additional unexpected element to the project running a young person workshop that required additional safeguarding checks to be in place.

Those groups able to adapt to changing circumstances have been able to complete their projects successfully.

6. Legacy

Some projects had the potential to continue but there was not enough support built into the Innovation Fund project from the libraries team. This was due to library service capacity issues (re-opening after Covid) and lack of available budget to support continued work. So, unfortunately the majority of projects have ended without legacy activity.

Although the legacy work is still to be developed from the libraries side, there was a continuation of the Imayla project (where they funded it), and the Brave Bold Drama project (Arts council funded). Horfield Friends did secure the Government High Street funds to use the garden space for attracting people back onto the high street. Whitchurch friends successfully bid for CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funds to build benches on the area outside library to make a more welcoming space.

7. Friends Groups and Community Groups

The Friends groups were often dependent on key members to mobilise activity, many of whom, have free time to devote to the group and projects. The Friends groups have often, but not always, struggled to engage a younger or more diverse membership. Friends of Bristol Libraries groups have formed, in many cases, from a group of individuals who come together often with many viewpoints and ideas which may not be compatible, and which is not apparent from the start. The community groups that were awarded funds were established and coherent with a single vision for the project.

There was an advantage of having a Project manager or at least a committed person with capacity to oversee a project which, as Friends groups are volunteers is not always possible.

The value of community or Friends groups having a connection to an established organisation such as the library service, increases their visibility in the sector and add an element of credibility, and is a great advantage in seeking further partnerships or applying for further grants.

There is often an assumption amongst community groups/Friends that the library service has more within its 'gift' whereas in fact they do not have the power to make decisions about land around the library or to the fabric of building.

Communication, setting parameters, expectations and clear responsibilities need defining early on. As well as understanding the role of the library and its priorities, there was on occasion a clash in aims when the library service has a universal and statutory responsibility and as a council department must comply with council guidelines.

8. Young People

We need to consider how we communicate better with young people, as it is apparent many do not know what is on offer at libraries.

We also need to consider how we involve young people in the development of our services and provide the spaces they would like to engage in.

<https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/6683-my-library-my-space-report>

What next - recommendations

The Bristol Libraries Innovation Fund Project has produced a number of learning points for the service and the communities of Bristol, which will support the development of a new Library Strategy that will follow from 2024.

The recommendations include:

- Consideration of how Bristol Libraries will facilitate more coherent communication between the areas of the service and council departments that work with communities.
- Continued conversations with local groups and library friends to create opportunities to maximise use of library spaces outside of staffed hours.
- Continued consideration of how we can make access easier for groups, for both buildings and through our hire processes.
- Collection of data that can support community groups and friends to evidence impact of activity.
- Improved collection of data for the library service to evidence use by all our communities.
- Focused engagement of young people to be active participants following up on the recommendations from the Rising Report and learning from Bishopston Library Friends.
- Events/Activities do not need to be traditionally 'library relevant,' in fact things not within service scope can draw in different audiences.
- Continued focus on working with Friends and community groups to animate libraries as neighbourhood spaces.

What innovations came out of the project, can these be replicated and what would be needed to replicate them?

Since completing the project and finalising the report the Library Management Team have reflected further on how the Innovation Fund was delivered, what projects or elements of projects were innovative and how these innovations can be replicated or embedded across the service. Also,

importantly, what does the service need to be able to continue to work with communities to ensure their involvement in helping to shape and add value to the library service offer.

What innovations came out of the project?

Whilst some projects involved innovative approaches to engagement or the types of activity that could occur in libraries to broaden their appeal the true innovation was in the overall project itself. Making available funds for Friends Groups and Community Groups to bid for to run their own projects was in and of itself a highly innovative approach for a Library service to take. As can be seen from the learning it necessitated a rethink of what a library space could be and how library staff could work with their communities. Allowing groups to get involved to such an extent and with the level of funding assigned to the project was a new, bold, and untried path. The emphasis on empowering Friends and other groups to try new things, to experiment, take risks and support them to take risks was inherently innovative. Lessons were learnt from both what went well and what did not go so well but all learning is valuable and will inform future work.

To continue, replicate and embed learnings we need.

- A network of library Friends Groups- Having the Friends and other Community partners to plan, promote, deliver, and staff events and activities is necessary for activity to continue as there is not the capacity within library staffing to pick up and continue the work they do. We are extremely grateful to all our Friends and partners that provide this valuable extra activity. We are still working toward the ambition of having a Friends Group for every one of our libraries.
- Regular Networking opportunities for Friends Groups. The success and popularity of the regular City-Wide Friends Group meetings to which other award beneficiaries were also invited was invaluable to ensure that individuals and groups felt part of a wider project and network. It affords the opportunity to share ideas and best practice as well as make contacts and get inspired by what other people are doing. The library team were also able to pass on information, knowledge, and training at such events, so we intend to continue these. A celebration event was held at Junction 3 Library in April 2023 to which all Friends groups and other organisations who were awarded funding were invited to showcase their activity. This in person event was well attended.
- Skilled, knowledgeable staff dedicated to supporting community engagement. Though significantly reduced, our Reader Engagement Team, and our two Library Development Officers, still prioritise work with the Friends, encouraging new Friends Groups and other community engagement work outside of the library. However, they are spread thin and do not benefit from the support of the Library Innovation and Learning Manager, a temporary post that has now ended that was created to oversee the whole Innovation Fund project, providing advice to the Library team on due diligence, DBS and risk, managing the funding itself and ensuring that projects were kept on track and evaluated. Without this dedicated role or reinstating a third Library Development Officer, it is much harder to continue to support the Friends, encourage new friends' groups and engage in outreach to work with new community organisations or groups with a sense of consistency across the whole city.
- Funding. It has become clear since the end of the project that without the promise of funding for projects many groups have stalled or projects that were intended to continue stopped. Further funding either through the service or from other funding streams such as

CIL or grant making bodies is required to maintain impetus and provide a solid reason for groups to maintain contact and communication.

Section 3 - Library Strategy (Slides 23 – 27)

Current Strategy

The Library Strategy was completed after the citywide engagement of 2019. Community led meetings were held in each of the 27 library areas, often led by community groups. Cabinet approved it in February 2020. The service had been without a strategy for a while, and it was a positive outcome of the engagement.

As we near the end of 2023, we are considering how and when to refresh the current strategy. We have included a review of the strategy actions in the data pack, with progress to date.

- There are twenty-three measures of success in current strategy – 19 have been delivered or completed.
- Some measures e.g., introducing Wi Fi printing were delayed due to the Windows 10 rollout but should be completed in this budget year.
- Only one measure has not yet been started (IT satisfaction survey) as we wanted time for customers to get used to the new Windows 10 machines and Wi Fi printing to be in place.
- There are three amber actions (Quality of Life satisfaction survey, number of volunteers and work with partner agencies).

Some of the delivery of the Strategy was delayed or affected by the Covid pandemic but there is progress as we return to the pre-Covid levels of satisfaction. The Library Service has used the annual planning of the service plan to focus on delivering the Library Strategy and this has also included a refresh of the data we collect and how it is collected. This has highlighted some future work on how we collect more accurate data from external bookings or Friends Groups so that we can demonstrate the use of libraries out of hours.

We are also aware that the collection of data tells only one side of the story and would like to collect more examples of impact. We were asked to do a case study of our Reading Friends Project by The Reading Agency. This project was grant funded by the Reading Agency and aimed at combating isolation and the detrimental effect isolation has on wellbeing, which was particularly apparent during the Covid Pandemic. Our online Reading Friends activities, an Arts & Crafts group, 'Journalling for Wellbeing' and 'Write On,' an online writing group are still going strong.

Refreshed Strategy Priorities Post 2024

Context

There are a number of changes since the creation of the Strategy in 2020 that would need to be referenced in the refreshed or new Strategy from 2024.

New corporate strategy

Bristol City Council has a new Corporate Strategy (2022 – 2027) with refreshed themes.

The Corporate Strategy outlines a vision of driving an inclusive, sustainable, and healthy city of hope and aspiration where everyone can share the city's success. It also describes the activities we must do by law.

It is based on a wide-ranging review of evidence and needs-assessments and was co-created through a series of engagement events with elected political leaders, citizens, partners, and staff from across the council.

The Corporate Strategy's main priorities are informed by 5 key principles that influence everything we do:

- Development and delivery
- Environmental sustainability
- Equality and inclusion
- Resilience
- World-class employment

It is also arranged around 7 main themes:

Children and young people: A city where every child belongs and every child gets the best start in life, whatever circumstances they were born into.

Economy and skills: Economic growth that builds inclusive and resilient communities, decarbonises the city and offers equity of opportunity.

Environment and sustainability: Decarbonise the city, support the recovery of nature and lead a just transition to a low-carbon future.

Health, care, and wellbeing: Tackle health inequalities to help people stay healthier and happier throughout their lives.

Homes and communities: Healthy, resilient, and inclusive neighbourhoods with fair access to decent, affordable homes.

Transport and connectivity: A more efficient, sustainable, and inclusive connection of people to people, people to jobs and people to opportunity.

Effective development organisation: From city government to city governance: creating a focussed council that empowers individuals, communities, and partners to flourish and lead.

[Corporate Strategy \(bristol.gov.uk\)](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/corporate-strategy)

[Corporate Strategy 2022-27 \(bristol.gov.uk\)](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/corporate-strategy-2022-27)

The Library Service is specifically mentioned in Homes and Communities:

HC5 p/46 Community Participation (Homes and Communities)

We will build further on projects such as the School Streets and the Community Toilet programme, as well as innovative approaches to developing parks, play areas, libraries and community hubs and facilities for people to share neighbourhood spaces in an accessible way.

This relates directly to the aims of the Library Strategy and the aims of the Innovation Fund, to work more closely with communities and promote libraries as community resources.

Peer Challenge 2022 recommendations

We were successful in bidding for an LGA (Local Government Authority) online peer challenge in 2022. Experienced elected member and officer peers deliver peer challenges. The make-up of the peer team reflects the council's requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected based on their relevant experience and expertise and the peer team membership was agreed with the council. The peers who delivered the peer challenge in Bristol were:

Dawn Winter, Sandwell Council, Business Manager - Libraries and Archives

Councillor Andrew Western Leader of Trafford Council and LGA Labour Lead and Deputy Chair on Culture, Tourism, Sport Board.

Lynne Taylor, Relationship Manager - Arts Council England, Southwest.

Robert Hathaway, LGA Associate.

After an intensive two days of interviews and workshops, the following recommendations emerged.

1. Revise or rewrite the Library Strategy in line with Corporate Strategy and emerging Estates Rationalisation proposals. Ensure there is a strong and compelling narrative for libraries to be strong deliverers and enablers in cross-cutting themes such as Children and Young People, Economy, Skills, and Health, Care & Well Being.
2. Ensure that the revised Library Strategy is supported by an appropriate Delivery Plan to realise the vision. Where relevant, ensure that the library service is flexible where it can be on its demands for space and staffing facilities.
3. Provide significant opportunities for member engagement to help build cross party ownership, trust, and confidence for the future of Bristol's libraries including Scrutiny, task and finish groups and member seminars, as necessary.

The Corporate Strategy has been refreshed and unfortunately the Library Service does not have the visibility requested above, in other directorates. The work through Corporate Landlord does have impact on the service as we are in 27 buildings or spaces. The rationalisation of council buildings may affect some library buildings in the future, but we are working closely with Property to understand the timescales for any change.

Libraries are an early intervention service for many other services and contribute to supporting health and wellbeing, digital and social isolation, and education outcomes. Whilst this is hard to evidence and measure, a free universal service is vital to communities having resourcing and space to achieve their full potential.

Impact of the pandemic, changing use of libraries

After two years of interrupted service and unprecedented change for residents and staff, visitor numbers and the cycle of visiting the library have changed. We have been seeing less visits but more issues of material as residents visit less frequently but take more. We have also seen a huge increase

in online membership and use of e-resources (eBooks, eAudio and eNewspapers). This is apparent in the statistics in the data pack.

Events were only reinstated in April 2022, and we are still seeing a gradual return to pre-Covid levels of engagement. Whilst we have good audiences for daytime events we are still struggling, as are other library services and cultural venues, to attract an audience in the evening.

The use of spaces is also changing, with demand for seating, collaboration spaces, facilities such as toilets and refreshments and sockets for their own devices. This has been a gradual change before Covid, but the rising cost of living highlighted the importance of having a free warm neutral space for communities.

Cost of living crisis

The Cost-of-Living Crisis in the winter of 2022/23 gave rise to the initiative of Welcoming or Warm Spaces. These began in community venues and were championed by Local Authorities. This gave libraries a higher profile in welcoming residents into buildings that were open to the public. We started a coat swap, marble gifting in Central Café and provided jigsaws.

The Friends Groups in Hillfields, Clifton and Shirehampton successfully bid for Welcoming Spaces funding to provide activities, hot drinks, and support on days the libraries were not usually open. This was a successful outcome from the Innovation Fund as Friends Groups were confident about bidding for additional funds and delivering new activities.

Engagement

The previous Library Strategy was created following an intense period of citywide engagement around all 27 libraries. In 2019, we had the support of a project team to engage with residents in each library area, and a project budget to fund the engagement and creation of the Library Strategy. Key anchor organisations were funded to lead the community conversations. We also worked with Rising Arts to do a specific project with young people at Junction 3 as we had identified a gap in use from 16-24. This is unlikely to be the case in 2024/2025.

We need to consider how we will engage with Bristol City residents and library customers as well as our partners and residents who have yet to use us. We also need to consider the capacity of the service and the cost of engagement.

Timescales

The current Library Strategy is 2020-2024. We have been in touch with colleagues in the Policy Team who recommend any work should start after the new administration is in place following the May 2024 elections. We would plan to begin work in the Summer of 2024 with a refreshed draft Strategy available in the new year 2025.

Contact Details

Kate Murray Head of Libraries k.murray@bristol.gov.uk

Leon Flower Service Development Manager leon.flower@bristol.gov.uk

20th November 2023