

# Annual Report

Financial year  
1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024



## Introduction

Our vision is for an inclusive, modern, sustainable, and high-quality public library service at the heart of every community in West Berkshire. This is our seventh annual report, and it is intended to give you an idea of what libraries do, who uses them, our staff and volunteers, what the service costs, and how much town and parishes contributed in the financial year April 2023 to March 2024.

Libraries continue to play an important role in promoting well-being and community cohesion through offering a range of cultural activities and providing many people with free access to vital online services. We continue to work hard to ensure that West Berkshire libraries reflect and respond to local needs and provide a safe and trusted space for all.

As in previous reports we have included comparative data, and the data for 2023-4 shows the strong growth of the library service in all areas. We are always happy to respond to requests for general data about library usage, but please be mindful that requests take up staff time and their priority is to help customers use our services.



“Building on last year’s report, we continue to pursue our vision of providing a 21st century library offering for West Berkshire.

We are developing the idea that our libraries can be community hubs, providing much more than the traditional offering of loaning out books, educational and reference services. We aim to offer digital services such as wi-fi printing, help with accessing council services, as well as providing a space for community groups to meet.

The library service is looking to increase our offering for ‘hard to reach’ areas of our district. We will be expanding our very successful ‘Home Delivery Service’, bringing books to residents who might be house bound as well as providing an opportunity for a chat and interaction with our dedicated volunteer drivers. We will be rolling out ‘pop-up’ libraries that can be set up in community spaces such as village halls, for the benefit of residents in more isolated parts of the district. Again, we hope this will help to combat social isolation.

Despite the challenging economic environment in which we find ourselves, the West Berkshire Library service continues to provide an excellent service for our community and we aim to continue to build on the very encouraging increases in activity, evidenced in this report.

I would like to thank all our dedicated staff and volunteers for all their hard work that has contributed to this success”.

**Councillor Nigel Foot**

## Have you got a suggestion or query?

Email: Felicity Harrison, Culture & Libraries Manager,  
West Berkshire Council  
[Felicity.harrison@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:Felicity.harrison@westberks.gov.uk)



## About the service

The library service is FREE to join for everyone, of any age, living, working, or studying in West Berkshire.

Through our eight libraries: Newbury, Burghfield Common, Hungerford, Lambourn, Mortimer, Pangbourne, Thatcham and Theale, along with the Mobile Library and At Home service, we provided residents with free access to over 129,000 books to borrow in 2023-2024.



Our stock includes adult fiction and non-fiction, children's fiction and non-fiction, e-books, e-audio, large print books, graphic novels, quick reads and world fiction. In addition to books the library service also has the following:

- Free West Berkshire Libraries app – a quick and easy way for library users to access their accounts, to search the catalogue, renew, reserve, and check out books.
- Free children's app – Planet Library, launched in May 2024, which allows library users to search the catalogue, reserve books and renew loans, play games and collect digital rewards.
- Free computer use and wi-fi.
- Free access to e-books, e-magazines and e-newspapers.
- Audiobooks and e-audiobooks to listen to on the go.
- Children's online and in-person events, including Rhymetimes, Code Club and craft events.
- Summer Reading Challenge for children.
- Self-service printing, photocopying and free scanning to email.
- Room hire/library hire.
- Talks on popular topics.
- Wellbeing Bags, with activities to help maintain health and wellbeing.
- BBC micro:bits to try coding projects and ideas at home.
- Book groups – hundreds of titles available in sets of 10 copies (annual fee applies).
- Family and local history resources – including Newbury Weekly News archives available on microfilm.
- Online resources, all available free of charge:
  - **Access to Research** – access to over 10 million academic and research journal articles (available only from computers and mobile devices within a West Berkshire library).
  - **Ancestry Library edition** – Ancestry, the leading online resource for family history research (available only from computers and mobile devices within any West Berkshire library).
  - **Brillder** – helps students to investigate a range of academic topics.
  - **Britannica Online** – full version of the world's most famous and respected multi-volume encyclopedia, plus student and junior additions.
  - **British Newspaper Archive** – millions of pages of historical newspapers from the British Library collection.
  - **Find My Past** – new resource for British and Irish family history records, added in June 2023 to provide access to the 1921 Census (available only from computers and mobile devices within a West Berkshire library.)
  - **Oxford Dictionary of National Biography** – the life stories of over 50,000 people who shaped the history of the British Isles throughout the ages.
  - **Oxford English Dictionary (OED)** – digital access to one of the world's most famous dictionaries.
  - **Theory Test Pro** – online simulation of the UK driving theory test, including the entire official question bank from the Driving Standards Agency, plus online hazard perception tests.
  - **Who's Who** – biographical information on the most influential people of today as well as entries back to 1897.

## 2023/24 comparative statistics

West Berkshire Library Service	2022-2023	2023-2024	% variance
Loans or renewals of library stock	665,546	726,712	8.42%
Active borrowers	13,997	14,861	5.81%
New library members	5,648	6,220	9.20%
Reservations placed	65,968	74,399	11.33%
Visits to the library	277,754	311,168	10.75%
Items added to library stock	15,743	15,936	1.21%
No. of public computers	49	47	-4.2%
Public computer usage (hours)	12,683	13,139	3.47%
No. of public computer users	2,440	2,239	-8.98%
No. of visits to public computers	17,106	12,903	-32.57%
No. of staff (total)	47	47	0%
No. of staff (full time equivalent)	25.06	25.06	0%
No. of volunteers	269	332	18.98%
Volunteer hours	12,278	12,458	1.44%
Weekly opening hours	219.5	219.5	0%
Annual opening hours	11,416	11,416	0%
Planned closure hours	206.5	181.5	-13.77%
Unplanned closure hours	145.6	57.5	-153.22%
Total closure hours	352.1	239	-47.32%
Summer Reading Challenge participants (main challenge)	2,969	3,307	8.95%

Usage of West Berkshire libraries increased across the board in 2023/24 with numbers of library loans, new members, reservations and visits all up considerably as is shown in the table above. Due to demand from residents for study space to use their own devices, we have decreased the number of networked public computers and will continue to monitor this.

The number of volunteers assisting library staff increased by 18.98% and the range of volunteering opportunities available in libraries is regularly reviewed to enable us to enhance our services to residents.

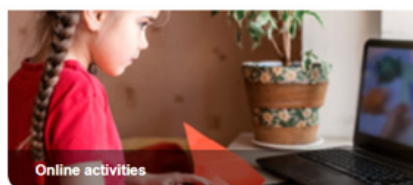


## 2023-24 achievements

The following plans were included in our 2022/23 report for the year ahead:

- ***"Launching a new events module so that customers can access information about all library events and activities in one place, through the West Berkshire Council website."***  
The new library events website can be found at [www.westberks.gov.uk/library-events](http://www.westberks.gov.uk/library-events).
- ***"Working with Family Hubs and the Early Years team to develop the Bookstart offer for pre-school children and West Berkshire Council's offer of 50 Things To Do Before You Are 5."***  
The second year of Bookstart's pilot project for its early years offer was successfully delivered in cooperation with West Berkshire Family Hubs and the Early Years team. The 50 Things app was promoted at Rhymetimes in all West Berkshire libraries.
- ***"Applying for Library of Sanctuary status in recognition of the work we do at Newbury Library in collaboration with Educafe to welcome and support refugees and people seeking sanctuary in our communities."***  
Newbury Library was awarded Library of Sanctuary status in June 2023. As part of this work the library hosted regular craft sessions to support Ukrainian refugees during spring 2024.
- ***"Completing the building improvement work at Thatcham Library."***  
A new entrance was created, accessible toilet added, and the library layout was altered to make better use of space within the building.
- ***"Setting up a Friends of Mortimer Library group, to promote more community engagement and involve local people with the library and increase library usage."***  
The Friends of Mortimer Library group has been formed and is currently supporting Mortimer Library.
- ***"Continuing to work with The Corn Exchange to provide venue opportunities in community libraries throughout the district, to allow the development of their Ageing Creatively programme."***  
The Corn Exchange, Newbury, ran a 5-week art course at Burghfield Common Library in autumn 2023 and arts workshops in Thatcham and Theale libraries in November. They also ran 'At Home' sessions through Mortimer and Lambourn libraries, delivering art packs for home use as part of the Ageing Creatively programme.

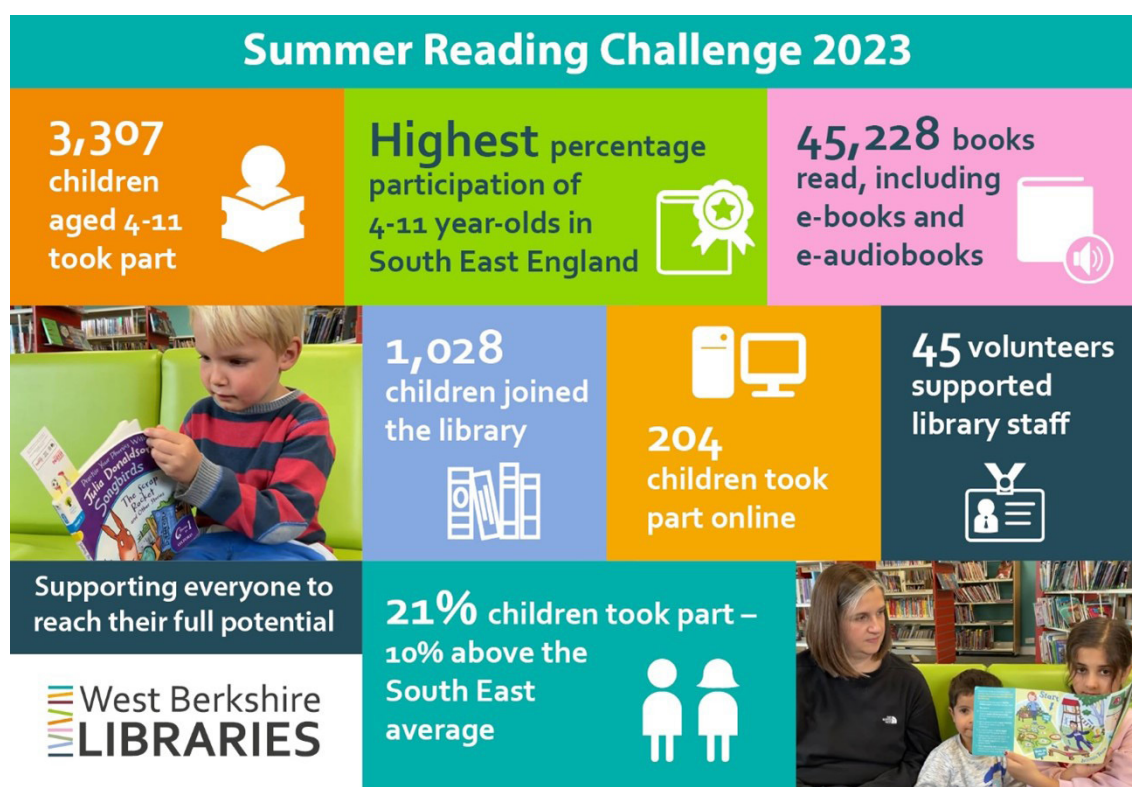
### What's On



## 2023-24 highlights

- During this year, our **47** staff members and **332** volunteers welcomed **311,203** visitors (an increase of **38%** on the previous year), and we gained **6,220** new members (an increase of **9%**). The number of library loans increased by **8%** to **726,712** and library customers placed **74,399** reservations, taking advantage of our free reservation service. The reservation service allows borrowers to reserve an item, either online or in person, which can then be collected from their chosen library. Our e-library was particularly popular again, with **258,033** loans and **20,233** reservations. Our library stock was replenished with **15,936** new items.
- For the third year running, West Berkshire had the highest percentage participation in the national **Summer Reading Challenge**, in the South East of England. The challenge, for 4-11 year olds, reached 21% of the target age range across the district, which is 10% above the average reach for the South East.

We also developed our summer reading challenge for adults, introducing a new **West Berks Book Challenge**, which included prizes given in each library. 873 people took part in this.



- **The Watermill Theatre** presented two performances for young children of the classic tale *The Ugly Duckling* at Newbury Library in April. This included the first **relaxed performance** of a show in a West Berkshire library, adapted for children with additional needs and young families who would benefit from a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Another story was brought to life in a touring company's performance of **Meet Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking** at Newbury Library in October. This event included a popular post-show craft activity.



- We celebrated the **King's Coronation** with various displays, craft activities and events in all libraries. In collaboration with Educafe, Newbury Library held a **Coronation Tea Party**, attended by the Mayor of Newbury and the Chair of West Berkshire Council. Thatcham Library held a **Coronation Celebration morning** of music, games, craft, refreshments and a treasure hunt. Newbury Library also showed the live screening of the Coronation on Saturday 6 May in the Carnegie Lounge.

- Our Wellbeing Bags, first introduced in 2022 and available for library members to borrow free of charge, were 'refreshed' to include new items. This allowed borrowers to enjoy some new activities and ideas to help maintain health and wellbeing.



- Newbury Library was awarded Library of Sanctuary status in recognition of its work in welcoming and supporting refugees and others seeking sanctuary. The Award, given by [City of Sanctuary UK](#), recognises the important role that public libraries play in welcoming refugees and people seeking sanctuary in our communities, and celebrates the libraries that go above and beyond to show solidarity, welcome and compassion for people from a forced displacement background.

Newbury Library was commended for its work undertaken with local organisation [Educafe](#), in partnership with other local service providers, to embrace different cultures and promote social inclusion, health and wellbeing through events, food, education and language support.



- We increased our range of free online resources for library members with **Find My Past**, an archive of over 10 billion searchable records, such as birth, marriage, death and parish records, along with census information including the 1921 Census of England and Wales. This resource is free to access from any computer or mobile device with a West Berkshire library.
- Throughout the summer, we supported **West Berkshire Council's poetry campaign, Poetry in Mind**, encouraging residents to be creative and write their own poetry. In October, all libraries displayed a selection of the poems which were submitted to the Council during the campaign.

- In addition to the arts activities in Burghfield Common, Lambourn, Mortimer, Thatcham and Theale libraries, the Corn Exchange completed a year-long residency providing weekly **World Crafts** workshops at Newbury Library. This was followed by a display of some of their craft work in the library during November.



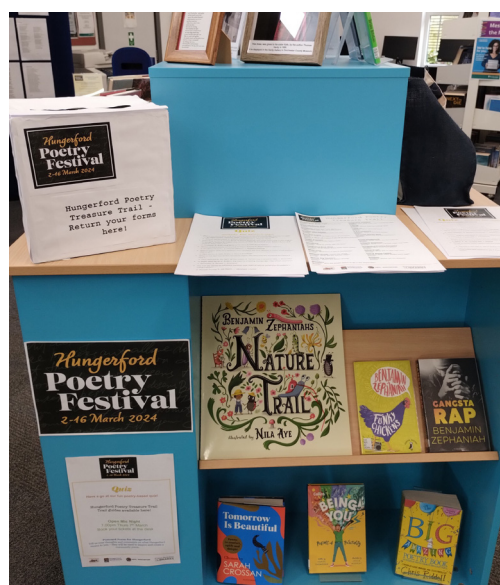
- Following the success of our **West Berkshire Author Showcase** in 2022, a second such event was held in November 2023, providing a forum for local authors to promote and sell their recently published books. We now intend to make this an annual event.

- We supported **Oxford University's nationwide campaign 'Their Finest Hour'**, which aimed to preserve the stories and objects of the Second World War by recording them in a free-to-use online archive. Members of the public were able to bring items of interest to Theale and Hungerford libraries on special collection days, where their objects were photographed or scanned and uploaded to the University's archive.



- Hungerford Library designed and coordinated a new event for the town: **The Hungerford Poetry Festival**. The festival ran across two weeks in March 2023, run by library staff along with staff from Hungerford Hub, Hungerford Bookshop and Arts for Hungerford. Events included two evenings of poetry and comedy by visiting poets, a poetry workshop run by a local author, an open mic evening at the library, a festival quiz and a poetry trail around the town. The library also hosted an exhibition of over 150 poems contributed by Hungerford Primary School pupils, residents and visitors.

62 people completed a postcard with thoughts about what the town means to them, and these will be developed into a 'Poem For Hungerford' during 2024.

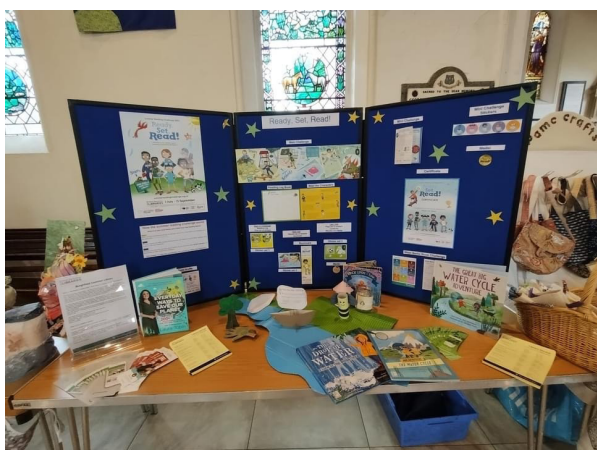


- **Educafe** at Newbury Library continued to grow, providing a very popular drop-in community cafe on Wednesdays. Educafe offer English language and employability skills and support, baby-friendly activities and visits by local maternity and parenting experts, along with information and advice from a variety of local businesses, public services and other community organisations and charities. Educafe also runs seated wellbeing sessions in the library each week.

In connection with their language and culture programme, Educafe began a 17 week course at the library during spring 2024 for members of the Hong Kong community in West Berkshire.



- We were successful in applying to The Reading Agency for books to gift in connection with **World Book Night 2023**. This enabled us to work with Educafe to distribute 80 copies of a 'Quick Read' title to Newbury Library users seeking to improve their English language skills.



*Burghfield Library Outreach to Festival of Creation at St Mary's Church Burghfield June 2023.*



*World Book Day at Burghfield Library with Mrs Blands Nursery and Infants School visit.*

## How much did it cost / how much income generated?

People sometimes ask how much a certain library branch costs. Some costs are specific to a branch: for example, staff, energy, rates, and maintenance. Others are shared with the whole service – professional librarians and back-office staff, emergency staff cover, book stock and digital library stock, ICT support, marketing etc. All the parts of the service are inter-dependent, so all branch libraries benefit from being part of the wider service, and the library service benefits from being part of West Berkshire Council: for example, corporate support for ICT, health and safety, HR, and phone contracts.

Our income includes contributions from town and parish councils, library item charges and fines, income from rent, events, book sales and grants.

In the information below we have also included information about capital investment in the library service.

<b>Revenue Expenditure (Running costs)</b>	<b>£ 2022-23</b>	<b>£ 2023-24</b>
Staff	976,528	967,232
Premises - energy, rates, maintenance costs	297,432	328,767
Supplies and services - ICT, marketing, transport, e-resources	188,174	157,533
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,462,134</b>	<b>1,453,532</b>
<b>Income</b>		
Fees and charges/fines, rent, venue hire, events, sales	(77,659)	(80,071)
Voluntary contributions from town and parish councils*	(38,030)	(14,390)
Other income including donations	(4,811)	(4,371)
<b>Total</b>	<b>(120,500)</b>	<b>(98,932)</b>
<b>Net cost of the library service</b>	<b>1,341,634</b>	<b>1,354,700</b>
<b>Capital Investment (Fixed Assets)</b>		
Building improvements	54,855	51,264
Book stock and associated costs	121,359	160,616
ICT improvements (** CIL funding)	1,212	1,621
<b>Total</b>	<b>177,426</b>	<b>213,501</b>
<p>*£38,870k was received in voluntary contributions from Town and Parish Councils in 2023/24; however due to an issue from 2022/23 where an expected payment was not received and then subsequently reversed, the total showing is £14,390.</p> <p>**The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a charge which can be levied by local authorities on new development in their area. It is an important tool for local authorities to use to help them deliver the infrastructure needed to support development in their area.</p>		

## Support from Town and Parish Councils

We always appreciate the help and support we receive from Town and Parish Councils in helping us to promote the library service, for example, by publicising libraries to their communities and helping us to recruit local volunteers.

We would like to thank those who made a financial contribution to the library service. In 2023/24 we received a total £38,870 from parish councils.

## Volunteers

We are always immensely grateful to all our volunteers for the help they provide. During 2023/24, **332** volunteers played a vital role in supporting our libraries and the West Berkshire community. Between them they spent **12,458** hours helping us by:

- Supporting staff in ensuring that visitors made the most of their time in the library.
- Assisting computer users with getting online and answering their IT queries.
- Helping out with events and activities such as Rhymetimes and crafts.
- Helping with stock work using our library management system.
- Supporting the At Home service by regularly delivering books and audiobooks to housebound readers.
- Ensuring books were shelved correctly and the library kept tidy.
- Supporting the Summer Reading Challenge, engaging with the participants, and chatting about the books they have read.



We have also helped **60** young people complete the volunteering section for their Duke of Edinburgh placement this year.

We are always keen to recruit new volunteers and to review the roles that we offer to be as flexible as possible.

We always take the time to communicate with our volunteers, thanking them for their efforts and giving feedback about the difference they are making. We greatly appreciate the fact that they give their time to support libraries, and we couldn't run the service without them.

If you would like to volunteer please talk to library staff or look online:

[www.westberks.gov.uk/volunteer](http://www.westberks.gov.uk/volunteer)

## Challenges and Plans for 2024-25

### Our plans for 2024/25 include:

- Engaging with Town and Parish Councils to improve the offering of library services in their areas and develop opportunities to purchase enhanced services.
- Working with Public Health, Children and Family services, and wider health partners to introduce a targeted programme of activity to improve school readiness and reduce health inequalities.
- Streamlining our shared library catalogue, to improve its performance and speed for library customers, in conjunction with the SELMS consortium.
- Piloting a weekly Ageing Creatively Community Café at Theale Library in association with the Corn Exchange, with a view to rolling out the model to other libraries across the district.
- Working with Public Health commissioned community outreach programmes to promote library services.
- Expanding the West Berkshire Libraries At Home service to cater for families without transport in rural areas, as well as those residents who find it difficult to visit their local library because of age or disability.
- Running the Summer Reading Challenge in association with The Reading Agency with an additional focus on the Mini Challenge for pre-school children to improve school readiness for seldom heard communities/families.
- Launching the West Berkshire Libraries Children's App to encourage interest in reading.
- Starting a Digital Device Loan Initiative.
- Piloting a digital escape room with focus groups of young people, to provide an interactive tool which promotes awareness of the libraries' offer to secondary school students in an innovative way.
- Starting a library 'Friends Group' at Burghfield Library, so that applications for grants can be made to funders where local authorities are not eligible to apply.

