

Libraries Strategy

2024-28



Introduction

Located within the heart of communities, Cheshire East libraries provide a rich selection of free resources and support in welcoming accessible and social spaces, that facilitate events and collaborative working. Funded by local government, library services are determined at a local level by the priorities of the council and reflective of the needs of residents. There is also a wider national network of libraries. Arts Council England (ACE) is the national development agency for libraries in England and in this capacity, it offers support to the development of public libraries through funding, advocacy, and collaboration.

In 2018 Libraries Connected was created as the national sector support organisation for public libraries in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, partly funded by ACE. The Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) published the 2014 Independent Library Report for England, set up the Libraries Taskforce and published the strategy Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 – 2021. That strategy describes libraries as 'vital community hubs – bringing people together and giving them access to the services and support they need to help them live better.

DCMS has a statutory duty to superintend and promote the improvement of public library services provided by local authorities

in England'. However, as part of a national network, the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport provides leadership and advocates on behalf of the sector.

Cheshire East Council has a legal duty under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964 to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all those who live, work or study in the borough. The council also has a 'public sector equality duty' under Section 149 of the Equality Act, therefore this strategy is based on evidence of need.

This strategy has been developed following the library service review in 2023 when feedback from the public consultation demonstrated that libraries are vitally important to Cheshire East residents. However, unprecedented financial challenges have meant that reductions in the budget for libraries will require the service to be run in a different way to maintain this valued offer where it is most needed across the borough.

A further consultation was run in mid-2024 informed by a draft strategy document and the feedback from this has helped to shape the final version. The results of this consultation can be found in the **Library Strategy Consultation 2024 - Full report** (cheshireeast.gov.uk/consultations)



What we do

"Libraries not only provide access to books and other literature but also help people to help themselves and improve their opportunities, bring people together, and provide practical support and guidance."

Libraries Deliver:
Ambition for Public Libraries in England, DCMS



**Libraries
Connected**

Vision

Cheshire East libraries will become the venue of choice for enabling and connecting residents to enrich their lives. Our library spaces and services will continue to develop to meet the needs of our communities.

Cheshire East libraries core offer:

Providing safe accessible spaces for everyone with access to:

- A wide range of books and digital resources for all ages available to borrow or download at no cost
- Reputable sources of information and help to navigate these from trained staff able to signpost to other sources of help and advice if required
- A request service for items not available locally
- Free Wi-Fi
- Access to PCs and printing facilities
- A range of activities and events promoting reading, culture and creativity and supporting health and wellbeing

Our core offer is underpinned by the universal offers established by Libraries Connected in partnership with Arts Council England and the Reading Agency and demonstrating the power of public libraries to enable individuals and communities.

Universal Library offers:



Health and Wellbeing **Healthier, Happier, Connected**

To support through the offer of early intervention and prevention the health and wellbeing of local people and communities through services that inform, engage and connect.



Reading **Engage, Imagine, Discover**

To build a literate and confident society by developing, delivering and promoting creative reading activities in libraries.



Information and Digital **Inform, Inspire, Innovate**

To ensure local communities have access to quality information and digital services, to learn new skills and to feel safe online.



Culture and Creativity **Explore, Create, Participate**

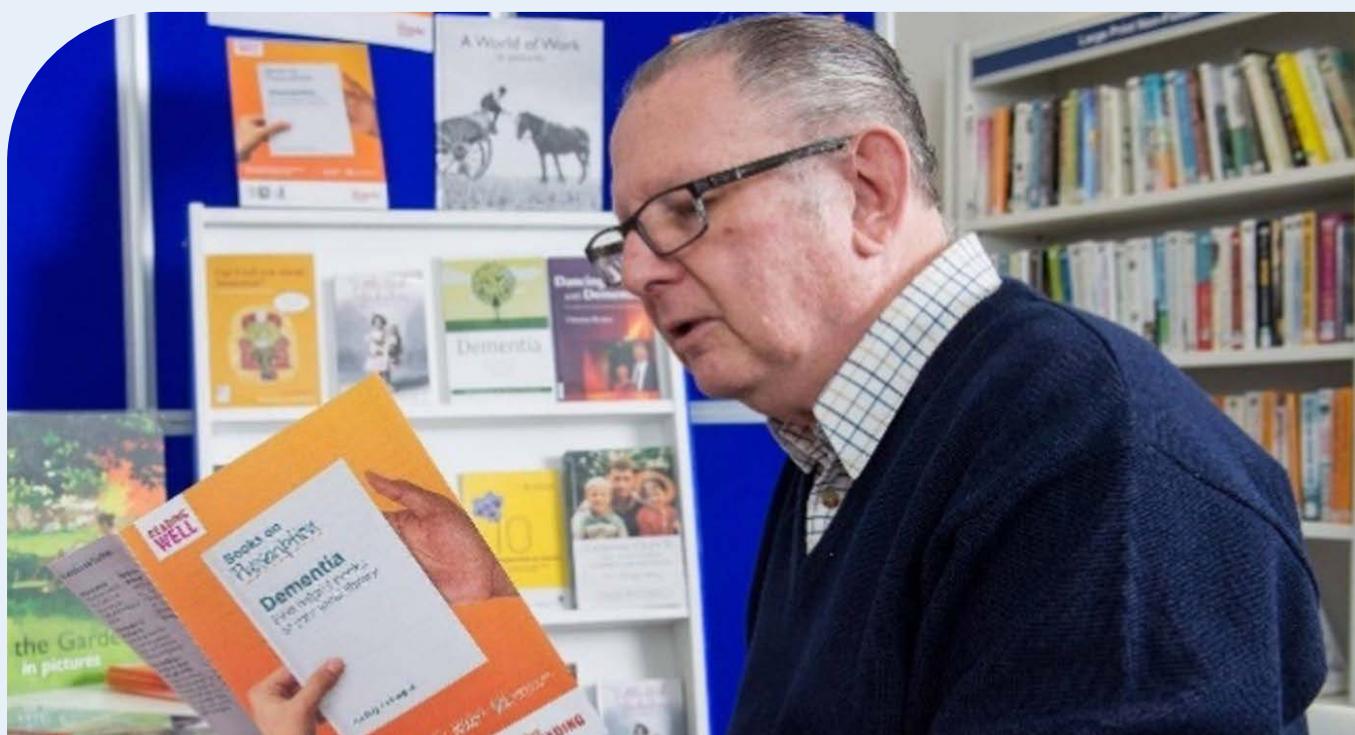
To enable local communities to access and participate in a variety of quality and diverse arts and cultural experiences through local libraries.



Cheshire East libraries offer by user group

Libraries have an offer for a range of different user groups from early years, parents, workers through to the retired and those more vulnerable people in our communities. The table below sets out the 'core offer' to some of these groups.

	Users need	Libraries deliver
 <h2>Early Years</h2>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Digital literacy • Family activities • Life skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories & Songs • Rhymetime • Summer reading challenge • Code clubs • Volunteering
 <h2>Active Learners</h2>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study space • Connectivity • Careers • Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Wi-Fi & Computers • Free study space • Books & E-resources • Homework clubs • Social spaces • Reading ahead & quick reads
 <h2>Active Citizens</h2>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community • Business support • Family activities • Learning • Health & Wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Wi-Fi & Computers • Local information • Customer Service Points • Books & E-resources • Job clubs • Health advice
 <h2>Active Ageing</h2>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Digital literacy • Family activities • Health & Wellbeing • Social activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free Wi-Fi & computers • Health information • Books & E-resources • Events & activities • Social and warm spaces • Home library service



Strategy development - guiding principles

In developing the strategy, we have considered best practice guidance as published by Libraries Connected and have used the following design principles so that it:

- Meets statutory requirements
- Is shaped by local need, supported by consultation and engagement
- Has a clear focus on public benefit and delivers a high-quality experience for residents that will help the service maintain provision where it is most needed
- Makes decisions on service provision informed by evidence
- Supports the delivery of the universal offers for public libraries in England
- Promotes partnership working and enterprise and innovation and;
- Delivers the service in the most cost-effective way whilst being well positioned to secure future investment funding

Strategy objectives

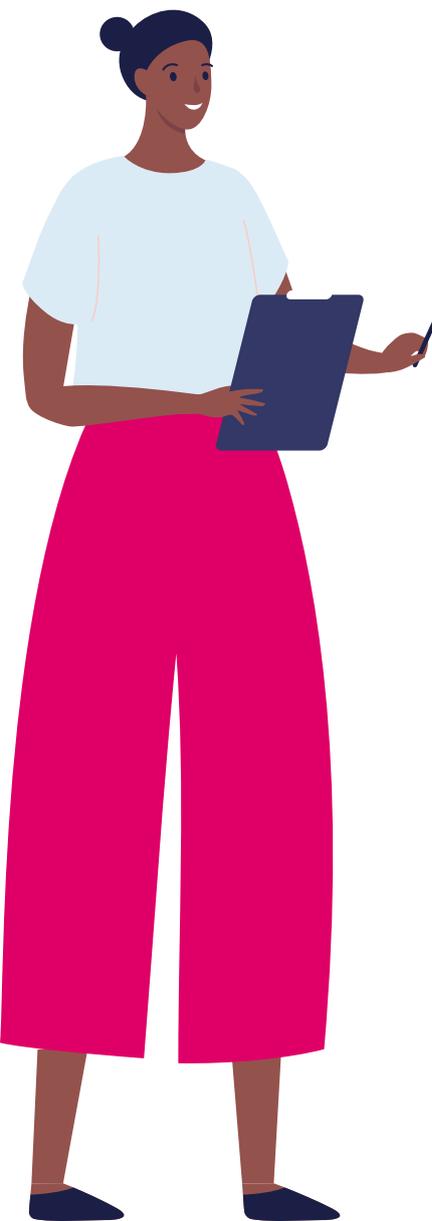
To align the library service's future potential with the Corporate Plan objectives, and other strategies in place across the council, which libraries already play a role in delivering against, the service has worked collaboratively with colleagues from the council's customer services, public health, adults and children's and families teams and the council's leisure provider to devise a set of objectives. These objectives were shared as part of the public consultation and 81% of respondents supported them.

The objectives of the strategy are as follows;

- To maintain the service, offer for all and enhance it through the introduction of other complementary council services focused on enabling customers and public health and wellbeing - in locations where it is needed the most;
- To offer a library service delivered in partnership with local councils, communities and organisations with similar aims;
- To actively promote the service, increasing visitors and becoming more accessible to residents through the use of new technologies and;
- To ensure that the service continues to be affordable for the residents of Cheshire East in the context of the council's financial position.

Our new strategy will ensure Cheshire East can deliver a high-quality library service sustainable into the future while remaining relevant to the changing needs of residents.

We will work in partnership with communities to ensure our libraries remain closely aligned to local needs. As proposals progress, appropriate consultation will be undertaken, and any identified equalities issues addressed.



Alignment to council's Transformation Plan

The council is embarking on a significant transformation journey which will be delivered over the same period as this strategy and beyond.

It is envisaged that libraries either in terms of the services offered now or in the future or by virtue of their central locations within the borough's towns will be a core part of the delivery of several aspects of the associated transformation plan. This plan has now been approved for implementation.

There will be a keen focus on how libraries play a role in the provision of targeted and needs based services, specifically both the promotion and delivery of early intervention and prevention activity, working jointly with the council's adult and children's social care and Public Health teams, alongside other partner organisations such as the NHS.

Through the objectives and guiding principles, adopting the strategy will establish the further development and implementation of the service offers at each library site and will therefore be a core part of this transformation process as it continues to evolve in its own right.

Alternative delivery model

The preferred alternative service delivery model is to move wherever possible to a community managed basis across all sites.

This is defined as a joint working arrangement between Cheshire East Council and the respective local councils where both parties provide funding towards maintaining staffed service provision and hence having a formal say in relation to the services provided and how their local site is further supported and promoted. This is whilst also enabling, developing and maintaining an appropriate level of community or volunteer led involvement for each site.

This model has been successfully promoted across all those sites assigned to Tier 3 with several having been established in Tier 1 in 2023.

The community managed approach was the most supported alternative service delivery model option presented through the public consultation.

In addition to this the strategy provides the framework for the promotion of a structured commercial approach with the next steps to develop a clear plan for driving income generation to support service delivery.



Use of technology

There are opportunities to utilise technology to extend the opening times of libraries which has been deployed in other local authorities. This currently comes with a range of constraints.

There will be a need to develop a clear business case for any such investment, including a clear understanding of upfront and ongoing costs.

The use of technology to maintain unstaffed opening hours was not supported through the public consultation, with several issues raised around security.

As such from a strategy perspective the use of technology will be explored further and where appropriate considered initially on a trial basis prior to any wider commitment being considered.

Tier System

Cheshire East Libraries Service will be delivered through a tiered system, branded and promoted in four distinct tiers. This approach aligns to the Corporate Plan priority of **“enabling a sustainable financial future for the council, through service development, improvement and transformation”** while also considering the increasing service demands and local needs, in the context of different delivery approaches.

The introduction of a tier system and assigning individual libraries to the first three tiers takes into consideration:

- Current site usage levels
- Customer service demands
- Digital inclusion
- Public health metrics
- Overall, the introduction of a tiered approach to the provision of library services was supported through the public consultation



Tier 1 Library Hubs

Centrally located in the largest towns in Cheshire East. These libraries will offer the broadest range of both enhanced library and wider council customer and health and wellbeing services, retaining the current longest opening hours. They will be modelled on 'community hubs' focused on supporting people to help themselves and each other, working with them to solve their problems and build knowledge, understanding and resilience. These libraries will be the initial focus of investment to maximise their potential to provide spaces for the benefit of complementary community usage as well as income generation.

They will provide the existing core library service as listed on page 3 offer plus offer free support around:

- **Employment, Skills and Education** - basic literacy and numeracy, digital inclusion
- **Personal finances** - debt advice, fuel poverty, food aid
- **Community services (third party)** - banking hubs, Post Office services
- **Health** - social prescriber, blood pressure checks, NHS support

They will provide opportunities for co-location delivering the likes of Family Hub Connect services. With investment, it is intended to expand the commercial offer at these libraries.

The Tier 1 sites will include – Congleton, Crewe, Macclesfield, Nantwich and Wilmslow.

Tier 1 Usage stats October 2023 – September 2024

Site	Visitors	Issues	Customer Experience	Registered Members	Computer Use	Adult Event Attendees	Children's Event Attendees
Tier Total	640,628	832,492	17,775	68,452	35,960	13,238	51,669
% of borough's use delivered within Tier 1 sites	58%	53%	53%	57%	64%	45%	44%



Tier 2 Local Libraries

Located in smaller towns, with opening hours aligned to the periods of highest demand. The libraries will deliver the current core library and council's customer service offer plus some of the complementary services at specific sites defined by the need for that area.

The Tier 2 sites will include – Alsager, Holmes Chapel, Knutsford Middlewich, Poynton and Sandbach.

Tier 2 Usage stats October 2023 – September 2024

Site	Visitors	Issues	Customer Experience	Registered Members	Computer Use	Adult Event Attendees	Children's Event Attendees
Tier Total	359,602	592,272	14,060	38,894	15,242	12,045	47,861
% of borough's use delivered within Tier 2 sites	33%	38%	42%	33%	27%	41%	41%



*Prestbury Library is considered as a tier 2 site but as it is independently funded is not considered within the data sets.



Tier 3 Community Libraries (Community managed libraries)

Located in smaller communities and villages these sites will be staffed by Cheshire East Council employees for a maximum of 1.5 days per week to offer core library and the council's customer service functions and a small range of activities. Communities will be encouraged to complement this offer through working with either individual or multiple town and parish councils and other community groups located in their area to facilitate self-service access to library services. This would include the issue and return of books, information and e-resources, access to IT, study spaces and community use space. They will provide a venue for events facilitated by the community and for council pop-up helpdesks as and when the need arises. .

The Tier 3 sites will include – Alderley Edge, Bollington, Disley and Handforth.

Tier 3 Usage stats October 2023 – September 2024

Site	Visitors	Issues	Customer Experience	Registered Members	Computer Use	Adult Event Attendees	Children's Event Attendees
Tier Total	100,415	152,335	1,663	11,808	4,660	4,093	16,913
% of borough's use delivered within Tier 3 sites	9%	10%	5%	10%	8%	14%	15%

Tier 4 Libraries Direct

Delivered by the existing mobile library, the most rural localities in the borough will have access to a timetabled library service stopping in their community on a 3-weekly basis. This service will provide access to books and information and some customer service point functions.

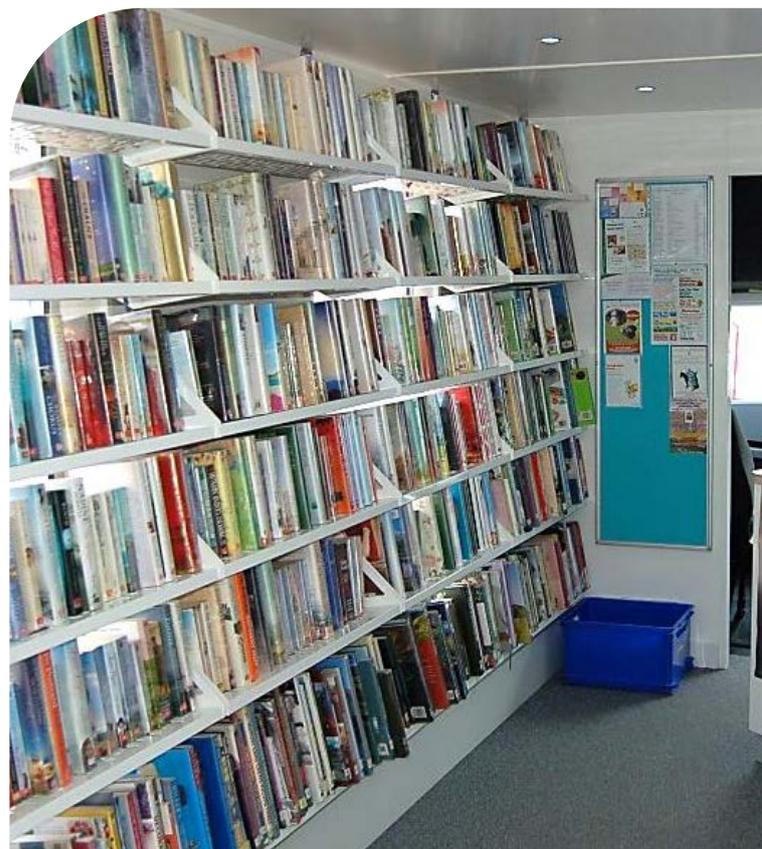
The Home Library Service – co-ordinated by library staff and delivered by volunteers – will continue to deliver books and information to those who can no longer leave their own homes.

Online services

Our online library service will continue to be always available providing easy access to information, online reference resources, the downloading of e-books, e-audio books and e-magazines and for ordering hard copy resources via the library catalogue.

Volunteers

Cheshire East Libraries currently use volunteers to support several parts of our service. The home library service is delivered entirely by volunteers, the Summer Reading Challenge for children relies heavily on volunteer support, and we have recruited volunteer 'IT Buddies' in many of our libraries to support customers in using our PCs and their own devices. We will continue to recruit and train volunteers, either directly or by working in partnership with local councils and community organisations to support the delivery of library services and activities.



Supporting the wider objectives of the Corporate Plan 2021-25

This strategy will direct the evolution and adaptation of the library service in Cheshire East to better support a much broader range of the council's priorities as identified in the Corporate Plan 2021-25.

Listen, learn, and respond to our residents, promoting opportunities for a two-way conversation.

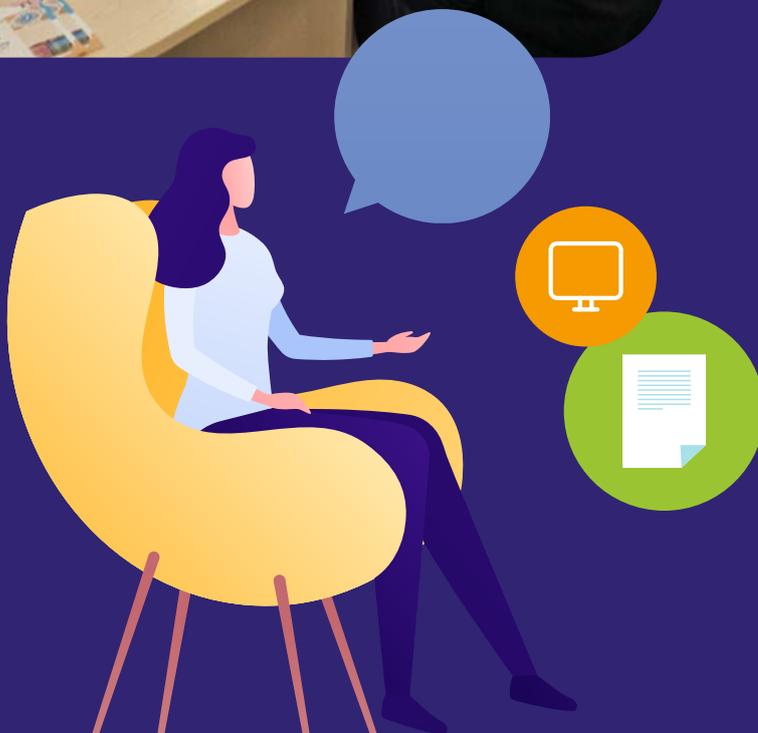
Many of our libraries are Cheshire East Council customer service points offering 'face to face' support and signposting for those who require it, while promoting council services.



Work together with our residents and our partners to support people and communities to be strong and resilient.

Libraries help keep residents informed by providing them with access to a wide range of information both in hard copy and digitally, ranging from online sources such as Which; Access to Research and Ancestry through to consultation documents.

They provide spaces for people to meet, access to free Wi-Fi and computers and offer Basic ICT support, if required. They host a range of 'pop-up' helpdesks enabling partner organisations and those commissioned by Cheshire East to offer 'face to face' advice and guidance in an easily accessible place. Library staff are trained to signpost residents to further help when required.



Reduce health inequalities across the borough.

Libraries provide a wide range of resources that residents can use as “self-help” to manage medical conditions. These include the nationally recognised Books on Prescription collections selected by GPs as additional support for a variety of medical conditions.

Library staff facilitate an extensive programme of events that aid wellbeing and can be accessed by all residents without the need for a referral. Examples of these include mindfulness, bibliotherapy and colouring for relaxation. Free access to ICT enables those who are digitally excluded to access digital channels of communication eg the NHS app to book appointments or order prescriptions.

Working in partnership with Springboard, several Cheshire East libraries offer work clubs supporting residents with job searching, new qualifications, CV writing and interview skills.



Support all children to have the best start in life.

Libraries help support children from birth onwards by providing high-quality book stock to encourage early language and literacy and foster a love of reading. Cheshire East libraries deliver an extensive programme of activities for all ages, examples include baby bounce; rhyme times; Lego clubs; school readiness activities and a range of STEAM skill activities.

We work with schools across the borough to offer a programme of class visits for pupils in reception through to high school. Our libraries provide a safe space for tutors to teach excluded pupils and provide volunteering opportunities for young people aged 12 years+ to gain valuable experience and develop life skills.

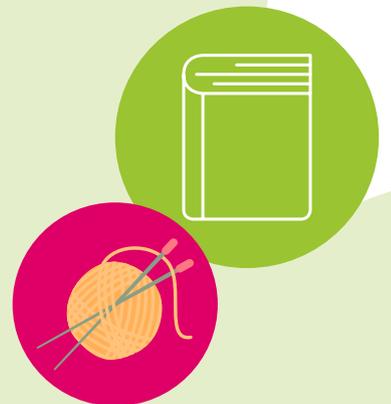
We are working in partnership with the Family Hub collaborative to ensure we complement both services' offers by maximising the support and facilities to children and families where it is needed most and are exploring options around co-location as part of the Family Hub Connect model. This has been considered in respect to establishing the tiers.



Reduce the reliance on long-term care by improving services closer to home and providing more extra care facilities, including dementia services.

The service helps support older and vulnerable people to live safely and maintain their independence by providing a safe and accessible place for them to visit to socialise or to seek advice as frequently as they wish. Library staff are available to assist with enquiries, help access resources or to signpost to other sources of help if necessary.

Our programme of low-cost activities, including knit and natter, IT and tea, community coffee mornings and crafternoon, are open to all and help mitigate loneliness while providing an opportunity to learn new skills. The Home Library Service delivered by library volunteers to residents across the borough helps combat isolation, while ensuring those who are unable to leave their own homes don't miss out on access to a regular supply of reading material.



Implementation, promotion and continuous review

As part of the council's commitment to ***“providing a high-quality accessible library service, that remains relevant to the changing needs of Cheshire East residents and delivers value for money”*** we will continue to ensure we are aware of the changing needs of residents and provide opportunities for them to be actively engaged in future service design by:

- Building on the work undertaken to date continue to engage with local councils and communities to seek further opportunities for joint working to enhance the overall service offer
- Encouraging feedback on our service
- Evaluating events and activities
- Monitoring our mobile library stops every 6 months to check continued viability
- Conducting a library survey every two years to see what library users and non-users think about our libraries, the results of which inform future library strategies



Promotional activities

The library service already undertakes a significant amount of promotional activity through the likes of different social media channels alongside a regular online newsletter. It is recognised however that this can be improved upon to further increase usage, particularly as the service offer increases.

Work is already underway to develop and refresh webpages. This work considers how the library events, activities and online resources are promoted. New webpages will go live aligned to the branding contained within the strategy in late 2024, implementation of operational changes to begin from January 2025.

The webpages will also be adapted to reflect the ongoing development of a joint service offer with the likes of Family Hubs, promotion of activities to be delivered under the One You contract banner and where appropriate the presence of community and private sector businesses.

Measuring our performance

We will measure our performance using a range of key performance indicators as well as qualitative feedback through regular user surveys. We will continue to benchmark our service within the national sector using data provided by Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and Libraries Connected and will report on progress annually to the council's environment and neighbourhoods committee.

Delivery of the library strategy will be incorporated into the annual neighbourhood services plan, which runs from April to March each year and the associated annual revenue budget for the library service. Improvements to the service will be introduced as opportunities and resources allow.

The assignment of library sites to each of the first three tiers will be reviewed when preparing the next iteration of the strategy, against the same broad criteria used to define the current tiers and with an updated data set.

We will develop a proactive communications plan to make residents aware of how they can benefit from the library offer. This will be developed in support of and alongside the implementation of the strategy and will include marketing via traditional methods, social media and through partner organisations.



