The Library is the Place:
Information, Recreation, Inspiration

National Public Library Strategy
2023-2027

Ireland's libraries
are for everyone

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Our public libraries are at
the heart of our communities

1. Foreword
Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys, T.D.

Heather Humphreys, T.D.

Our public libraries are at the heart of our communities. Libraries offer a vast range of services, both in-person and online, to library users, young and old. Supporting libraries has been a key priority of mine as Minister for Rural and Community Development. I am therefore delighted to welcome this new public library strategy, *The Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration*, which sets out 66 strategic actions under 9 strategic objectives and 3 strategic enablers for our public libraries, for the next five years.

There has been a significant level of achievement since the publication of the previous strategy *Our Public Libraries 2022* – most notably the removal of library fines and charges and the introduction of a new Library Management System. The opening of the My Open Library service in 31 branches has greatly extended access to libraries in those areas, with a further 60 branches approved to come on stream. COVID-19 highlighted the value of libraries within our communities and the high level of esteem in which libraries are held. Our libraries responded to this crisis in a flexible and innovative manner and increased their online offer resulting in an exponential increase in borrowings of eBooks and eAudiobooks.

Modern libraries must reflect the different ways in which people use them and we need to continually review our approach to ensure existing and emerging needs are met. *The Library is the Place* is an ambitious forward-looking strategy which sets the direction of travel for the public library service and seeks to improve access, use and visibility of public libraries as an essential community service. It complements other government strategies such as *Our Rural Future*, the *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities Strategy* and the *Town Centre First Policy*. In addition, it also makes an explicit contribution to sustainable development and meeting the challenges of climate change.

My department will support this strategy with continued investment in libraries, developing high quality library buildings that reflect the quality of services available, improving access and opening hours and enhancing digital services. We will also work with other government departments and stakeholders to develop the role of libraries in supporting national policy priorities such as *Harnessing Digital – the Digital Ireland Framework*.

The implementation of the strategy will be overseen by the Libraries Development Committee, which includes representation of my department, the Local Government Management Agency and local authorities.

I would like to thank everybody who helped us to develop this strategy over the past year especially the almost 3,000 respondents to the public consultation process, the Libraries Development Committee, the Strategy Working Group members, City and County Librarians, library staff, elected members, and all other stakeholders who contributed.

Heather Humphreys, T.D.

Minister for Rural and Community Development

Our libraries provide accessible, friendly, and truly civic spaces

2. Introduction
Chair, Libraries Development Committee, Anna Marie Delaney

Anna Marie Delaney,
Chief Executive, Offaly County Council

Ireland's public library service is provided across the 31 local authorities. Through 330 branches, 23 mobile libraries, and multiple digital channels, our libraries provide accessible, friendly, and truly civic spaces. They help people to go on voyages of reading and escapism, attend interesting events and activities, or engage with new technologies and learn new skills. Over 765,000 people registered with their library in the past year and the service is consistently regarded as one of the best things a local authority has to offer its residents.

The outgoing public library strategy, *Our Public Libraries 2022*, supported our library staff to deliver improved services and expand the role and profile of the library in the community. It removed library fines for everyone, increased opening hours through the My Open Library service, and supported the training of staff to deliver new digital services. Even during a pandemic, when our buildings were closed to the public, the library service remained open and connected to communities through various initiatives including delivery services, increased provision of eBooks, online events and regular online storytimes.

Our new strategy, *The Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration*, seeks to maintain our general progress and is progressive and ambitious for the development of our core services including reading and literacy and access to information. Yet it also aims higher, with measures firmly rooted in the now to help aid Ireland's recovery from the pandemic, combat the cost-of-living crisis, and support climate action. It proposes new actions

on lifelong learning, cultural heritage and digital inclusion that will make Ireland's libraries a leader in global librarianship. Importantly, it is the first national library strategy to have a specific focus on sustainability and climate action, with actions designed to help Ireland achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Investment in our public libraries is an investment in people and their families and their community. To ensure success, local and central government will need to commit to supporting our buildings and staff, ensuring that both have the resources they need to deliver the exciting programmes and actions set out in this strategy.

The Libraries Development Committee will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of *The Library is the Place* over the next five years. As Chair of this committee, I am looking forward to working with all local authorities, the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Local Government Management Agency and all other partners and stakeholders to deliver on the promise of this strategy and ensure that even better library services are available in our communities.

Anna Marie Delaney

Chair, Libraries Development Committee
Chief Executive, Offaly County Council

3. The Public Library Service – Our Libraries Today

Ireland's libraries are for everyone. There are currently 330 local libraries operating across the country's 30 library authorities, offering a free service to more than 765,000 registered members. Libraries across Ireland are an invaluable cultural pillar for the country, providing access to an extensive collection of over 13 million books, CDs and DVDs that is available to all users, wherever they are in the country. The online collections include tens of thousands of eBooks and eAudiobooks, and thousands of digital magazines and newspapers.

Our libraries provide a diverse range of resources and services. These include encouraging reading at all levels, improving digital skills and literacy, enabling formal and informal learning, supporting the provision of information and guidance on many topics including health and wellbeing, job seeking and personal development and ensuring that people have a place in the community to meet and come together. Every day, libraries across Ireland arrange events, provide access to local studies collections, or work with a variety of partners to create cultural programming.

A library is a unique community-focused institution but the library system is nationwide – members can use library services at any library in the country.

Through the My Open Library service, many members can use their library outside of staffed hours from 8am to 10pm, 365 days of the year.

The first public library in Ireland opened in the 1700s, and since then public libraries have become one of the most popular services provided by local authorities. Under the Local Government Act 2001, each local authority is responsible for managing and delivering the public library service in its administrative area.

In recent surveys, public libraries are consistently valued as one of the most popular services a local authority can offer its residents, with the public expressing very high levels of satisfaction with library offerings[1]. This popularity is down to the library's role as a community space that is free for everyone to use, and the strong bonds that have developed between local libraries and their users over time.

Some statistics which reflect the reach and impact of our public libraries:

More than
53.6 million
visits since 2018

330
local libraries

Access to
7,000
eNewspapers and eMagazines from

Over
600
online eLearning courses at a variety of levels and comprising a wide range of subjects

13,265,332
items in the collection

More than
76 million
items issued since 2018

120+
countries in

60+
languages

Over
110
language courses for speakers of 30+ languages

A collection of over
110,000
eBooks and eAudiobooks

23
mobile libraries (including one cross-border service)

1   Local Authority Customer Satisfaction Survey (LGMA) 2023.

The first public library strategy, *Branching Out: A New Public Library Service,* was published in 1998. This was followed by three further strategies – *Branching Out: Future Directions* in 2008, *Opportunities For All – A Strategy for Public Libraries 2013-2017* and *Our Public Libraries 2022.* All four strategies have contributed greatly to the development of the public library service we see today. Starting in 2023, *The Library is the Place* will build on the success of the previous strategies and go even further to develop a library service to meet the needs of today's society.

This strategy has been informed by the experience of COVID-19, which highlighted the particular importance of libraries to our communities and demonstrated their success in adapting their offer and innovating their service delivery. The challenges overcome by more than 1,800 professional staff in the sector in 2020 and 2021 have made our libraries stronger and more ambitious and contributed to the formation of the objectives we will achieve over the next five years.

This strategy has been developed jointly between the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), as policy lead, the Libraries Development Unit within the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), the County and City Management Association (CCMA), and local authorities.

The strategic themes of the strategy align with relevant public policy objectives across government, including commitments to the wider rural and community development priorities of DRCD. For example, a commitment under *Our Rural Future* to make rural Ireland a viable and attractive place for people to live with access to good job opportunities and public services and also a commitment to support individuals and groups from disadvantaged, marginalised and socially excluded communities, including those in urban areas, to meet their full potential.

Location of Public Libraries across the Country
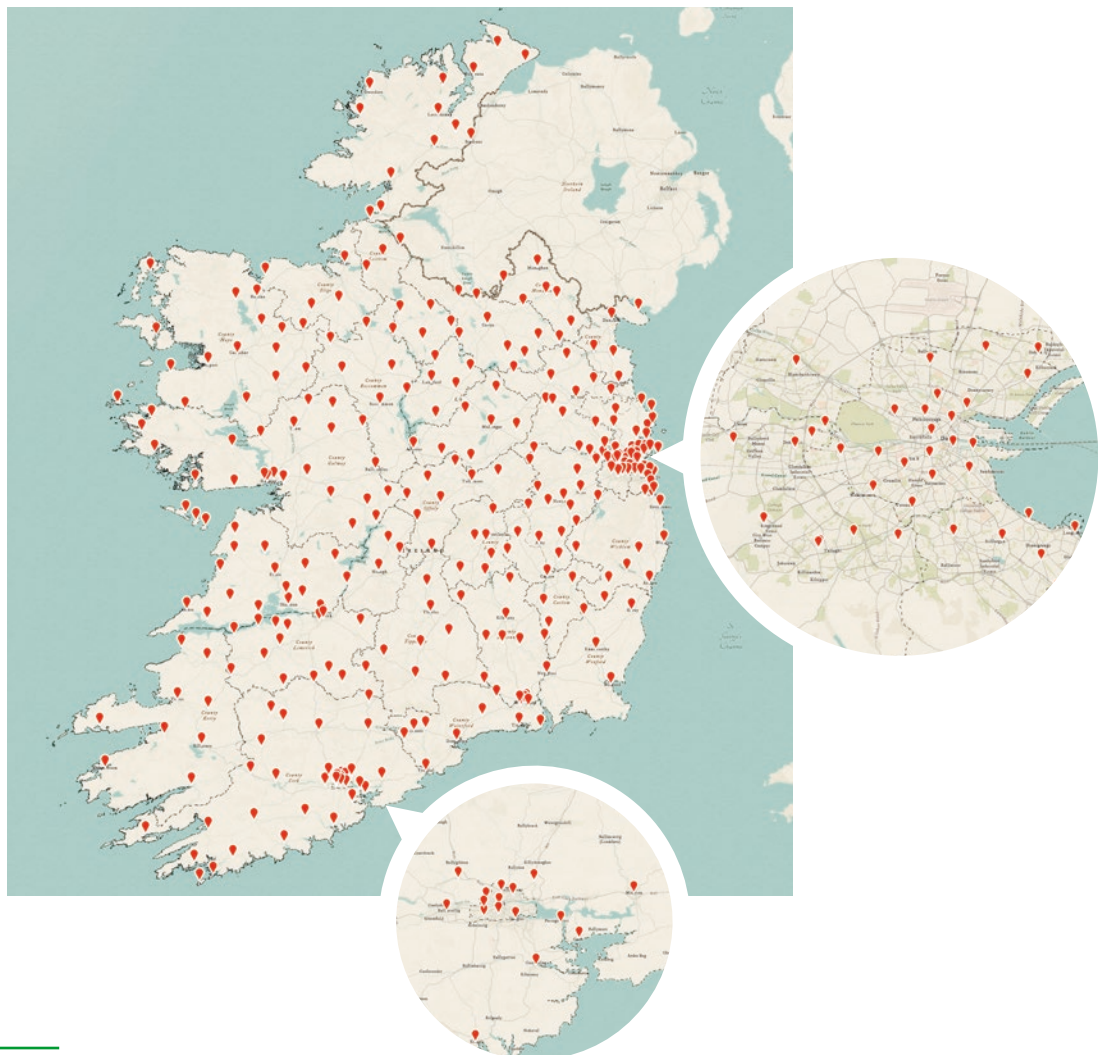
4. Our Public Libraries 2022 – Achievements

Substantial progress has been made on many of the commitments contained in *Our Public Libraries 2022*. Much of this has been achieved despite or, in some cases, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 highlighted the central position of libraries in our communities and demonstrated the ability of libraries and their staff to flexibly deliver their services in a more innovative manner and upskill to meet the needs of users especially when library buildings were closed over an extensive period of time. This has brought benefits of appreciation and self-confidence.

One of the most significant achievements, and possibly the one with the most beneficial impact on members, was the removal of library fines and charges. This eliminated a significant barrier to library use, thereby facilitating equity of access for all to public library services and resources. Allied to this was the significant investment in our

public library infrastructure through the Libraries Capital Programme, local authority investment, Urban and Rural Regeneration Development Funds, and EU funds.

A further significant milestone was the introduction of a new Library Management System which included a more responsive and functional platform, streamlining the user access experience and providing the same functionality across library authority websites. *Our Public Libraries 2022* also expanded access to digital resources, including eBooks and online resources, to include a greater number and variety of options in all libraries. The demand for eBooks and eAudiobooks increased exponentially as a result of COVID-19, leading to a 210% increase in eAudiobook loans, a 160% increase in eBook loans and an increase of 155% in user registrations for our eLending service between 2019 and 2021.

Throughout this strategy there are examples of the initiatives that have taken place during *Our Public Libraries 2022*.

Case Study

Ireland Reads

Ireland Reads was launched as part of the government's Keep Well campaign that ran during the winter of 2021. The objective was to encourage people to pledge to read on a particular day – February 25th, Ireland Reads Day – in order to promote reading and libraries. An award-winning marketing campaign asked people to 'Squeeze in a Read' and rediscover the joy of reading, in particular during COVID-19 restrictions. Participants were able to get book recommendations from library staff based on their interests, available time and reading level via the Ireland Reads website, and sign up to pledge to read on Ireland Reads Day itself. Media coverage for the campaign was achieved across high-profile national TV, print, radio and digital media which led to thousands of people all over the country joining library digital services for the first time, and pledging to spend over 900,000 minutes of reading on February 25th.

Case Study

Little Library

Little Library is a programme under the cross government First 5 strategy and the public libraries' Right to Read Programme. Little Library supports early language and literacy development among young children by encouraging library usage and providing library services to Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings. The programme started in 2021 when more than 4,500 early learning and care providers were offered free book bags and storytime events. In 2022 almost 23,000 4 and 5 year olds received their My Little Library Bag and library membership to help support their transition to primary school.

Little Library in 2022

22,900
New members aged 4 and 5 under My Little Library Bag

414,450
books issued to 4 and 5 year old members

14,700
4 and 5 year olds renewed memberships under My Little Library Bag

63%
of total population of 4 and 5 year olds are now library members

844
friendship themed storytime events and over 10,000 books delivered to ELCs during Ireland Reads and Spring into Storytime

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong Learning can be defined as all learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies for personal, social and/or professional reasons. Supporting lifelong learning is one of the core functions of the library service and a recent survey of all public library services showed that:

- All library services provide classes, presentations, exhibitions and informal learning groups.
- During *Our Public Libraries 2022* the topics most commonly offered in the classes/presentations are:

	Health	Crafts	IT	History & Culture	Science
Percentage of library authorities	**100%**	**93%**	**90%**	**83%**	**83%**

- Topics most frequently offered (on a weekly basis):

	Languages	Crafts	IT
Percentage of library authorities	**59%**	**54%**	**44%**

- All library authorities offer exhibitions, on all of the following topics: culture, learning and information, reading and literature, history, environment, art appreciation and craft.
- 90% offer exhibitions relating to business and employment.
- All library authorities support informal learning groups, the most common types are:

	Book Clubs	Parent/ Toddler Groups	Knitting Groups
Percentage of library authorities	**93%**	**87%**	**87%**

Case Study

Right to Read at your Library

Right to Read

The Right to Read Programme was launched in 2017 to support reading and literacy across all counties. The programme includes initiatives for children and families throughout the year – Spring into Storytime, Summer Stars, Children's Book Festival and Family Time at Your Library – and a range of services to support schools.

In 2021, initiatives aimed specifically at preschool age were introduced under the Little Library Programme. The Right to Read Programme also focuses on supports and resources for adults and we will continue to expand this element of the programme under *The Library is the Place*. Right to Read is delivered by a local Right to Read network in each local authority and is co-ordinated by a Right to Read Co-ordinator in each local library service. The programme grew in recognition and participation every year to 2019 with record participation in that year, including over 62,000 children taking part in Summer Stars. A swift reworking by the library team at the start of COVID-19 restrictions ensured the programme continued, largely online, throughout 2020 and 2021.

In 2022, a new mix of online and in library branch delivery proved very popular, achieving the second highest annual levels of involvement so far, including almost 56,000 children taking part in Summer Stars 2022.

Healthy Ireland at Your Library

The Healthy Ireland at Your Library programme is part of the national Healthy Ireland strategy to improve health and wellbeing. The programme is available across all 30 library authorities. Healthy Ireland at Your Library includes a book collection (books, eBooks, and eAudiobooks), events, and a Healthy Ireland at Your Library Co-ordinator at each library service co-ordinates a programme of free Healthy Ireland events across the year. Healthy Ireland at Your Library is a consistent and reliable source of health information across Ireland's 330 library branches. The collection items are evaluated by health experts and the selection of event topics and speakers are led by Department of Health guidelines. Engagement with the programme has increased since its beginning in 2017. Between July 2020 and September 2021, there was a total of 136,351 loans from the collection. This is almost eight times the number of issues compared to the first year of the programme in 2017. The number of people attending events has also increased, with 72,596 participants between July 2020 and September 2021.

Throughout the lifetime of *Our Public Libraries 2022*, libraries have been delivering national and local programmes to support personal and community development, arranging thousands of events and activities each year for hundreds of thousands of people through the Right to Read Programme, Work Matters at Your Library, Healthy Ireland at Your Library, Creative Ireland and more. These programmes have been planned and delivered with central and local input to expand the range and variety of activities in each topic in order to keep increasing participation and reach within the community. The onset of COVID-19 restrictions did not result in any interruption of programme delivery, as a quick refocus and agile upskilling by the library team ensured continuity of these services to the fullest extent possible throughout the period.

Moreover, the service delivery achievements and learning experiences during COVID-19 are now being incorporated into providing the optimum design of programmes for users in the future.

Work is also continuing on a number of other areas identified in the strategy including the expansion of the My Open Library service – this facility is now available in 31 libraries with a further 60 approved to come on stream. A programme of ICT infrastructure updates and the development of digital learning centres and innovation spaces in suitable libraries were also implemented.

It is recognised that further work is required in some areas. Active membership of libraries was rising until the arrival of COVID-19, but it fell back in 2021.

Efforts will be made to return to pre-COVID levels of active membership and increase them during the new strategy period. A review of the national Public Library Standards and Benchmarks was also delayed by COVID-19, and challenges also remain around book funds, a mechanism for universal library membership, and the required levels of investment in online resources and IT hardware.

Case Study

My Open Library

The My Open Library service provides library access to members from 8am to 10pm, 365 days of the year. The expansion of the My Open Library service has continued over the past five years and it is now open in 31 libraries across 16 local authorities, with a further 60 approved to come on stream. Outside of necessary closure periods during 2021 and 2022 due to COVID-19 restrictions, the service has been operating very successfully since its introduction in 2014. Feedback from the public is extremely positive, with users commenting that access beyond normal working hours makes the local library much more accessible for commuters, workers and students. My Open Library has also brought increased usage to those libraries which offer the service, particularly at weekends, and is attracting a broader range of customers with increased use from the 35-55 year old group in the evenings and from families with young children at weekends.

Removal of Fines

Libraries are free lifelong learning resources that should be available to all without barriers or charges. Library fines have been shown to have a detrimental effect on library use by children and the disadvantaged*, so on the 1st of January 2019 fines for the late return of library items were abolished in Ireland. From this date onwards, there were no lending charges of any kind for public library users, making Ireland one of the first countries in the world to apply this approach to all of its public library branches.

* *DeFaveri, Annette, Breaking Barriers: Libraries and Socially Excluded Communities, (2005); and Meg Johnson Depriest, Removing Barriers to Access: Eliminating Library Fines and Fees on Children's Materials, 2016*

Overall, the picture that emerges from the *Our Public Libraries 2022* period is of good progress but with challenges still to overcome. What has become clear though, is that Ireland's public libraries are being recognised in the international community for their achievements during the past five years in widening access to collections and reducing and eliminating barriers, such as fines, to library usage. The hosting of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) World Library and Information Congress in Dublin in 2022 placed

a spotlight on the work of the sector, as does the participation of Irish librarians internationally in the many committees and projects of IFLA, the National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe Forum (NAPLE), the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA) and Public Libraries 2030. More than ever, practitioners and policymakers in Europe and beyond are aware of what Irish public libraries are achieving, and this is a great base to build on with a new strategy.

Libraries Capital Programme 2016-2022

Government approved funding of

€29m

in 2016 for a Libraries Capital Programme. The programme supported:

19 capital projects including the following allocations

My Open Library
€6.9m

Kilkenny City Library
€4.7m

Ennis Library
€4.1m

Portlaoise Library
€3.2m

Small Scale Capital Works programme
€3m

Monaghan Town Library
€2.8m

Edgeworthstown Library
€2.5m

Athy Community Library
€1.7m

Wicklow Town Library
€1m

North Clondalkin Library
€1m

Kevin St Library
€1m

Case Study

Sensory Libraries

Sensory services in our public libraries have expanded significantly since 2019 when the Department of Rural and Community Development provided funding of €691,000. This funding supported the provision of sensory facilities, resources, and equipment in public libraries, including sensory pods, sensory toys and social stories. These services have reached out and engaged people on the autism spectrum and have made the library space more accessible and inclusive, offering a safe and enjoyable space for all. Many public libraries also offer a collection of toys and resources that are designed to support the development of important skills. Families can borrow the resources that might interest their child, without the expense of purchasing them. A number of libraries have also installed sensory pods and sensory rooms which provide a facility for children and adults to go to, engage with and enjoy. In 2019, Watch House Cross Community Library in Limerick opened the first ever dedicated Sensory Room for those on the autism spectrum and this initiative earned them the award for 'Best Library Service' at the Chambers Ireland Excellence in Local Government Awards later that year.

Case Study

Culture and Creative Ireland

Libraries have a long-established role in the support and provision of access to culture for individuals and communities. Libraries offer a free and uncomplicated way into culture, not only through extensive collections and exhibitions, but also through an increasing range of festivals and events across the network of branches.

Libraries are also central to the local delivery of the all-of-government Creative Ireland Programme supporting culture and wellbeing. Culture Teams have been established in each local authority and are currently being led in fifteen counties by the library service. In all counties, libraries are actively represented on culture teams.

Case Study

Design Thinking and the User-Centred Experience

Design Thinking is an approach to service development and creative problem-solving which centres on the users and supports libraries in growing their understanding of community needs. It focuses on discovering what users and communities want and on experimenting to create library services which are built more around people and communities and meeting their changing needs.

In 2021, ten library services took part in a Design Thinking pilot. Participating library staff received training through eight 3-hour workshops. Following training, each library service developed local projects using design thinking principles. All ten pilot teams reported that Design Thinking significantly improved their approaches to working in partnership with users and in gaining a better understanding of community needs in developing and delivering services. In 2022, additional training was delivered to further support development of local projects using the approach.
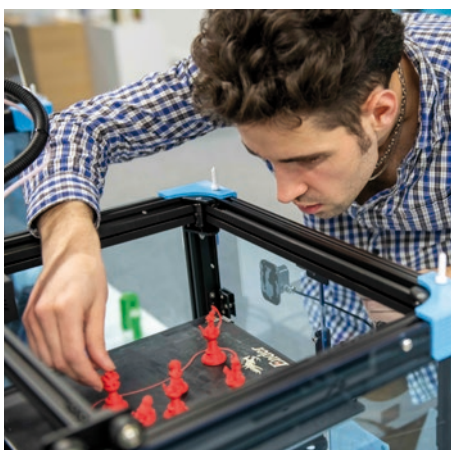
"Due to requirements of remote work and remote study, I have re-engaged with the public library system for the first time in five years. I am glad to say I am extremely impressed. Staff are very helpful and supportive and facilities top class." [Consultation contributor]

Case Study

Prison Library Services Review

A review of prison library services was carried out in 2021 across the twelve prisons and with the seven local authorities in which those prisons are located: Dublin City, Cork City, Cavan, Limerick, Laois, Roscommon and Wicklow. A report on the review, undertaken by the School of Education in Ulster University, was published in 2022, and set out overarching principles which reflect the need for a policy-driven and user-centred approach to the provision of prison library services. Key principles and recommendations are set out in terms of policies, universal access, collaboration, staffing, range and scope of provision, the library as a support and stepping-stone to re-entering society, and also in terms of review and evaluation. Work began in 2022 on the implementation of the recommendations, the Service Level Agreements between the library services and local prisons, and the development of a national policy for prison library service provision.

5. Sectoral Trends and the Impact of COVID-19

Public libraries face some common pressures, opportunities, and threats globally and regionally. The 2021 update to the IFLA Trend Report identifies a number of these that are relevant for the sector in Ireland[2]:

- Immediate access vs. digital detox: people want personalisation and 24/7 information access now. But equally, a preference for off-line living is emerging as an antidote to digital overload

- Charges for information: new barriers and paywalls and licensing arrangements have implications for the free exchange of ideas as well as library budgets

- Disinformation: the greater value of information literacy in the "fake" news era

- Data domination: a growing role for Artificial Intelligence in society – algorithms are already becoming overwhelmingly important and can impact negatively

- Race to extremes: populism, lack of respect for alternative views – what libraries can and do hold will be challenged and criticised

- Mobile populations and a globalized user base: a challenge to the relevance of the local library service

- Lifelong learners: people change jobs, reskill, retrain, are mobile. Libraries should support this through resources, but should they be educators too?

- Global collections: local access to worldwide resources has implications for technology, licensing, and "localness" of services.

While all these global trends are taken into account in *The Library is the Place*'s objectives, of perhaps even greater consequence are the changes forced upon public library services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Our Public Libraries 2022* was launched in June 2018 and was in place for 21 months before COVID-19 took effect. In that time strategy implementation had gained momentum and notable milestones, including the removal of fines, had already been reached. However, without the option to offer many of their face-to-face and physical services for long periods, libraries' priorities began to change.

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2   Update to the IFLA Trend Report 2021, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.
     https://www.ifla.org/news/ifla-trend-report-2021-update-released/

Public Libraries In Ireland During COVID-19

Our libraries reacted quickly to the challenges of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. Library buildings physically closed but the sector continued to provide essential services throughout the pandemic. Library staff were spotlighted as key workers in a speech by the Taoiseach in March 2020, and formed core parts of Community Response Forums that were set up in local authorities. Home book delivery services to the people who were "cocooning" and isolated were rolled out across the country, as well as click and collect services at branches. A swift pivot to the increased provision of eBooks and eAudiobooks saw more than 150,000 new digital readers join their libraries in 2020, and over 200,000 in 2021. Library staff became digital presenters and social media experts, delivering online storytimes for children, or local history talks that reached tens of thousands of users in Ireland and all over the world. They also become tutors to first time older users of digital library services through the Age Friendly Digital Ambassadors programme. These actions, as well as two major campaigns, Ireland Reads, and Grow it Forward (a grow-your-own-food programme) contributed to the high-profile of the service during multiple lockdowns, as did a new focus on outdoor library events. The sector emerged in 2022 with new staff skillsets, new users, and new opportunities for growth in the changed environment.

At the heart of these changes, experienced by all public libraries worldwide, was the much discussed 'digital pivot'. With buildings closed to the public, digital offerings became essential for libraries to maintain connection with their users and provide relevant services. Explosions in eBook and eAudiobook usage were seen everywhere, but it was quickly noted that the increases in digital reading would not bridge the gap in the number of physical book loans lost due to buildings being shut. During 2020-2021 Irish public library services experienced drops in loans of physical items of 40%-63% of pre-pandemic borrowing levels. Meeting the new demand for eBooks also required additional resources – eBooks are more expensive than print books for libraries to license and come with restrictive licensing conditions.

The pandemic demanded librarians adopt new approaches in order to offer high-quality digital activities and significant upskilling took place in Ireland in 2020 and 2021 through online events and workshops. This paralleled the situation in Finland where librarians surveyed at the early stages of the pandemic indicated a belief that innovation is here to stay and it had forced some reluctant colleagues to adopt technology that they had previously not used[3]. Sustaining high levels of digital skills across the library team will be a key issue that *The Library is the Place* seeks to address.

However, some caution about the digital pivot is expressed by the Carnegie Trust in 'Making A Difference'[4]:

> "The limitations of digital delivery included: digital exclusion impacting upon reach; digital formats having a negative impact on services' ability to provide quality interaction and support; and services' inability to provide access to physical resources."

The Carnegie Trust also highlighted that digital versions of services were not the same as in-person services and could not replace the wider civic, social and community benefits of library spaces.

This is the crux of the matter for library services in Ireland in the next five years: taking the best of the digital outcomes from the COVID-19 period but remaining focused on the community, the user and what they want from the service. As a paper for Public Library Quarterly in 2021 puts it:

> "A different role must be given to communities, not the passive one of consumers, but the active one of co-creators of services, putting participatory communities in the first place.[5]"

None of this will be possible without the correct workforce balance. A final COVID-19-related trend of great importance is the impact on recruitment and retention of library workers that is being felt worldwide. Libraries are not the only sector to be experiencing challenges such as high costs of living or a newfound preference for remote and more flexible working conditions, but as providers of a public-facing service they do have a complicated puzzle to unravel. Providing an attractive and compelling place to work, where library staff can expect to receive training in the skills needed to thrive in an environment where the physical-digital balance is being re-examined, is a key ambition of *The Library is the Place*.

Libraries and the Sustainable Development Goals

In October 2022 public libraries were included in the government's *National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals 2022-2024*[6]. This makes Ireland one of a handful of leading countries globally that is utilising the benefits of public libraries to achieve the SDGs, and places our libraries at the forefront of trends in international librarianship. The plan recognises public libraries as sustainable institutions which play a big part in helping to provide knowledge, understanding, and resources in our communities. As key stakeholders in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* the plan asks libraries to support many specific aspects of the Agenda, including universal literacy, inclusivity and national ownership.

Over the next two years the sector will support national SDG activities including SDG Week, and map library programmes to the SDGs so as to feed relevant outcomes and impact into Ireland's contribution to the Voluntary National Review process at the UN in 2023.

Actions to either directly or indirectly support sustainable development and climate action are therefore a key part of *The Library is the Place* and can be found throughout the strategic targets, and Strategic Objective 6 in particular. Appendix 2 illustrates the SDG targets that will be impacted by library activities between 2023 and 2027.

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3   Haasio, A and Kannasto, E: COVID-19 and its impact in Finnish public libraries. Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries, 19.3.20 p 14 http://78.46.229.148/ojs/index.php/qqml/article/view/639

4   Peachey, Jenny: Making a difference: libraries, lockdown and looking ahead. Carnegie UK Trust, 2020 https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/making-a-difference-libraries-lockdown-and-looking-ahead/

5   Tammaro, A: The new normal: public libraries in Italy post-COVID-19. Public Library Quarterly, 19.1.21 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10572317.2021.1869452

6   gov.ie – National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals 2022-2024 (www.gov.ie)

"Staff are extremely helpful and will always order in any books I need." [Consultation contributor]

Recovery and Resilience

As we launch a new strategy, the library sector is emerging from a period of uncertainty and restriction, but also a time of substantial innovation and activity that is continuing today. The impacts of the pandemic were far-reaching, and a full recovery has not been possible before additional complications from regional conflicts and a global energy crisis emerged. Yet it has become apparent from government strategies, library sector analysis and media reports that the current moment offers the public library sector a great moment of opportunity. However, a steady course will need to be steered as there are some existential challenges in sight too.

Public libraries must be key partners in the recovery programmes that are underway around the world, including in Ireland. The Irish public library proved itself to be a resilient institution of great relevance during a national crisis, and now is the time to continue to invest in and support our libraries. Public libraries already play critical recovery roles – in helping to support digital inclusion, providing literacy and technology skills training for those looking for work, and supporting marginalised and disadvantaged communities to access government services.

A fundamental challenge of the post-pandemic society will be encouraging people to engage once more with our institutions, our town centres, and our community facilities. Libraries, as freely available public institutions in the heart of our cities, towns, and villages, are uniquely placed to do this. *The Library is the Place,* with its alignment with key national recovery policies, and its emphasis on a whole-of-government approach to the provision of library services, gives us a firm basis to work from and contribute to the rebuilding of our society at a difficult time.

"The staff are friendly, professional, helpful and always welcoming. We enjoy the book selection available and the reading programmes like 'Summer Stars'. We see lots of positive improvements in our local library with new books and the general upkeep of the library. We really appreciate that our library is a nice place to visit with nice people. Thank you and keep up the great work." [Consultation contributor]

6. Strategy Consultation

To ensure comprehensive input from library users and other stakeholders, a five-week programme of consultation was undertaken in June and July 2022 on a draft strategic framework to help develop the final version of *The Library is the Place*. The main objective of the consultation was to seek views on the proposed framework and to better understand attitudes towards the library service. It also sought feedback on how services could be improved in terms of access, use and visibility of public libraries.

The consultation was open to everyone in Ireland and internationally. A survey was widely publicised through various media to individuals and organisations, with a programme of workshops, focus groups and individual interviews being held with key stakeholders.

The public consultation received an extremely high number of responses: 2,792 responses were submitted online, and 201 paper copies submitted.

With a complementary programme of stakeholder focus groups and workshops, a stakeholder specific questionnaire and interviews with key partners in the implementation of the library service, a solid base on which to build the new strategy was established.

Consultation Findings

The consultation responses showed strong satisfaction with the service, while also identifying areas for improvement. Some of the positive feedback included:

- 90% of public survey respondents had used a library service in the past year

- 87% of public survey respondents were satisfied with the library service overall

- The three areas of service provision with the highest satisfaction levels were books, the standard of customer service, and the overall appearance and physical condition of libraries

- A strong appreciation of library services generally, the range of resources available and the commitment and enthusiasm of staff

- Being able to order material from any library in the country for collection at a user's local library was highly popular

- Libraries were recognised as a central community hub for reading, learning and enjoyment – and as a key part of literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy programmes

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Strategy Consultation

17
stakeholder organisation surveys returned

Two key stakeholder focus groups with
23
organisations

Key stakeholder interviews

2,993
returned questionnaires

Focus groups with
over 300
members of staff

Feedback from government departments

Workshops

Workshop with Local Authority Directors of Service

Workshop with young people under 18

Workshop with City and County Librarians

Workshop with Irish language stakeholders (as Gaeilge/in Irish)

Note: a list of consultation respondents can be found in Appendix 4

- Libraries are sanctuaries in communities that play a crucial role in delivering services to children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, and other isolated and hard to reach groups, particularly in rural areas.

Some areas for improvement were:

- The unevenness of the library offer across the country

- Users in some areas wished to see an extension of mobile library services

- Libraries need to do more to support environmental sustainability and climate action

- Marketing of library services needs to be improved, as many non-users remain unaware of the range of services on offer, particularly in relation to technology

- Non-users identified the pandemic, lack of time and inadequate opening hours as barriers to use.

Priority areas identified for *The Library is the Place*

Taken together, the public survey and stakeholder consultation revealed a number of priority areas for *The Library is the Place* to address:

- A capital building programme for libraries

- Expanding a disability friendly approach to services

- Positioning libraries as a vital resource for older people

- Targeting promotion towards young people and teenagers and expanding stock and services for them

- Building partnerships and working with other library sectors

- Reviewing Irish language resources, and developing new services and collections for other languages and new communities

- Promoting local history and archives collections, and digitising content for a wider audience

- Workforce planning and staff development, from recruitment and retention through to skills development and the establishment of a leadership programme

- Developing an evidence-based and data-driven approach to support user-centred service design

- Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals and delivering Climate Action Plans

- Extending evening and weekend opening hours

- Increasing study space and community space

- Exploring opportunities for extending mobile library provision.

7. Vision, Mission and Values

Our Vision

Ireland's public libraries are leaders in enabling and supporting all people across all communities to be informed, connected, literate individuals, skilled for life.

Our Mission

To enrich the lives of people and communities in Ireland by providing universal access to information and resources to promote reading and enjoyment, lifelong learning, life skills, education and cultural engagement.

Our Values

Quality and Excellence

Trustworthiness and Integrity

Intellectual Freedom

Civic Participation

Creativity, Innovation, and Imagination

Universal Accessibility

Equality, Inclusivity and Diversity

8. Strategic Objectives and Enablers

1	Strategic Theme: **People**

1: Reading and literacy is at the heart of what we do

Our ambition

Public libraries will be at the heart of reading and literacy development within the community. We will provide opportunities for everyone to develop as literate and informed individuals and raise the profile of reading for pleasure and wellbeing in English, Irish and other languages. There will be an excellent book stock available at libraries, mobile libraries, online and through our national distribution service.

Our strategic actions

1. The Right to Read programme and Right to Read Local Networks will be expanded to increase the participation of children and young people, families, and adults in reading activities.

2. Every library user will have access to a book club that is suitable for them in terms of age and reading level by the end of 2024.

3. Every library authority will support the annual Ireland Reads national day of reading with events and activities.

4. We will ensure that programmes are put in place to meet a book fund annual spend target of €4 per head of population in the lifetime of the strategy, and that the amount spent on books rises year on year in every library authority.

5. The availability of services and materials in the Irish language will be increased in every library authority.

6. The amount of remuneration to authors through the Public Lending Remuneration (PLR) scheme for physical lending shall increase by 50% over the lifetime of the strategy.

Our strategic alignments

7. We will work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the early learning and care sector to develop the Little Library Programme, and provide uniform levels of literacy and reading development supports for early childhood.

8. We will work with the Department of Education to build on the current provision of library services to primary and post-primary schools and explore the potential for an expanded programme of library supports which will be delivered in alignment with the Department's forthcoming new national strategy on literacy and numeracy.

9. We will work with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; SOLAS; the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA); Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and other stakeholders to implement the Adult Literacy for Life strategy through library activities.

10. We will work with Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), Gaelchultúr and other partners to deliver high quality Irish language services through libraries.

2: Libraries for all

Our ambition

Public libraries will improve life opportunities for all and address social and health inequality by providing access, free of charge, to information, ideas, collections, and study and community space. Everyone will have the opportunity to become a library member. We will support disadvantaged and marginalised users, welcome new arrivals and assist with their integration into the community. Those who need assistive technologies, literacy resources and sensory equipment will be able to find them at the library.

Our library service will welcome everyone through its doors and continue to be a free service for everyone.

Our strategic actions

11. The number of active library users will return to 2019 levels by the end of 2023 and will increase overall in every remaining year of the strategy.

12. Library opening hours and the impact of the My Open Library service will be reviewed in the first year of the strategy to identify an optimum approach for access to library services.

13. Outreach library services, such as mobile libraries or digital services, will be provided to isolated urban, rural and island communities and to individuals who cannot visit their public library such as the homebound, or those in nursing homes or prisons.

Our strategic alignments

14. We will work with the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the health sector to further develop the Healthy Ireland at Your Library programme and will prepare an initial package of library services in support of the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme by the end of 2023.

15. We will partner with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to fully develop the First 5 Little Library initiative supporting all children under 6 to become library members, informed by evidence-based assessment.

16. We will work with Age Friendly Ireland to make every library in Ireland achieve age friendly recognition by the end of the strategy period.

17. We will expand services and facilities for teenagers and young adults and encourage their use of, and engagement with, the library by working in partnership with the education sector and youth organisations.

18. A new framework will be created by the Department of Rural and Community Development in partnership with the LGMA to facilitate contributions from government, and other third-party funding organisations, including philanthropic sources, to support and enhance library programming focusing on all parts of the community.

19. We will work with the Department of Justice, the Irish Prison Service and prison governors to ensure that every relevant local authority will have a working Service Level Agreement with their local prisons and have commenced delivery of agreed services during 2023.

3: Skills for Life

Our ambition

Public libraries will support individuals at all stages in their lives to develop and maintain the skills they require to navigate the changing world successfully. We will be a trusted information source, providing a wide range of book stock, online and print learning resources to support all of our events, workshops and training programmes. We will support lifelong learning in all its forms and be a crucial partner in enhancing digital inclusion.

Our strategic actions

20. A national 'Skills for Life' umbrella programme of resources and activities will be developed and available through all library authorities by the end of 2024, and will include:

    - Basic digital skills

    - Financial literacy

    - Media literacy

    - Business and employment skills

    - Health awareness

    - Sustainable lifestyles and environmental awareness.

Our strategic alignments

21. We will work with the Department of Education; the Department of Finance; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; the Department of Health; the Department of Social Protection; the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (Department of Public Expenditure & Reform); Media Literacy Ireland; Age Friendly Ireland and all other relevant agencies to support Skills for Life and continue the provision of specific programming, technology and facilities for disadvantaged and marginalised library users.

| 2 | Strategic Theme: **Spaces** |

4: The library as the centre of the community

Our ambition

Public libraries will continue to be central to our cities, towns, and villages. As the only civic spaces in many communities, we will offer trusted and welcoming facilities that encourage community participation and are accessible and relevant to everyone. We will expand our role as the frontline information service for local authorities, continue to signpost users to other reliable agencies and sources of information and design any new services and spaces in partnership with the community. Libraries will be a primary consideration in urban and rural regeneration planning, community development and efforts to support the night-time economy, through evening opening hours and the My Open Library service.

Our strategic actions

22. We will ensure that visitor numbers return to 2019 levels by the end of 2024, and rise in every remaining year of the strategy.

23. We will ensure that meeting, study, and social space is freely accessible for individuals, local organisations and groups.

24. We will ensure that staff in every library authority are able to utilise user-centred design approaches, such as design thinking, in the development of library services.

Our strategic alignments

25. We will work with other government departments and agencies to explore potential additional funding sources for projects focused on community regeneration which will include opportunities for the development of library facilities.

26. We will work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that there is support for the development of areas for children and families in libraries in line with the *First 5* strategy.

27. We will work with Local Community Development Committees to ensure that the role of the library is incorporated into Local Economic and Community Plans to be launched in 2023.

5: Our buildings

Our ambition

Public libraries will enable communities to make maximum use of library services and facilities, including spaces for community engagement, research, education, and recreation. Our libraries will provide up-to-date ICT infrastructure and increase broadband speeds to support the development and roll-out of new and innovative services.

Our strategic actions

28. New Public Library Standards and Benchmarks will be published during 2023 and a review of adherence will commence in 2024.

29. A new Libraries Capital Programme will be developed to align with the strategy for the 2023-2027 period.

30. All new and refurbished library buildings will be developed to meet local community needs, and will adhere to the Capital Management Process in order to meet the highest standards of construction, energy efficiency, capital project management and compliance, accessibility and service delivery.

6: Sustainability and climate action

Our ambition

Public libraries will make a significant contribution to local, national, and international climate and environmental objectives by providing information, knowledge and programmes for the community.

We will provide our users with energy awareness and green lifestyle resources, and promote awareness of libraries' contribution to Ireland's circular economy.

Our strategic actions

31. All new library buildings will support Local Authority Climate Action Plans energy efficiency and sustainability targets.

32. As we upgrade library vehicles, we will prioritise the transition to hybrid, hydrogen or electric library vehicles during the course of the strategy.

33. All libraries will provide information to the public supporting Ireland's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Climate Action Plans.

34. All libraries will offer users access to resources to support home energy saving awareness and assessment.

Our strategic alignments

35. We will work with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver public library objectives under the *National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals 2022-2024*, and we will ensure the role of public libraries is incorporated into subsequent plans.

36. We will work with all relevant government departments to include public library activities in the 2023 National Voluntary Review to the UN High Level Political Forum on the SDGs.

37. We will engage with local authority Climate Teams, Climate Action Regional Offices and energy agencies to ensure library involvement in the implementation of Local Authority Climate Action Plans.

3 Strategic Theme: Connections

7: Our Digital Offer

Our ambition

Public libraries will support users to navigate the digital world and will provide access to the appropriate technology to do this. We will provide a wide range of trusted information sources, both in print form and digitally, and ensure that skilled library staff are available to advise users on how to identify and access reliable information. Recognising the increase in usage of online services during the pandemic, we will provide all library users with access to eBooks and other digital resources to facilitate lifelong learning, on a cost-effective basis to the public library sector.

Our strategic actions

38. The accessibility and ease of use of the Library Management System will be continually improved throughout the lifetime of the strategy to optimise the user experience.

39. Apps for access to the catalogue, digital resources and other library services will be developed.

40. During the lifetime of the strategy we will explore the feasibility of library-owned infrastructure for the provision of eBooks and other digital resources, in collaboration with other countries which have already done this.

41. By the end of 2023, a new national media literacy programme for staff and users will be developed and rolled out.

42. A new network of Gigabit Libraries will be developed by 2025 to offer superfast internet services to users.

Our strategic alignments

43. Throughout the strategy we will work with the Connected Hubs and Broadband Connection Points project teams to explore the expansion and improvement of community access to digital library resources.

44. Through participation in the Erasmus+ ADELE project (Advancing Digital Empowerment of Libraries in Europe), we will collaboratively develop an online self-assessment tool to review the provision and use of digital technologies

Case Study

Library Management System

In 2022, the public library sector implemented a new Library Management System (LMS) providing a single point of access for library members to more than 13,000,000 items held by public library services across the country. This system is supported via a national distribution service that delivers and collects items to and from libraries nationwide. The new LMS provides additional functionality and an enhanced user experience for more than 765,000 library members across the country.

8: Culture

Our ambition

Public libraries will be centres of cultural activity, inspiring and encouraging creativity and hosting free cultural experiences. We will produce and support local cultural events, festivals, exhibitions, and residency programmes, working with the creative community at local and national levels. We will harness the enthusiasm generated by the Decade of Centenaries programme and work with our local communities and partners to collect, explore, preserve and celebrate cultural memories.

Our strategic actions

45. By the end of 2023 we will produce recommendations on the development of new online infrastructure for access to cultural heritage, local history, and other materials, and work to implement the recommendations during the remainder of the strategy period.

46. Libraries will create and hold events, activities, and exhibitions as part of national festivals celebrating Ireland's culture such as Criunniú na nÓg, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Bealtaine, Heritage Week and Culture Night.

Our strategic alignments

47. We will develop libraries' engagement at a national level with the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Creative Ireland to explore opportunities for collaboration and will maintain the high levels of library involvement in partnership locally through the Creative Communities Programmes.

48. We will continue to support libraries to engage with both statutory and non-statutory organisations at local level, to explore opportunities for collaboration.

49. We will work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and European library stakeholders to strengthen the multiple roles of libraries as gateways to, and transmitters of, cultural works, skills and European values, as outlined in the European Union Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026.

9: Cross-Border and Transnational Co-operation

Our ambition

Public libraries will work collaboratively on a cross-border and transnational level to share models of best practice and explore opportunities for joint initiatives and funding. We will strengthen Irish public libraries' contribution to international librarianship by developing new relationships and building on existing ones with European and global organisations. Libraries Development, LGMA will continue to proactively engage in international networks on behalf of the sector.

Our strategic actions

50. We will ensure that there is active collaboration in European and international networks to inform, develop and share models of good practice and contribute to international research.

51. By the end of the strategy period we will have designed and implemented a professional development programme in partnership with Libraries NI, focusing on developing new library leaders.

52. By the end of the strategy period an international network with peer countries in Europe will be formed to further develop the skills of existing library leadership through exchange of best practice and study exchanges.

Our strategic alignments

53. We will engage in joint working with Northern Ireland counterparts and explore opportunities for Shared Island initiative funding.

54. We will work with the National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe Forum (NAPLE), the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA), Public Libraries 2030 and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to raise the profile of Irish public libraries internationally and develop best practice.

Strategic Enablers

The delivery of the strategic priorities will be underpinned by three strategic enablers: data and design, marketing and, above all, the library team.

10: Data Supported and User-Focused Service Design

Our ambition

We will understand the needs of our communities through collection and analysis of data and development of needs analysis and impact evaluation frameworks and will provide services on that basis. We will support this through streamlined and effective mechanisms for recording and analysing library service-related data.

Our strategic actions

55. By the end of 2024 a data dashboard will be available to library leaders to support decision making and service design, followed by a public facing version during the lifetime of the strategy.

56. Current methods used to evaluate the impact of national library programmes and funded projects will be reviewed, training will be provided to library authority staff to implement updated evaluation and impact frameworks.

57. A national approach to support the analysis of user needs will be developed, and the use of user-centred design approaches will be expanded across the library sector to inform service design and development.

58. Local authority spending on library services will be closely monitored in order to progress towards a consistent level of investment in the service.

11: Marketing

Our ambition

Public libraries will be promoted through national and coordinated local marketing campaigns every year. We will use reliable data to inform our marketing, and work with local partners to ensure mutual promotion of our services. The role of libraries in any relevant national campaigns and initiatives will always be highlighted.

Our strategic actions

59. Every local authority will be supported to develop a local promotional marketing campaign focusing on increasing library membership and use.

60. There will be a national public libraries open day in every year of the strategy, where libraries can showcase what they offer.

61. Library staff will receive training annually on marketing and communications.

Case Study

Take a Closer Look

In 2020 the first national campaign to promote public libraries encouraged everyone to reconsider their view and 'take a closer look' at the modern and innovative library services on offer in Ireland. A quirky marketing campaign featured actual library staff, with a distinct visual style. We used social media, radio, print, video on demand and cinema advertising to convey a positive image of modern public libraries and encourage users to visit their local library on the first national public libraries open day, February 29th. During the campaign, the number of new library members increased by 17% compared to the same period the previous year. There was also a 90% increase in those joining the library online and visits to the Libraries Ireland website increased by 228% during the campaign. The campaign achieved national and international recognition, and won an IFLA/Pressreader International Marketing Award in 2021.

THERE'S LOADS FOR YOU AT THE LIBRARY.

SEE FOR YOURSELF.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OPEN DAY.
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 29TH 2020.

Your library
Take a closer look

librariesireland.ie

Libraries Ireland
Makes Every Library Your Local Library

12: Library Team

Our ambition

Our public library staff are the most important element of the strategy. It is their skills, customer service and commitment that have created the impressive range of services that we have today. We can achieve our ambition of placing libraries firmly at the heart of every community by valuing and investing in our library staff.

Our strategic actions

62. The implementation of workforce plans will be completed, and workforce strategies will be mapped against staffing requirements to deliver the strategy to ensure our libraries have adequate staff levels.

63. Staff skills gaps will be addressed through structured programmes, mentoring and training.

64. Commencing in 2023, comprehensive training will be delivered to help staff develop and expand their digital skills, and a cohort of digital library specialists will be created in 2024 to support better digital services in each library authority.

65. A national leadership programme for library staff will be developed during 2024 and rolled out in 2025.

66. Existing approaches to the recruitment and retention of the library workforce will be reviewed in the first year of the strategy to ensure the development of a committed and diverse staff suitable for the delivery of library services during the strategy period.

Case Study

Workforce Development

A national training programme for all library staff was delivered online on Microsoft Teams in both 2021 and 2022. The programme was based on the results of a library staff skills' audit undertaken with all library services in 2020, and in which 983 staff participated. The training programme included online workshops delivered by professional trainers and skills-share sessions involving presentations from library staff. The demand for online training was evident in the high attendance numbers; in 2021, 875 library staff across all library services participated in the online training, and the overall attendance figure for that year was 1,784. The high demand continued throughout 2022 with over 1,000 staff having engaged in the programme since it began. An online platform to support library staff training has also been developed and includes videos, recordings of webinars and workshops, PowerPoint presentations, and other downloadable training resources.

9. Implementation and Monitoring

Implementing the Strategy

The Library is the Place will build on the achievements of its predecessors and the significant strengths of public libraries in Ireland. Its ambition is to increase membership and use of the library system. It will do so by focusing on core reading and literacy offerings, improving library spaces and IT infrastructure. Delivering innovative and resilient programmes and services that can support users as the country enters a new phase following the COVID-19 pandemic, will also be a key element of this objective.

Previous national public library strategies have benefited from an emphasis on partnerships to deliver results, and our new strategy will continue this approach. Strategic alignments with partners and a whole-of-government approach is stressed throughout the strategy's themes and targets, highlighting existing cooperation and creating new areas for joint projects.

The strategy will be implemented by local authorities, supported by the Libraries Development Unit, Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will have a central role in the implementation of this strategy as we seek to optimise staffing of the library service and the delivery of our national programmes. Other government departments, including the Department of Health, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Education, and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications will also play a key role. Outside of government, we will also draw on the important national and local relationships developed and deepened during *Our Public Libraries 2022*, in order to deliver relevant and community-orientated library services.

An implementation plan will be developed to set out steps and requirements towards delivering on each strategic action.

Monitoring Progress

The implementation of the strategy will be overseen by the Libraries Development Committee (LDC). The LDC comprises of local authority Chief Executives, City and County Librarians, and representatives from LGMA and DRCD, and is the most appropriate body for ongoing monitoring and progress evaluation. The Committee brings together the perspectives, expertise and experience of the key partners, and oversees and guides the strategic development of the public library sector. We are confident that this shared partnership approach will ensure the realisation of the aims and vision of this strategy for the benefit of all people and communities.

Local authorities will deliver the programmes, initiatives, and actions of the strategy at local level. The Libraries Development Unit in the LGMA will co-ordinate the national implementation, working to the LDC. Ongoing assessment and monitoring will be carried out to understand how *The Library is the Place* is being implemented and if results are being delivered. Review and evaluation of actions and programmes at key points will complement this approach, and enable the overall impact of the strategy to be measured.

Key stakeholders in the process will be the 30 City and County Librarians who will engage across strategy committees to support implementation. These committees will take responsibility for relevant elements of the strategy and will set in place mechanisms to measure progress and enable reporting on progress to the Libraries Development Committee.

To facilitate this process, at the start of the strategy implementation process, the Libraries Development Committee will develop an outcomes framework, with appropriate outcome and output performance indicators. A formal review of the strategy will be carried out as part of preparing the next library strategy in 2027.

"Bím ag freastal ar Ciorcal Comhrá gach seachtain"

(I attend an Irish Conversation Group every week).

[Consultation contributor]

Appendix 1: Action Plan

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: People				
1: Reading and literacy is at the heart of what we do				
1	The Right to Read programme and Right to Read Local Networks will be expanded to increase the participation of children and young people, families, and adults in reading activities	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	DRCD, DCEDIY, DFHERIS, DoE, NALA, SOLAS, Sport Ireland
2	Every library user has access to a book club that is suitable for them in terms of age and reading level by the end of 2024	Q4 2024	LGMA, Library Authorities	
3	Every library authority will support the annual Ireland Reads national day of reading with events and activities	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
4	Programmes are put in place to meet a book fund annual spend target of 4 Euro per head of population in the lifetime of the strategy, and the amount spent on books rises year on year in every library authority	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	CCMA
5	The availability of services and materials in the Irish language will be increased in every library authority	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), (COGG), Gaelchultúr
6	The amount of remuneration to authors through the Public Lending Remuneration (PLR) scheme for physical lending shall increase by 50% over the lifetime of the strategy	Q4 2027	DRCD	LGMA, British Library
7	We will work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the early learning and care sector to develop the Little Library Programme, and provide uniform levels of literacy and reading development supports for early childhood	Ongoing	LGMA	DCEDIY, Early Learning & Care sector
8	We will work with the Department of Education to build on the current provision of library services to primary and post-primary schools and explore the potential for an expanded programme of library supports which will be delivered in alignment with the Department's forthcoming new national strategy on literacy and numeracy	Ongoing	LGMA	DoE

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: People				
9	We will work with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; SOLAS; the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA); Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and other stakeholders to implement the *Adult Literacy for Life* strategy through library activities	Ongoing	LGMA	DFHERIS, SOLAS, NALA, ETBI
10	We will work with Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), (COGG), Gaelchultúr and other partners to deliver high quality Irish language services through libraries	Ongoing	LGMA	Foras na Gaeilge, Conradh na Gaeilge, An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG), (COGG), Gaelchultúr
2. Libraries for all				
11	The number of active library users will return to 2019 levels by the end of 2023 and will increase at a national level in every remaining year of the strategy	Q4 2023	LGMA, Library Authorities	
12	Library opening hours and the impact of the My Open Library service will be reviewed by the end of 2023 to identify an optimum approach for the remainder of the strategy	Q4 2023	LGMA	DRCD
13	Outreach library services, including mobile libraries and digital services, are provided to isolated rural and island communities and to individuals who cannot visit their public library, such as the homebound, or those in nursing homes or prisons	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
14	We will work with the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and health sector to further develop the Healthy Ireland at Your Library programme and will prepare an initial package of library services in support of the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme by the end of 2023	Q4 2023	LGMA	DRCD, DoH, HSE
15	We will partner with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, to fully develop the First 5 Little Library initiative supporting all children aged five and under to become library members, informed by evidence-based assessment	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	DCEDIY
16	We will work with Age Friendly Ireland to make every library in Ireland achieve age friendly recognition by the end of the strategy period	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	Age Friendly Ireland

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: People				
17	We will expand services and facilities for teenagers and young adults and encourage their use of and engagement with the library by working in partnership with the education sector and youth organisations	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	Foróige
18	A new framework will be created by the Department of Rural and Community Development in partnership with the LGMA to facilitate contributions from government, and other third-party funding organisations, including philanthropic sources, to support and enhance library programming focusing on all parts of the community	Ongoing	DRCD	LGMA
19	We will work with the Department of Justice, the Irish Prison Service and prison governors to ensure that every relevant local authority will have a working Service Level Agreement with their local prisons and have commenced delivery of agreed services during 2023.	Q4 2023	LGMA, Library Authorities	DoJ, Irish Prison Service
3. Skills for Life				
20	A national Skills for Life umbrella programme of resources and activities is developed and available through all library authorities by the end of 2024, which includes: • Basic digital skills • Financial literacy • Media literacy • Business and employment skills • Health awareness • Sustainable lifestyles and environmental awareness	Q4 2024	LGMA, Library Authorities	DoE; DoF; DFERIS; DoH; DoSP; the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer; Media Literacy Ireland; SOLAS; Age Friendly Ireland
21	We will work with the Department of Education; the Department of Finance; the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; the Department of Health; the Department of Social Protection; the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (Department of Public Expenditure & Reform); Media Literacy Ireland; Age Friendly Ireland and all other relevant agencies to support Skills for Life and continue the provision of specific programming, technology and facilities for disadvantaged and marginalised library users.	Ongoing	LGMA	DoE; DoF; DFERIS; DoH; DoSP; the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer; Media Literacy Ireland; SOLAS; Age Friendly Ireland

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: Spaces				
4. The Library as the Centre of the Community				
22	Visitor numbers return to 2019 levels by the end of 2024, and will rise in every remaining year of the strategy	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
23	Meeting, study, and social space is freely accessible for individuals, local organisations and groups	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
24	Staff in every library authority are able to utilise user-centred design approaches, such as design thinking, in the development of library services	Q4 2024	LGMA, Library Authorities	
25	We will work with other government departments and agencies to explore potential additional funding sources for projects focused on community regeneration which will include opportunities for the development of library facilities	Q4 2024	DRCD, LGMA	
26	We will work with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ensure that there is support for the development of areas for children and families in libraries in line with the First Five Strategy	Ongoing	LGMA	DCEDIY, DRCD
27	We will work with Local Community Development Committees to ensure that the role of the library is incorporated into Local Economic and Community Plans, to be launched in 2023.	Q4 2023	LGMA, Library Authorities	LCDCs, PPNs, DRCD
5. Our Buildings				
28	New Public Library Standards and Benchmarks will be published during 2023 and a review of adherence will commence in 2024.	Q4 2024	DRCD, LGMA	
29	A new Libraries Capital Programme will be developed to align with the strategy for the 2023 – 2027 period.	Q4 2023	DRCD, LGMA	
30	All new and refurbished library buildings will be developed to meet local community needs, and will adhere to the Capital Management Process in order to meet the highest standards of construction, energy efficiency, capital project management and compliance, accessibility and service delivery.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	DRCD

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: Spaces				
6. Sustainability and Climate Action				
31	All new library buildings will support Local Authority Climate Action Plans energy efficiency and sustainability targets.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
32	As we upgrade library vehicles, we will prioritise the transition to hybrid, hydrogen or electric library vehicles during the course of the strategy.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	DRCD
33	All libraries will provide information to the public supporting Ireland's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Climate Action plans.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
34	All libraries will offer users access to resources to support home energy saving awareness and assessment.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	DRCD, DECC
35	We will work with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver public library objectives under the National Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals 2022-2024, and we will ensure the role of public libraries is incorporated into subsequent plans.	Q4 2024	LGMA	LGMA, DECC
36	We will work with all relevant government departments to include public library activities in the 2023 National Voluntary Review to the UN High Level Political Forum on the SDGs.	Q2 2023	LGMA	LGMA, DECC, Department of the Taoiseach
37	We will engage with local authority Climate Teams, Climate Action Regional Offices and energy agencies to ensure library involvement in the implementation of Local Authority Climate Action Plans.	Ongoing	LGMA	LGMA, CCMA, CAROs

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: Connections				
7. Our Digital Offer				
38	The accessibility and ease of use of the Library Management System will be continually improved throughout the lifetime of the strategy to optimise the user experience.	Ongoing	LGMA	
39	Apps for access to the catalogue, digital resources and other library services will be developed.	Ongoing	LGMA	
40	During the lifetime of the strategy we will explore the feasibility of library-owned infrastructure for the provision of eBooks and other digital resources, in collaboration with other countries which have already done this.	Ongoing	LGMA	DRCD
41	By the end of 2023, a new national media literacy programme for staff and users will be developed and rolled out.	Q4 2023	LGMA	Media Literacy Ireland
42	A new network of Gigabit Libraries will be developed by 2025 to offer superfast internet services to users.	Q4 2024	LGMA	Local Authority Heads of Information Services, DRCD
43	Throughout the strategy we will work with the Connected Hubs and Broadband Connection Points project teams to explore the expansion and improvement of community access to digital library resources.	Ongoing	LGMA	DRCD, BCPs, Connected Hubs, Local Authority Heads of Information Services
44	Through participation in the Erasmus+ ADELE project (Advancing Digital Empowerment of Libraries in Europe), we will collaboratively develop an online self-assessment tool to review the provision and use of digital technologies	Q1 2024	LGMA	Public Libraries 2030, EGINA, ICCU, Global Libraries Bulgaria Foundation
8. Culture				
45	By the end of 2023 we will produce recommendations on the development of new online infrastructure for access to cultural heritage, local history, and other materials, and work to implement the recommendations during the remainder of the strategy period.	Q4 2023	LGMA	DRCD
46	Libraries will create and hold events, activities, and exhibitions as part of national festivals celebrating Ireland's culture such as Criunniú na nÓg, Seachtain Na Gaeilge, Bealtaine, Heritage Week and Culture Night.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	Creative Ireland

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Theme: Connections				
47	We will develop libraries' engagement at a national level with Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and Creative Ireland to explore opportunities for co-ordinated collaboration and will maintain the high levels of library involvement in partnership locally through the Creative Communities Programmes.	Ongoing	LGMA	DTCAGSM, Creative Ireland
48	We will continue to develop libraries' engagement to explore opportunities for collaboration with both statutory and non-statutory organisations at a local level.	Ongoing	LGMA	Local Authorities
49	We will work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and other European library stakeholders to strengthen the multiple roles of libraries as gateways to and transmitters of cultural works, skills and European values, as outlined in the European Union Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026.	Ongoing	LGMA	LGMA, DFA
9. Cross-Border and Transnational Partnership				
50	We will ensure that there is active collaboration in European and international networks to inform, develop and share models of good practice and contribute to international research.	Ongoing	LGMA	NAPLE, EBLIDA, PL2030, IFLA
51	By the end of the strategy period we will have designed and implemented a professional development programme in partnership with Libraries NI, focusing on developing new library leaders.	Ongoing	LGMA	Libraries NI
52	By the end of the strategy period an international network with peer countries in Europe will be formed to further develop the skills of existing library leadership through exchange of best practice and study exchanges.	Ongoing	LGMA	NAPLE, EBLIDA, PL2030, IFLA
53	We will engage in joint working with Northern Ireland counterparts and explore opportunities for Shared Island initiative funding.	Ongoing	LGMA	Libraries NI, DRCD, Department of the Taoiseach
54	We will work with the National Authorities on Public Libraries in Europe Forum (NAPLE), the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA), Public Libraries 2030 and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to raise the profile of Irish public libraries internationally and develop best practice.	Ongoing	LGMA	NAPLE, EBLIDA, PL2030, IFLA

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Enablers				
10. Data-Supported and User-Focused Service Design				
55	By the end of 2024 a data dashboard will be available to library leaders to support decision making and service design, followed by a public facing version during the lifetime of the strategy.	Q4 2024	LGMA	
56	Current methods used to evaluate the impact of national library programmes and funded projects will be reviewed, training will be provided to library authority staff to implement updated evaluation and impact frameworks	Ongoing	LGMA	DRCD
57	A national approach to support the analysis of user needs will be developed, and the use of user-centred design approaches will be expanded across the library sector to inform service design and development	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	
58	Local authority spending on library services will be closely monitored in order to progress towards a consistent level of investment in the service	Ongoing	LGMA	CCMA, DRCD
11. Marketing				
59	Every library authority will be supported to develop a local promotional marketing campaign focusing on increasing library membership and use.	Ongoing	LGMA	
60	There will be a national public libraries open day in every year of the strategy, where libraries can showcase what they offer.	Ongoing	LGMA, Library Authorities	DRCD
61	Library staff will receive annual training on marketing and communications.	Annual	LGMA	
12. Library Team				
62	The implementation of workforce plans will be completed, and workforce strategies will be mapped against staffing requirements to deliver the strategy to ensure our libraries have adequate staff levels.	Q4 2024	LGMA	DHLGH
63	Staff skills gaps will be addressed through structured programmes, mentoring and training.	Ongoing	LGMA	

No	Action	Timescale	Lead Delivery Organisations	Stakeholders
Strategic Enablers				
64	Commencing in 2023, comprehensive training will be delivered to help staff develop and expand their digital skills, and a cohort of digital library specialists will be created in 2024 to support better digital services in each library authority.	Q4 2024	LGMA	
65	A national leadership programme for library staff will be developed during 2024 and rolled out in 2025.	Q4 2025	LGMA	
66	Existing approaches to the recruitment and retention of the library workforce will be reviewed during 2023 to ensure the development of a committed and diverse staff suitable for the delivery of library services during the strategy period.	Q4 2023	LGMA	

Appendix 2: Sustainable Development Goals

The table below shows how *The Library is the Place's* strategic objectives and targets map to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

	SDG Target	*The Library is the Place* Strategic Objective	*The Library is the Place* Target
1.4	Equal rights to ownership, basic services, technology and economic resources	2	
1.5	Build resilience to environmental, economic and social disasters		20
1B	Create pro-poor and gender-sensitive policy frameworks		18
2.1	Universal access to safe and nutritious food		14
3.4	Reduce mortality from non-communicable diseases and promote mental health		14
3.5	Prevent and treat substance abuse		14
3.7	Universal access to sexual and reproductive care, family planning and education		14
4.2	Equal access to quality pre-primary education		7, 15, 26
4.3	Equal access to affordable technical, vocational and higher education		20, 21
4.4	Increase the number of people with relevant skills for financial success		20
4.6	Universal literacy and numeracy	1	8, 9, 20, 21
4.7	Education for sustainable development and global citizenship	3, 6	20, 21, 33, 34
5.5	Ensure full participation in leadership and decision-making	3	24, 41
5B	Promote empowerment of women through technology		20
6B	Support local engagement in water and sanitation management		14
7.3	Double the improvement in energy efficiency		34
8.3	Promote policies to support job creation and growing enterprises		20
8.6	Promote youth employment, education and training		17, 20
9.1	Develop sustainable, resilient and inclusive infrastructures	4, 5	25, 27, 30, 31, 59
9C	Universal access to information and communications technology	7	43, 44
10.2	Promote universal social, economic and political inclusion	2	
11.4	Protect the world's cultural and natural heritage		46, 47
11.7	Provide access to safe and inclusive green and public spaces	4, 5	
12.7	Promote sustainable public procurement practices		30, 40, 59
12.8	Promote universal understanding of sustainable lifestyles		20, 33
13.3	Build knowledge and capacity to meet climate change		20, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37
16.6	Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions		58
16.7	Ensure responsive, inclusive and representative decision-making		24,58
16.10	Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms	2, 3, 4, 7	4, 5, 20, 21, 41, 44
17.14	Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development	6	
17.17	Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries	9 (All strategic alignments contribute to this target)	

Appendix 3: List of Members of the Committees

Libraries Development Committee

Chair

Anna Marie Delaney, Offaly County Council.

Members

Paula Butler, Local Government Management Agency.

Pat Daly, Limerick County Council.

Paul Dunne, Local Government Management Agency.

Stuart Hamilton, Local Government Management Agency.

Sonya Kavanagh, Kildare County Council.

Kieran Moylan, Department of Rural and Community Development.

Emer O'Brien, Cork County Council.

Mairéad Owens, Dublin City Council.

National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027 Working Group

Chair

Deirdre Kearney, Department of Rural and Community Development.

Members

Gordon Daly, Limerick County Council.

John Duggan, Department of Rural and Community Development.

Catherine Elliot, Monaghan County Council.

Catherine Gallagher, Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council.

Carolyne Godkin, Wexford County Council.

Stuart Hamilton, Local Government Management Agency.

Emer O'Brien, Cork County Council.

Joan Ward, Local Government Management Agency.

Appendix 4: Stakeholder Consultation

Following a comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise two focus groups were held with invited key organisations:

- Age Friendly Ireland
- Arts Council
- Bookselling Ireland
- Children's Books Ireland
- Conradh na Gaeilge
- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- Department of Education
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
- Education & Training Boards Ireland
- Foróige
- Irish Prison Service
- Irish Writers Centre
- Junior Certificate School Programme Libraries
- Library Association of Ireland
- Libraries Northern Ireland
- Local Enterprise Office
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- National Council for the Blind of Ireland
- National Library of Ireland
- SOLAS
- Western Development Commission
- Wikimedia Ireland

Targeted focus groups

Three focus group sessions were held to explore specific areas of the library offer: Irish language, young people, and skills and education.

Stakeholder Questionnaires

Seventeen stakeholder consultation questionnaires were received. Six of these were from local history and archaeological societies. Other stakeholders that submitted a questionnaire were the National Council for the Blind of Ireland; the Health Service Executive; Conradh na Gaeilge; The Department of Education and Skills; Westmeath Libraries; Community Education; Mayo Arts Officer; Urlingford Town Team; Kilkenny Adult Literacy Service; and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals.

Internal stakeholder consultation

A programme of consultation was undertaken with City and County Librarians, Local Authority Directors of Services, frontline staff and project team members. Four workshops were held with over 300 members of staff who provided their views and comments through breakout rooms and feedback sessions.

Government departments

All government departments were consulted on the Strategy by DRCD.

Appendix 5: Public Sector Duty

The values and strategic actions proposed recognise the importance of inclusivity, equality, respect, non-discrimination and free access to all.

Local authorities will abide by their public sector duty in the implementation of the strategy at local level to ensure that there is no discrimination in respect of public library activities. Universal access to trustworthy information supports the rights of all library users to participate in society as informed and engaged citizens.

The LGMA will co-ordinate delivery and monitor the implementation of the strategy, including the commitments to equality, inclusivity, and free access to all.

"I think the community space is great." [Consultation contributor]

Appendix 6: Acknowledgements

"Life itself is a journey of learning. Libraries are a means of transport along the route. An enjoyable one". [Consultation contributor]

"Love that I've read book reviews in the newspaper & shortly afterwards discovered the books arriving in the library." [Consultation contributor]

Investment in public libraries is an investment in people, in their families, in their communities