Appendix A2

Towards the next chapter for our libraries



A draft strategy for Bristol City Council's library service
October 2026



1. Introduction

Welcome

Thank you for joining in

Last year, we started a big conversation about the next five years for Bristol Libraries and asked for your help. Thank you to the thousands of you who took part.

We had initial thoughts about what the future might be for our libraries but wanted to know what you thought. The message came back loud and clear:

- you care about your libraries and want better
- you want more opening hours and more going on
- you want us to improve our buildings
- you want things to change, but in the right way

We've taken that all on board and have now developed this draft strategy which summarises how we want the library service to develop. Over the next few months, we'll continue talking to everyone involved in making it all happen to help refine our final strategy, together with all the detailed plans for getting it underway.

From the start, we made it clear that we are not planning to reduce our funding for libraries and so we have set out to find ways of delivering the changes that you want within our current resources. That means we'll be taking people up on their offers to help us deliver a service that we can all be proud of.

Councillor Stephen Williams
Chair of Public Health and Communities Committee

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Introduction

Towards a new strategy

Every few years the Council updates its long-term plans for the library service. To aid the conversation with the people who live, work and study in Bristol, we developed an outline strategy in 2025 to test out with people.

It was worked on by an all-party group of councillors who reviewed the purpose of the library service and what its focus should be. They looked at data on the service and the city and at the results of early discussions with a selection of community groups, other organisations in the city, and with some library users and members of library Friends Groups.

This outline strategy was approved as the basis for use in public feedback. The feedback has now been reviewed and used to turn the outline strategy into a draft strategy. After we've tested the draft strategy further, we'll produce a final library strategy.

The new Draft Library Strategy

The new Draft Library Strategy summarises what people told us and the results of our research.

It aims to respond to the ideas and feedback we've received and chart a new direction for the library service.

The ambition is to build on the strengths and successes of the current library service to deliver even better results for the people who live, work, study and invest in the city.

As the council had no plans to make cuts to the current library service budget, we've come up with ways of transforming the service from within its own resources.

But this does depend on new ways of working for our staff and on the support of the people of Bristol.

About the library service

Books are, of course, central to our libraries, but libraries offer so much more to people, children and families:

- enabling them to enjoy culture and creativity through events and performances organised by the library service and other groups
- helping them with their health and wellbeing through information and the social contact they offer
- giving them access to information and digital services, such as our free public computers and wifi
- helping them with literacy and encouraging the joy of reading, with book groups and talks by authors
- providing vital space for coming together

Libraries also help our children and young people to get a great start in life. They support learning and offer study space. More people are using libraries as places to work and to get business support.



How people use them

Many thousands of people in Bristol use these different services as shown on the right.

There have also been interesting trends. Fewer physical books and other items are being borrowed compared with a few years ago, but the use of eBooks, eAudiobooks and eMagazines has been rocketing up.

We've compared our service with others and found we perform pretty well - but we can improve.



2. What we've heard and found

What people told us

Talking about libraries

We engaged with people through a range of different routes, including:

- a public survey for which we received 2671 responses
- a mini-survey on Extended Access with 456 responses
- workshops with the public, Friends Groups, volunteers and library staff
- a special study aimed at children, young people and their parents
- focus groups in different parts of the city, targeting non-users
- meetings with community groups
- meetings with other public bodies

Thanks to the time people gave, we've heard the views, ideas and concerns of thousands of people. We've summed up the balance of views on the right.

Some of what we heard

- particularly positive feedback for the work and advice from staff and activities such as the Summer Reading Challenge for children
- Bristol's libraries are valued as an essential community asset, even by those who don't use them and get their resources elsewhere
- regret at budget cuts and the resulting shorter opening hours was widespread, the most common complaint we heard
- the quality of our buildings and toilets was raised as frequently
- a greater choice of reading material, including ebooks and eAudiobooks, was the most popular option for change in the survey
- the risk of fines for overdue books was seen as off-putting – especially for those struggling with money
- people wanted more services, events and activities at libraries - in part to encourage them to be used more
- there was feedback, particularly from non-users, that people didn't know what was available at libraries
- a sizeable proportion of non-users thought libraries are out-dated or have nothing to offer them
- people were open to the library service accepting more help from volunteers and communities but not to replace trained staff
- people were against replacing libraries with 'fewer but better' ones.
- organisations were keen to partner up with the service
- the majority of people who use Extended Access which allows people to get in when there are no staff on duty valued this service
- a sizeable minority of users were happy with things as they are

What we found

Our research

We've looked at data on our libraries; experience from elsewhere; and the quality of our library network. This includes:

- figures on how well our services are used and how this compares
- our costs, particular for smaller libraries
- an independent review of our library buildings
- examples of operational practices in other library services, including staffing models and volunteering
- need in the city and how libraries can help to address it
- how libraries support our diverse communities
- how we could improve marketing and social media

Some of what we found out in our research

- all libraries except Central Library are part-time and the 25% reduction in hours in 2016 had a disproportionate impact on some areas
- some of our libraries suffer from very high unit costs and their value-for-money must be improved
- most of our library buildings - some 100 years old or more - are not in ideal locations; have no meeting space; and 13 have no public toilets
- the interiors and exterior signage need investment to bring them up to a good standard; space and layout get in the way of some activities
- we have encouraged more library Friends Groups to start up; some of them have struggled, others are very successful and want to do more
- we have gradually increased the number of volunteers who help with the service, but some other councils benefit from far more support
- most residents don't use our libraries on a regular basis
- some councils have transferred their libraries to community management with mixed results, but some are successful
- some councils have dropped fines for overdue books with positive results, but we would have to find money to cover lost income
- council practices and resources prevent effective marketing
- the library service is not treated as a key cultural asset in the city; it could do so much more for cultural life, learning and the economy

3. What we want to achieve



Being ambitious for the service – and Bristol

Being ambitious

People's feedback and our research suggest that **it's possible to be far more ambitious for what the library service could achieve.**

So we've upped the level of aspiration in the outcomes we want to see for the library strategy. We want to have a positive impact on the whole city – on everyone's lives.

This will mean shifting our focus **to encouraging people to come together to share the richness that literature, learning, art and culture can offer.**

This will demand a change in the part we play in the life of the city.

Main outcome	Supporting outcomes
People are taking part, whatever their circumstances	• everyone in Bristol is reading – and more widely • children are reading widely throughout their childhood • everyone is making the most of the digital world safely • people are enjoying spending time in our library spaces
People are making things happen in every community	• libraries are reaching every part of each community • communities are making libraries lively, creative spaces • libraries are bringing people together to make the city a better place • people are proud of their libraries' contribution to their communities
We are pulling together to get the most out of our resources	• communities are actively sustaining their libraries • we are sharing our resources to maximum effect • our library services are very well used • we are delivering better value from our resources

What we've ruled out

Deciding on our options

We have used our research and feedback from people to develop a list of potential changes, drawing on what's worked in Bristol and elsewhere.

We've then assessed each option to see if it would help us deliver the outcomes we want from the strategy.

There are a number of options that we've ruled out from the start, as shown on the right.

What this means is that if we want to achieve more, we will have to do so within the same budget. And so we will need to change what we do and how we work.

The options we've ruled out

1. Increasing the library budget is not realistic given the financial pressures on the Council from high-cost services such as adult and children's social care
2. Cutting the library service to deliver savings would not allow us to meet our ambitions for libraries and would lose the long-term benefits to Bristol that libraries bring
3. Closing libraries to invest in fewer but better libraries would limit our ability to reach every part of every community
4. Outsourcing the library service to the private or third sector would be counterproductive as there's no competitive market for library provision; it would take too long; and for little benefit
5. No change is not an option given everything people have told us and what we know about our libraries. Also, too few are taking advantage of everything they offer and represent

We've ruled these changes out, but the remaining options provide a package of changes that could make a big difference – with people's help.

The help we're looking for

There are improvements we want to make, like extending opening hours, investing in more community outreach, and overhauling our online presence.

But if we're working within the same budget, we'll need to find the resources from within the service and our biggest expenditure is on our staff. So that means we'll need to ask our library staff to work differently.

For example, instead of working in teams of two in our smaller libraries we could ask them to work as one member of staff **but** always accompanied by one or more volunteers. That means that our volunteers could free our staff member to concentrate on work that needs their training. Staff time that was released could then be used for priorities such as longer opening hours.

This works elsewhere; we already have many volunteers; and it wouldn't involve cutting our staffing budget.



4. The new strategy



The interlocking circles of our new approach

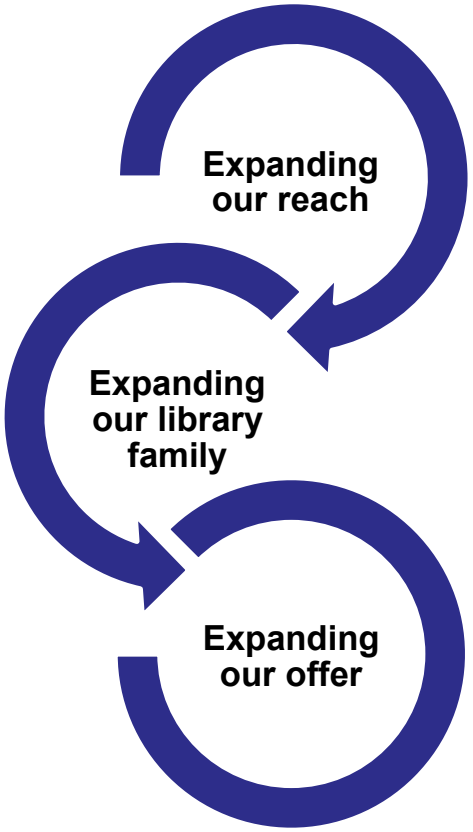
The drive to expand access

A key priority for the all-party group of councillors who worked on the development of the initial 'outline' strategy was a drive to 'expand access'.

This was built into the draft mission for the library service:

> "Our mission is to inspire everyone in the city to read more widely; support those who face additional barriers to get the help they need to thrive; and enable people to come together to make things happen in our communities. We will do this by expanding access to everything that libraries can offer".

Our research confirmed the importance of expanding access and this is at the heart of the strategy with its three themes.



- having the best of our offer in every library
- having more attractive libraries with better facilities
- improving our marketing and outreach

- welcoming help from volunteers, Friends and communities
- working closely with more partners
- freeing staff to focus on what they're trained for

- aiming to open our libraries for the whole day
- offering more cultural activities and events
- championing reading and literacy across the city

Theme 1: plans for expanding our reach

Reaching more, being more open

To reach out more, we'll start by tackling what puts many off, such as fines for overdue books and not having a toilet to use.

The whole experience of visiting will be better by making the entrances more attractive and providing a warm welcome to people visiting. Better signage is a priority, so that we're more visible on the high street.

The interiors need an upgrade with more attractive furniture and artwork. In the longer-term, we will need to find better locations and spaces for some libraries with more sharing of buildings with partners. We'll need to develop an ambitious fundraising strategy and be 'bid-ready' to take opportunities of external funding.

People need to know we're here and what we offer, so we'll also need to get much better at – and freed up to do - marketing and targeting.

What we will do

- ❑ begin a programme of focused improvements to premises, including public toilets wherever we can
- ❑ develop a long-term plan for better locations and space for libraries, ideally with partners
- ❑ overhaul the customer experience, improving our signage, entrances and new staff training
- ❑ invest more in outreach by staff, taking our service out into communities who could benefit most
- ❑ develop a creative plan for engaging with people with better marketing, campaigning and social media
- ❑ aim to abolish fines for late returns of books and minimise room hire charges
- ❑ develop a data and research function to target our work and assemble evidence to support funding bids
- ❑ develop a capital fundraising strategy

To do this, **we'll need to develop much higher expectations** for what our libraries should look and feel like and for the number of people using our services.

Theme 2: plans for expanding our library family

Building our new family

People are passionate about their libraries and what they represent and are keen to share that with others. Libraries build communities and communities build thriving libraries.

We've already got many fantastic volunteers and Friends Groups who are giving up their time. We know from elsewhere that we can encourage many more to help out. We could also work with community groups who would want to get more involved in their library.

Our staff will have help from more volunteers and so will be able to concentrate on the work that they are trained for, such as helping people to make sense of complex online official forms.

There are potential partners who'd like to work more closely with us to offer services, such as for health advice, so that we can make better use of buildings.

What we will do

- ❑ expand the number of volunteers we use with a wider range of roles to suit what they'd like to do
- ❑ strengthen our partnerships with Friends Groups and removing some of the barriers to working together
- ❑ test working with other community groups who'd like to get more involved in running their local libraries
- ❑ do more to celebrate the work of those who selflessly give up their time to help others – and us
- ❑ build more ambitious partnerships to work together on initiatives, both city-wide and local
- ❑ explore opportunities for co-locating and integrating services with our partners
- ❑ free up our staff time to concentrate on the work that needs their particular skills and training
- ❑ explore how we can move more staff resources to the frontline to help us extend opening hours

To do all this, **we'll need to build a 'movement'** that brings together all those who want to foster reading, literacy, learning, creativity – and the imagination.

Theme 3: plans for expanding our offer

Building a bigger offer

If we have a library building in the first place, it should ideally be open all day. This will only be possible if we succeed in extending our library family. We can also make more use of the popular Extended Access service where people use their card to get into a library when it's unstaffed, although it will not suit every library.

Non-users - and even users - have told us they don't know what's on offer, so we will redefine just what people can expect in each library and online. We also need to extend the range of services, particularly to make libraries a bigger part of the city's cultural and creative scene and of each community.

The written and spoken word will remain the core of what we are there for, but we will broaden our horizons beyond what our library buildings and collections offer to encourage everyone in the city to read more - and at every age. Our offer will be about connecting through reading, not just about the act of reading.

What we will do

- ❑ aim for 'all-day' opening across more of our libraries with the help of volunteers, Friends and communities
- ❑ extend and promote the use of Extended Access in suitable libraries where it would have most impact
- ❑ develop a bolder, more engaging library offer with a campaign of 'reading for all'
- ❑ clarify our library offers for learning, well-being and business and what people can expect in each library
- ❑ expand the role of libraries as centres for community action, culture and creativity
- ❑ market our digital offer of ebooks and eAudio and explain better the constraints imposed by publishers
- ❑ examine where we need to invest more in reading materials and raise capital for investment in more physical stock

This will involve rethinking how we judge success – ultimately, **we want everyone in Bristol to enjoy reading more**, however often they visit our libraries.

How big a change will this be?

On the one hand …

Most of these proposals are not that new for Bristol:

- we already have dozens of volunteers and twelve Friends Groups that help out with our work
- we already have libraries in community centres, and a new one is being built now
- library assistants' job roles include working with volunteers who help out with a wide range of tasks
- we already use technology, such as self-service kiosks, to free up our library assistants' time
- we'll be helping staff focus on what they're trained for
- we will still have trained library staff in every council-run library and more work out in communities
- we have built new libraries like Bishopston and refurbished Central Library's historic reading room
- we know how to run lively activities and events

In one sense, we are building on our strengths and existing practices.

… and on the other

What is different is **the scale of change planned and the level of ambition.**

Where we currently have dozens of volunteers, we'll need hundreds. Where we run libraries in community centres, we're open to community organisations running them. We will look at all our staffing arrangements to see if we can move more staff to the frontline. All of this will enable us to open more libraries full-time; reach out more into communities; and improve our marketing.

Rather than tackling piecemeal changes to our libraries, we'll have a long-term plan for transforming our buildings and replacing substandard furniture. This will be underpinned by higher standards of design.

Rather than being seen as a set of buildings, we'll be actively involved across Bristol's cultural and creative life, the part that's in every community.

Matching the best of the city's cultural offer

Great cultural venues

Over recent decades, a variety of organisations in Bristol have invested in world-class and award-winning cultural venues and museums.

As well as providing great facilities for our residents, they have helped our tourism and hospitality sectors to grow, bringing new jobs and opportunity.

We now want to raise our libraries to the standard of the best cultural venues. They reach into every community; they are important focal points in each neighbourhood; and they increase footfall when they're in our shopping districts. Bristol expects and deserves more so that's what we'll aim to deliver.



Increasing our wider impact

The wider benefits of libraries

Our role is broader than culture and creativity. Research shows the social, health and economic benefits of libraries' other work and what people have told us:

- We help people with their health and well-being by enabling them to socialise, whether new parents or older people suffering from loneliness
- our free computers, wifi and IT support help those who can't afford the equipment or broadband to take part in a world where so much is 'digital by default'
- our study spaces enable people to find somewhere to work, study or relax away from homes where there's not enough room
- we provide places for young people to spend time doing homework or productive and fun activities
- we are within walking distance for most people and so help to reduce the reliance on travel by car

We know how important such services are to people's lives but we don't always have the right facilities.

Making an even bigger difference

We provide important and busy hubs for community and public services in every neighbourhood. Part of improving these wider health, social, educational and employment impacts depends on improving our facilities, but it's also about the way we work.

We use national library standards to inform our work and we'll be seeking accreditation to national quality measures. In part, this involves making sure we maintain a varied and quality bookstock that caters for our different user types and our diverse communities.

We can become better at using data to track who is using the service and who is not; what they use and take part in; and what is not as popular as it could be.

We'll also be working with our partners in the city and the council to help bring more cultural opportunities to the city, using our libraries as neighbourhood venues.

What will we have achieved at the end of this?

Vision and mission

In last year's outline strategy, we presented a draft new vision and mission for our libraries. Although the new mission remains the same, we have now widened the vision to reflect what we've heard:

Our vision for the city and the library service is:

> "By sharing reading, knowledge, creativity and the arts, Bristol is a city where disparities in social and economic outcomes are reducing, and where communities are more united."

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Our new mission for libraries
1. Ensuring our libraries are exciting and welcoming places **where residents want to spend time and partners want to be working with us**
2. Reaching out and offering appropriate support **for people who are struggling with literacy, health or other problems that get in their way**
3. Bringing people together across communities **to share in creative activities and celebrate our rich and diverse histories**
4. Championing reading, literacy, and creativity**, providing ways for everyone to discover reading, literature, and the creative arts, particularly where participation has been lowest**
5. Providing dedicated resources and advice for entrepreneurs **to make a success of their businesses**
6. Creating a network of **attractive, high-quality facilities that are sustainable, accessible, multi-use and in good locations** that can offer a range of activities
7. Providing space and resources which facilitate climate and social action **where people have access to expertise and information to drive the change they want to see locally and globally**
8. Actively programming and marketing **using digital platforms, word of mouth and visuals to encourage participation, and communicate and celebrate activities and achievements**
9. Collaborating across sectors **in community-focused partnerships to design and co-ordinate local, culturally sensitive programmes of activity, encouraging more volunteering**
10. Analysing and gathering data **to target our support to help those most in need and to drive improvement**

5. How we will make it happen

Making it stack up

Finding the investment

After years of austerity and financial pressures on local government, there is not a lot of scope for funding new capital initiatives. However, the Council's rolling programme of capital investments have funded work on libraries and so decisions will needed over the priority to give to a new programme of library refurbishments.

The Council's funding should ideally lever in external capital investment. For example, Henleaze Library is receiving money from the national Library Improvement Fund. There are also regular national funding programmes for local renewal in general. The new Filwood Library project is part-funded by the former government's Levelling Up programme.

The key is to develop a fundraising strategy that is ready to take advantage of new opportunities as they come up. The service must be 'bid-ready'.

Finding the resources

The ambitions to increase opening hours, extend outreach and do better marketing will only be possible if we can free up resources with the help of volunteers, Friends Groups and communities. And **the improvements will only happen at the pace that we can free up those resources**.

The major progamme of work to deliver the library strategy can't just be done by library managers as part of their day job. We will need to put in place specialist programme and project managers to see the changes through, working closely with other organisations. There will also need to be an investment in training for staff and our volunteers.

Most importantly, we will need to put work into communicating with and enthusing everyone involved; responding to issues that come up; and managing expectations. **It's not all going to happen overnight – and we need to work together.**

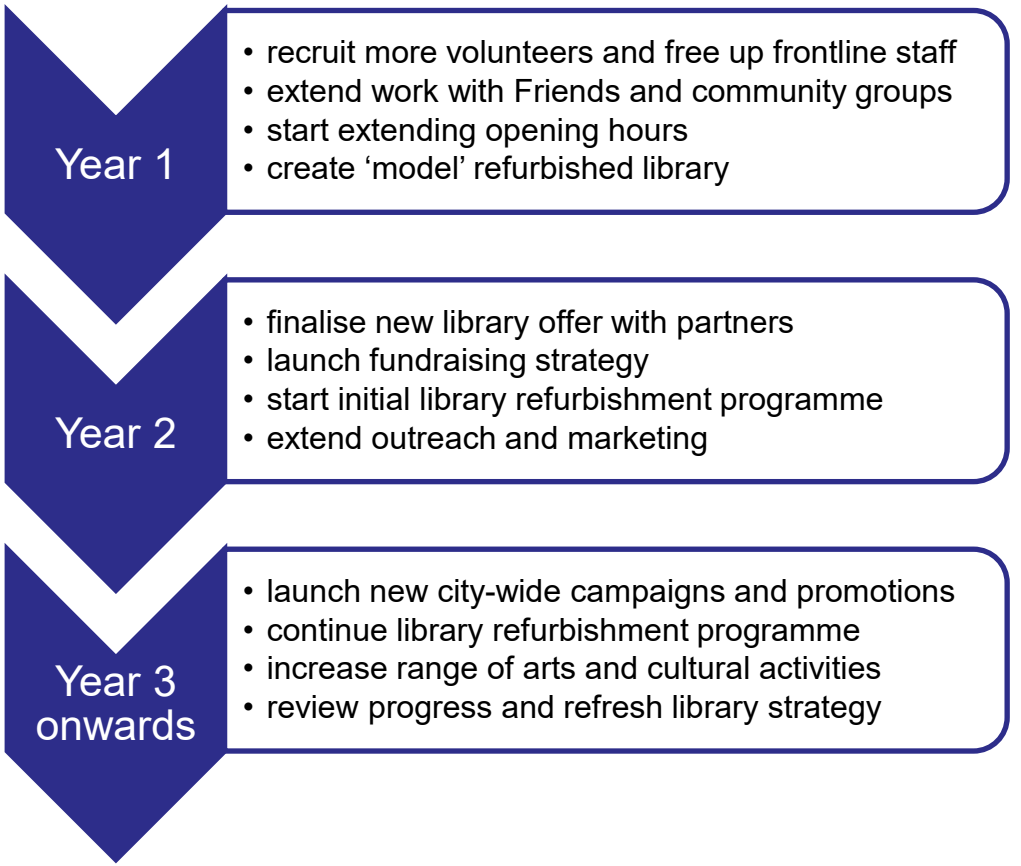
How soon can it all happen?

Taking enough time

Changes on the scale envisaged could take a decade or more, particularly for long-term building projects that require investment. Creating our new library family can take years to get to the stage where they are second nature.

But **we want to start making changes quickly** and we will do that by running pilots and creating 'showcase' examples of our new way of working and some of our refurbishments.

We'll make short-term changes within a planned framework so that we get it right first time and can then apply what we've learned to other parts of the service and network. That will take more research and need our users, staff and partners to get involved.



Making the programme run smoothly

Managing the risks

Any programme of this scale involves risks and so we'll prepare for the worst and be ready to avoid it - and be ready to respond if things do go wrong.

We will develop a 'risk management' plan to anticipate all the risks that could materialise and keep regular checks on how we're anticipating and dealing with them.

Key to a programme of this type is to plan well and avoid reinventing the wheel. Every community and library is different and so we need to be adaptable, but we will have consistent ways of working and standards for what a good service and a good library should look like.

Risks and issues	Examples of how we'll manage that
Making sure what we do works for people	• involving communities in our planning • testing ideas and piloting new approaches • getting feedback on people's experience
Keeping control of construction timetable and costs	• having our own specialist project managers • selecting the right designers and builders • creating a standard toolkit we can repeat
Staff finding it hard to adapt	• consult staff and involve them from the start • pin down the changes needed to our work • give them the support and training they need
Raising expectations and not meeting them	• be clear about our priorities • communicate what's happening and when • staying in touch with live updates
Struggling to find the money	• develop a clear set of priorities • make persuasive investment cases to funders • stay on top of funding opportunities
Not having enough volunteers	• review the roles on offer and be flexible • stay in touch to get our support right • resource our support for more volunteering

Managing the programme

Delivering the changes

This is a major programme of change which will require concentrated effort for a period of time. The library service's managers will need to be heavily involved and can't be expected to oversee all these changes and manage the 'day job'.

They will be supported by professional programme and project managers who understand public services and the value of public libraries. This will need to be resourced for a sustained period until the changes have settled in and become 'business as usual'.

There will also be senior oversight of the transformation programme, ideally overseen by a board that includes a selection of other partners and stakeholders.

The library managers and staff most closely involved will need to have time to learn from elsewhere in the country and have their own development programme.

Working with people

We'll be continuing to talk to people in the run-up to the Final Strategy next year.

We'll be following up our discussions this year with current and prospective partners and especially with our current Friends Groups, volunteers and community partners.

We'll also be consulting with our staff on any changes we propose to their working arrangements.

We'll be working with colleagues developing the council's new cultural strategy to maximise libraries' impact on the wider cultural scene.

As we begin implementation, we will want to involve people and get their thoughts and ideas about how the strategy will be put into effect. We'll also be sure to give our users and partners regular updates on progress.

Helping us get started

Having the confidence to get started

Much of what is being planned builds on what has been done before in Bristol and so we can have confidence that we are capable of making it happen.

At the end of the lifetime of this strategy, we should be well on the way to having a world-class library service that we have all helped create and that we can be proud of.

Can you help in some way?

If you've got any feedback on this draft strategy or have other ideas and suggestions, we'd be delighted to get your thoughts.

If you might be interested in joining a Friends Group or volunteering to help in your local library, do get in touch.

Equally, if you work for an organisation that might be interested in working with us, do let us know.

You can email us at: library.strategy@bristol.gov.uk