

# About our libraries consultation

Northumberland Libraries are thinking of making some changes. We need your help to do this.

Here are some of the things we are thinking about doing:

- Making sure that staff have more time to help you, by rearranging how they work
- Looking at opening hours, so that:
  - larger libraries have the longest opening hours and are open Monday to Saturday
  - smaller libraries will be open at least 12 hours per week (some are only open for four hours now)
- Asking people if they would like more libraries to become a 'Community Access Library' with local people looking after the library
- Trying out new technology that will allow you (with an adult) to use a library when staff aren't there
- Using our mobile library to visit more villages in Northumberland



## Have your say

We want to understand what is important to you about your library.

If you age 16 or under, please complete our short questionnaire [here](#).

The consultation closes at 5pm on Monday 13 April 2026.

## More information

Here's some more information about our libraries and the survey.

How many libraries are there in Northumberland?

There are 29 libraries. Two of them are 'Community Access Libraries'.

Will I still be able to do all the things I like doing a library now?

Yes. Libraries will still have:

- books
- computers
- activities or events
- space to sit and do what you want to do in a library

What will you do with my answers?

We will read your answers to help us decide what to do next.

# About our libraries consultation

Northumberland's Library Service is being redesigned, and we need your help to do it.

On 10 February, Cabinet launched a public consultation so that we can get your views on the future of libraries, including:

- how we work with communities
- new ways of working generally
- opening hours and mobile library routes
- our digital offer
- how we deliver events, activities and information



## Have your say

We want our communities and residents to help shape this work.

**[To get involved and have your say, complete our survey here.](#)**

Please note:

- If you would like a printed copy or need the consultation in an alternative format, please ask at your local library or contact
- You do not need to be a member of Northumberland Libraries to have your say

- This consultation is for adults – view the Children and Young People consultation [here](#)
- We recommend reading the background information below before completing the survey

The consultation closes at 5pm on Monday 13 April 2026.

## Background

Northumberland County Council has a legal duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for those who live, work or study in the county.

We're committed to meeting the needs of our communities.

### Overview of our libraries

Our libraries work to a national framework of delivery that covers:

- reading
- information and digital
- health and wellbeing
- culture and creativity
- a Children's and Young People's Promise (inspiring, welcoming and inclusive libraries)



Northumberland Libraries currently offer:

- 29 libraries across the county with more than 270,000 physical books and items available
- two community libraries ran by volunteers
- a mobile library service
- a home library service
- a digital library available 24/7 with eBooks, audiobooks, newspapers, magazines and more
- a prison library service
- a school's library service

The Schools Library Service and the Prison Library Service are not part of this consultation.

Some statistics from our library service include:

- nearly a million items issued each year and over half of these are physical items, such as books
- 3,500 events held in libraries with 45,000 attendees
- over 25,000 hours of free PC use recorded in 2024-25
- nearly 60,000 people registered with the library
- 20,000 people (7% of the population) actively use their library card

## Our 2021-2025 strategy

In 2021, residents told us that they wanted:

- a better range of books
- longer opening hours
- a more consistent service across the county
- improvements to the library environment

Over the last four years, we've been delivering a strategy for libraries that includes:

- strengthening the services we offer
- creating library 'hubs' (main library sites)
- extending our services to reach more people
- working with partners to enhance our services

A lot has been achieved since then, including the purchase of a new mobile library unit in January 2025.

However, there is more to be done to modernise libraries, balanced with the need to become more efficient and make financial savings.

## Why is there a need to change?

There are several reasons for considering change, including:

- Short notice library closures
- Lack of consistency across libraries
- Several libraries are open less than 10 hours per week
- Three libraries have fewer than 50 active members (Lynemouth, Kielder, South Beach)
- At least two libraries are within two miles of another library
- The number of libraries available per 100,000 population is higher than neighbouring authorities (10.4 in Northumberland compared to 6.61 in North-East Combined Authority)

These factors put pressure on the sustainability of our libraries service.

## New ways of working

We're committed to putting communities first and making every contact count.

We strive to be proactive and preventative. We want our staff to listen, engage and make sure that support reaches those who need it most.

We're proposing to combine face-to-face customer services with the face-to-face library services. We hope this will make us more efficient and better able to support people. Telephone and online customer services will remain unchanged.



Teams working in the Library at Queens Hall, Hexham, have already started to work in this way.

## What is being proposed?

Read about the proposals we have put forward as part of this consultation.

## A new way of organising library services

We are looking at a new way of running library services. We want to do this by working in partnership with local communities.

### Cluster model

Hub Libraries would be larger libraries in the North, South, East, West and Central areas. These bigger libraries would be open for longer and offer more services.

Smaller libraries would still be important and would help people access services close to home.

This 'cluster' model helps us be efficient and more consistent across the county.

### Example of Cluster Model

	Hub 45 hours	Primary 28 hours	Secondary 12 hours	Community Access Library	Community bookshelf
North	Berwick Alnwick	Rothbury Wooler			Seahouses
West	Hexham	Haltwhistle	Allendale Bellingham Corbridge	Haydon Bridge Heddon Kielder	
East	Ashington	Amble	Newbiggin Lynemouth Widdrington		Ellington Hirst
South	Blyth Cramlington	Bedlington		Bedlington Station Seaton Sluice Seaton Valley South Beach	
Central	Morpeth	Ponteland Prudhoe	Wylam	Guide Post	

### Community Access Libraries

Community Access Libraries (CALs) are small libraries run by local volunteers. They give people more opportunity to use library services.

For example, Haydon Bridge CAL is open 15 hours a week and Heddon CAL is open 8 hours a week. Together they issue around 2,000 items and have 57 and 83 active members.

We want to explore whether more libraries could become CALs. This will depend on interest from local people and partners. Some libraries have been identified as possible future CALs.

More information is available in the section on Community Access Libraries.

### Community bookshelves

There are three community bookshelves that help people access books closer to home. These are not part of the main library service.

We are looking at how this idea could grow using new technology. We would like to hear from any places that might want to take part in a community bookshelf trial.

More details are in the section on digital solutions.

## A new pattern of opening hours

If proposals are agreed, there will be:

- seven 'hub' libraries staffed for 45 hours per week
- seven 'primary' libraries staffed for 28 hours per week
- seven 'secondary' libraries staffed for 12 hours per week
- eight Community Access Libraries to provide agreed hours supported by volunteers

Some libraries will be open evenings and weekends.





# Hub libraries

Hub libraries would be staffed at 45 hours per week. Unstaffed opening hours are indicated in the comments below.



	Alnwick	Ashington	Berwick	Blyth	Cramlington	Hexham	Morpeth
Current	54	49.5	47	45	45.5	49.5	45
	-9	-4.5	-2		-0.5	-4.5	
Proposed	45	45	45	45	45	45	45

Located within Ashington Sports & Leisure centre  
Self-service available 49.5 hours

Located within Cramlington Community Hub  
Self-service available 48.5 hours (TBC)

Located within Morpeth Sports & Leisure Centre  
Self-service available 100 hours



# Primary libraries

Primary libraries would be staffed at 28 hours per week.  
Unstaffed opening hours are indicated in the comments below.



Amble

Current

24.5

+3.5

28

Proposed

Bedlington

26.5

+1.5

28

Haltwhistle

34.5

-6.5

28

Ponteland

12

+16

28

Prudhoe

44.5

-16.5

28

Rothbury

17

+11

28

Wooler

38

-10

28

Located within  
Ponteland Sports  
& Leisure Centre

Self-service  
available 100  
hours

Located within  
Spetchells Centre

Potential for self-  
service options



# Secondary libraries

Secondary libraries would be staffed at 12 hours per week.  
Unstaffed opening hours are indicated in the comments below.



	Allendale	Bellingham	Corbridge	Lynemouth	Newbiggin	Widdrington	Wylam
Current	6	12	15	9	0	8	12
	+6		-3	+3	+12	+4	
Proposed	12	12	12	12	12	12	12

Located within  
Newbiggin  
Community  
Hub/Leisure  
Centre  
  
Self-service  
available 40 hours

# Community Access Libraries

CALs would operate without council staffing



	Bedlington Station	Guide Post	Haydon Bridge	Heddon	Kielder	Seaton Sluice	Seaton Valley	South Beach
Current	9	6.5	CAL	CAL	4	12	6	4
	-9	-6.5			-4	-12	-6	-4
Proposed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Bedlington Station library is within 1.6 miles of Bedlington Library	Our Schools Library Service operate from Guidepost Library	Current Community Access Library ran by volunteers	Current Community Access Library ran by volunteers	Potential self-service options	Currently volunteer led with council support	Plans to develop volunteer support in this library	Volunteer network in place

This represents a 6% reduction in staffed opening hours. However, this would be offset (and could result in an overall increase in opening hours) by:

- the option to create more Community Access Libraries (CALs)
- trying out new technologies to extend the reach and accessibility of library services

## Digital solutions and new technologies

### Open access

You might be familiar with the self-service kiosks in several libraries. Kiosks allow you to issue, renew and return your items yourselves. This saves time and frees staff to help with more events or answer enquiries.

Many library services now use a fully self-service system. The system enables your library card to act as a 'key' to the library. This is often known as 'open access'.

This open access would allow adults to:

- enter a library for extended opening hours
- choose and return books using the kiosks
- use the public computers and WiFi
- use the space for study
- meet as a group to host an activity, such as a reading group

It provides a service at quieter times and outside normal opening hours. It also supports with staff shortage due to sickness or weather conditions.

Children under the age of 16 need to be accompanied to use a self-service library.

CCTV, risk assessments and emergency phones ensure the health and safety of users during self-service hours. Library members can opt out of the activation of their library card. Those who choose to use it would complete a short induction to understand how to use the service safely.

We have earmarked transformation funds to pilot the use of a self-service library.

### Automated bookshelves

We're exploring how automated bookshelves could support readers in rural or isolated communities and be part of our outreach offer.

They operate like a dispensing machine to collect reservations and choose/return books. For example, in non-library spaces or when the main library is closed.

## New Community Access Libraries (CALs)

CALs are volunteer managed and operated.

We propose that CALs have a connection to the statutory library service for operational support and identity. They won't form part of the council's future statutory responsibility.

The current CALs are supported with:

- library stock
- access to the library management system (LMS)
- public PCs
- information and professional support from the public library service
- appearing listed as one of the branch libraries on the council's website for reservation collections, issues and returns

They offer a programme of activities and events. They also take part in county-wide initiatives such as the Summer Reading Challenge.

The creation of a CAL means the buildings and facilities management transfer to the local community. A Memorandum of Understanding or a Service Level Agreement would set out the responsibilities of each party.

We propose to approach local communities, parish councils, volunteer groups and interested stakeholders at six initial sites that may be suitable for conversion to the CAL model.

We would also like to hear from any community interested in using this model of delivery.

Get in touch by emailing [libraries.consult@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:libraries.consult@northumberland.gov.uk)

The libraries currently suggested are:

- Bedlington Station
- Guidepost
- Kielder
- Seaton Sluice
- Seaton Valley
- South Beach

This is because they meet at least one of the following criteria:

- are open less than 10 hours per week
- issue less than 3000 items per year
- have public PCs that are used less than 5% of the time
- have fewer than 50 active library members using their cards
- may have more opportunity to develop if it became a CAL

We realise that these sites are important to those who use them and would like to find a way that they remain accessible to local people.

To support the successful delivery and sustainability of volunteer managed libraries in Northumberland, we are setting out a proposed transition period of up to two years, that could include a tapered financial package of support to assist with partial help for insurance, legal, utilities and other building associated costs.

In addition, a long-term support framework would be put in place. The key elements of this long-term support are:

- an initial collection of books that will transfer with the building
- eBooks, eAudio, ePress supplied without charge by the library service
- access to the Library Management System (LMS) for catalogues and loans supplied without charge by the library service
- county wide promotional materials
- basic training in the use of the LMS, Data Protection and public health and safety matters provided for volunteers
- a 'buddy' hub library to provide professional advice and information
- WiFi
- a single public PC with basic software capabilities
- printing and scanning facilities at the discretion of the CAL

## Bringing a 'new' Secondary Library into the statutory provision

Newbiggin Library is not currently supported by regular library staff on site and is looked after by colleagues working in the building.

This location would benefit from regular staffing hours, supporting more library activities and events, and scheduled times when you can ask for assistance or advice about council services.

2,050 items were borrowed from this library in 2024-25 and there were 127 active members.

We propose that Newbiggin becomes a Secondary Library and is staffed 12 hours per week.

## Mobile Library review of routes and provision proposal

We invested in a new mobile library in 2025. The previous vehicles had become obsolete and no longer fit for purpose.

We propose that the new vehicle continue to visit 214 locations. These visits would take place every six weeks instead of every three. Members would be allowed to borrow more books, and they could keep them for longer. We know people value this service, and the aim is to keep it running well while staying within budget.

Mobile library services are important. They give people in rural areas access to books, digital resources, and learning.

We could improve these services by working with local community hubs and wider VCSE networks through Thriving Together our VCSE coordination partner. Hubs could act as drop off and collection points. This would make the service stronger, cheaper to run, and easier for people to use.



Working with communities would make libraries more convenient. It would encourage people to use local community spaces and connect people into existing support such as befriending. This could:

- help reduce loneliness
- increase activity in local hubs
- make sure services meet the needs of residents

More people might volunteer to help collect or deliver books. This would help the service:

- become part of everyday community life
- make better use of local resources

Using community hubs for regular library drops would reduce the need to rely on mobile library vehicles. Hubs could offer:

- reading corners
- computers
- space for events like book clubs or workshops if the facilities are available

Volunteers would play a key role. They could train to help with book reservations, digital skills, and promoting library services.

Bringing mobile libraries and community hubs together would create a service that:

- is stronger

- is more inclusive
- supports learning
- brings communities closer

The Home Library Service will still be available for the most vulnerable people. Volunteers will continue to visit them at home and deliver books/services to their door.

[More information about the Home Library Service can be found here.](#)

## Additional considerations

Proposals have been set out for Cabinet consideration. Following the public consultation, a final set of recommendations will return to Cabinet for decision.

The proposals set out a way in which the Future Library Service can develop and meet the needs of residents. They aim to increase access to council services at more locations across the county.

We want to strengthen the library offer by:

- making best use of assets both within the council and local communities
- working in partnership
- creating volunteering opportunities

A full Integrated Impact Assessment was undertaken to ensure proposals meet equality duties. A separate Integrated Impact Assessment has also been undertaken for the Mobile Library.



## Having your say

We want to hear from as many different people as possible:

- the children and young people version for under 16s is available [here](#)
- the full consultation is available in an easy-read format
- the consultation can be provided in different languages or printed upon request

The consultation is being supported by a publicity campaign. This includes social media posts. We have face-to-face opportunities to hear more about the proposals and have your say too.

See below a list of provisional dates, times and locations. Please check before attending any meeting.

Further details to be confirmed via the library website nearer the time.

<b>Provisional Date</b>	<b>Location</b>
Wednesday 25 February (am)	Hexham
Thursday 26 February (pm)	Allendale
Thursday 26 February (pm)	North Northumberland/ Castle Morpeth Community Partnership
Friday 27 February (am)	Morpeth
Friday 27 February (am)	Amble
Friday 27 February (pm)	Rothbury
Monday 2 March (am)	Newbiggin
Monday 2 March (pm)	Lynemouth
Tuesday 3 March (pm)	South Beach
Wednesday 4 <sup>th</sup> March (am)	Seaton Sluice
Wednesday 4 March (pm)	Widdrington
Wednesday 4 March (pm)	Ashington
Thursday 5 March 5-7pm	Town & Parish Council Conference
Friday 6 March (am)	Bedlington Station
Friday 6 March (am)	Haltwhistle
Friday 6 March (pm)	Guide Post
Friday 6 March (pm)	Haydon Bridge
Monday 9 March (pm)	Cramlington
Wednesday 11 March (11am-2pm TBC)	Corbridge
Wednesday 11 March (11am-2pm TBC)	Wooler
Friday 13 March (am)	Seaton Valley
Friday 13 March (pm)	Ponteland
Friday 13 March (pm)	Heddon
Tuesday 17 March (pm)	Bedlington

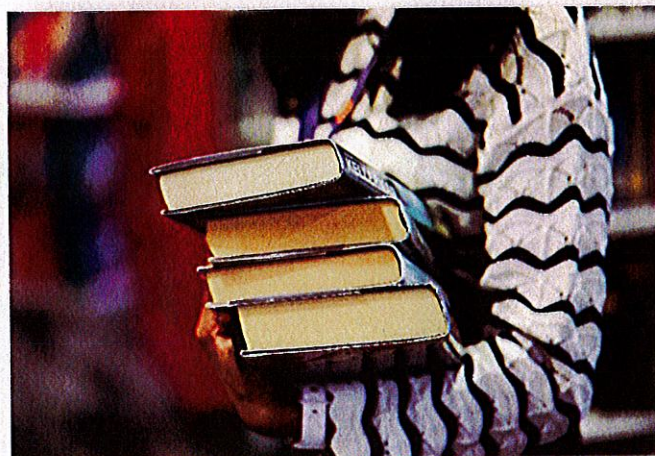
Wednesday 18 March (TBC)	Berwick
Thursday 19 March (pm)	Prudhoe
Friday 20 March (am)	Blyth
Friday 20 March (am)	Bellingham
Friday 20 March (pm)	Kielder
Tuesday 24 March (pm)	Wylam
Tue 24 March (pm)	Cramlington, Bedlington & Seaton Valley Partnership
Tuesday 24 March (pm)	Alnwick
Tue 31 March (pm)	Tynedale Community Partnership

If you'd like to volunteer with the library service, we would love to hear from you.

Please email [mylibrary@northumberland.gov.uk](mailto:mylibrary@northumberland.gov.uk) for current volunteering opportunities.

If you are not currently a member of the library service, find out how to join the library [here](#).

Thank you for taking the time to read our background information.







# Northumberland County Council

Cabinet

Tuesday, 10 February 2026

## Service Redesign - Libraries and Customer Services

**Report of Councillor(s)** Wendy Pattison, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism. Nick Oliver, Cabinet Member for Finance and Value for Money

**Responsible Officer(s):** Gill O'Neill, Executive Director for Public Health (DPH), Inequalities & Stronger Communities

### 1. Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

This report links to all three of the Council's priorities:

**Tackling Inequalities** – Libraries and Customer Services are well placed to assist in tackling inequalities. They offer a wide range of information and activities supporting health and wellbeing, as well as providing a safe, inclusive and welcoming environment for individuals, families and interest groups. They provide a significant role in the development of literacy, social and digital skills for those who live, work or study in the County. The two teams play a significant role in the Council's system-based approach to tackling inequalities by using data and intelligence to ensure that every contact counts and resident needs are met through more targeted delivery.

**Economic Development** – Libraries provide an accessible resource for individuals seeking employment through providing opportunities to gain new skills and enabling digital access. Libraries help build engaged and empowered communities supporting economic growth and regeneration. The Business and Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC) network supports business start-up and growth. Customer Services provide targeted support to help individuals access the benefits to which they are entitled, improving financial stability and reducing the risk of hardship.

**Value For Money** – Providing a new integrated sustainable, high quality, Library and Information Service enables those who live, work and study in the County to access a greater range of convenient face-to-face services and support contributing towards the Council's aim to achieve value for money for all residents.

## 2. Purpose of report

This report describes proposals, and supporting rationale, to transform the current operating model for both face-to-face library, and customer services to create 'a universal front door' to increase equity in access to council services.

The report outlines the Council's statutory obligations, under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service, and describes the programme of public consultation planned to seek public opinion on the proposals.

## 3. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

Note the methodology and activity undertaken to review the current service operating models and inform the proposals for a new integrated Library and Information Service.

Consider the proposals to create a new Library and Information Service including the creation of a 'universal front door', the introduction of an area based 'hub and cluster' model, revised staff operating hours, extension of the network of Community Access Libraries (CALs), making better use of digital services, and redesign of the Mobile Library offer.

Approve the commencement of an eight-week period of formal public consultation, supported by a programme of awareness raising and engagement, commencing Monday 16 February 2026 and concluding Monday 13 April 2026.

Agree to receive a further report describing the findings from the public consultation and final proposals for implementation of a new Library and Information Service to be considered prior to implementation.

## 4. Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

The Report was first listed on the Forward Plan 13 November 2025.

## 5. Background

There are currently 29 physical libraries across Northumberland, including two Community Access Libraries managed by volunteers. There is also a Mobile Library Service, Prison Library Service, School Library Service and Home Library Service. The digital library is available 24/7 offering millions of newspaper and magazine articles, books, audio books and research and study materials. The proposed consultation focusses on the Public Library Service, including face to face delivery, digital, Mobile and Home Library Services.

In Northumberland 10.4 libraries are provided per 100,000 population. This is compared to 7.14 for County Durham, and 6.61 for the North East Combined Authority (NECA) area. This level of provision puts pressure on the sustainability of the Service.

The service is currently offered through five hub libraries from which a network of smaller libraries span. Some libraries are situated in leisure centres, whilst others

are co-located with partners in cultural venues. Others are in community or stand-alone settings.

Libraries are more than just places to read and borrow books. They are places where communities come together and those who live, study or work in the County can learn new skills, join social and learning groups, spend time with their families enjoying reading, songs and music with their children, have a hot drink in a warm space, take time out in a safe space, and pursue personal development.

Libraries are also ideal places for people to seek support and access public services. They are often closer to residents' homes than other public services and can provide more tailored and localised support in a welcoming universal environment.

Volunteering is very much at the heart of libraries and provides several benefits to the service, including managing two Community Access Libraries. Volunteers provide extra support to library staff and customers including through providing the Home Library Service. Volunteering within the Library Service helps individuals gain new skills and contribute to their local communities. The very act of volunteering has been found to increase the wellbeing of individuals and is an active part of the council's Communities First way of working.

Northumberland Library Service works to a national framework of 'Universal Offers' that covers Reading, Information and Digital, Health and Wellbeing, Culture and Creativity, and the Children's and Young People's Promise for inspiring, welcoming and inclusive libraries. Through providing opportunities and activities that support delivery of these offers, libraries contribute to the Council and its partners working towards giving children the best start in life, helping people achieve their ambitions, and supporting people to be as well as possible for as long as possible with independence and control over their lives.

### ***Budget***

The overall Library Service budget for 2025-2026 is £2,593,470. This includes £2,355,520 for staffing and £608,330 for non-staffing. The Service has an efficiency target agreed at February 2025 Council meeting of £344,000 over 2025-2026 and 2026/2027.

### ***Customer Services***

Dedicated face-to-face Customer Services staff are available in six locations across the County for 106.5 hours per week. These are; Berwick Walkergate, Alnwick Lindisfarne Centre, Ashington Town Hall, Blyth Library, Cramlington Hub and Hexham Queens Hall.

The face-to-face Customer Service Team are multi-skilled and currently work delivering both in person services and answering calls in the contact centre.

The team deal with a wide range of enquiries from customers who prefer to speak to someone directly and may have limited digital skills. Enquiries range from applications for bus passes and blue badges, council tax and benefits support to housing and homelessness and anything in between. The team operate under the Make Every Contact Count (MECC) principal to ensure as much support as possible is given to customers at the first point of contact, they receive correct advice or signposting to specialist advice or community partners.

The Customer Experience budget for 2025-26 face-to-face information centres is £832,970.

### ***The Legal Framework***

Sections 7 and 8 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act imposes a statutory duty on local authorities to 'provide a comprehensive and efficient Library Service for those who live, work or study in the area'. In providing this service, councils must 'encourage both adults and children to make full use of the library service' and 'lend books and other printed material free of charge...'. The term 'library service' is not defined in law, nor are the concepts 'comprehensive' and 'efficient'. Library facilities whilst referred to are not defined by legislation. It is accepted that a library service will include digital as well as printed resources.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is the regulator of the statutory public library service charged with superintending and promoting the improvement of the service and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of their library functions. As part of the Northumberland Library Service Review, DCMS have been a key stakeholder and are fully sighted on transformation and consultation proposals. Engagement with the DCMS will continue throughout the process through to implementation.

## **6. The Opportunity to Improve Services**

### ***Library Service User and Non-User Consultation 2021***

In 2021, following an extensive consultation exercise, NCC Cabinet agreed three strategic principles for the County's future Library Service provision based on:

1. Strengthening the core service
2. Establishment of Library Hubs within each Locality area
3. Extending reach and partnerships

The results from the consultation demonstrated and confirmed the important role the Library Service plays in the lives of Northumberland residents, particularly amongst the County's population of older people and those who use the service regularly. In addition to the provision of books, computers and resources, the value of the Library Service was recognised as a safe, inclusive, social space for community members.

The consultation particularly highlighted that residents wanted a better range of books, longer opening hours, a more consistent service across the county, and improvements to the library environment.

Following the consultation much has been achieved over the past three years including:

- the establishment of five Hub Libraries located at Berwick, Cramlington, Hexham, Morpeth and Blyth
- the introduction of 14 self-service kiosks
- expansion of the online Library Service offer through Investment in *Borrowbox* and *Pressreader* driving digital issues up, now 57% of total issues for 2024/25 (from 41% in 2023/24)

- an increase in events, more than 3531 April 2024 to March 2025; attended by 20,038 children and 24,766 adults
- the adoption of a Social Impact tool which is building evidence of social value and demonstrating impact of libraries
- further collocation of library services within NCC and community assets eg Morpeth Leisure Centre and Bedlington Station Community Centre
- investment in a new bespoke Mobile Library vehicle
- the development of bid writing skills with the Library Service successfully realising external grant funding of £61,000 over a 12 month period from January 2025

To ensure continued effectiveness and long-term sustainability, an external review of the Public Library Service (excluding the School and Prison Services) was carried out during Autumn 2024. The review focussed on identifying priorities for future provision and developing potential future equitable delivery models which maximise engagement and reach, impact and efficiency including new ways of working and blended services.

The review was undertaken by an independent library sector expert in the context of Northumberland County Council's Corporate Plan, the requirements of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and the BEST design principles of increased customer satisfaction, increased staff satisfaction and demonstrating value for money.

### ***Key Findings of the 2024 Review***

The review highlighted that in Northumberland the high level of provision ((10.4) per 100,000 population) puts pressure on the sustainability of the Service and can result in frequent short notice closures and a lack of consistency across the County. Several libraries are open for less than 10 hours per week with three libraries having fewer than 50 active members (Kielder, Lynemouth and South Beach), and at least two libraries (Bedlington Station and South Beach) are within 2 miles of another larger library.

The review identified:

- Whilst the library service has 58,967 registered users, only 20,016 (less than 7% of the population) are active members who have used their library card within the last 12 months
- Current staffing structures limit the ability for staff to work at an appropriate level or build professional capacity in the service
- There are opportunities for further collocation with Council Services and wider partnerships
- Inconsistent opening hours (4 hpw - 100 hpw) and ad hoc closures hinder accessibility for communities
- There is no use of self-managed Open+ or similar, that is becoming common place in other library services across the country

- Self-service kiosk transactions are well below sector standards, on average <30% (80% elsewhere)
- Book stock is challenged by limited funds and an over-reliance on donations; supplier selection not yet utilised
- Successful activities and best practice are not consistently shared to develop a more coherent county-wide program

## 7. The Proposals for Service Redesign – Libraries and Customer Services

The proposal is to bring together the face-to-face staff teams from Customer Services and the Library Service to create a new 'Libraries and Information Service'. This new Service will form a vital part of the 'Council's Universal Front Door' being developed through BEST where residents will be able to access a wider range of Council Services and support. This will create a more sustainable service with a broader offer to residents as we combine the skill sets and expertise of the two teams, whilst creating opportunities for staff and supporting with succession planning. The integration has been successfully trialled at the Customer Information Centre and Library at Queens Hall with benefits reported for both customers and staff.

The Council is committed to a Communities First way of working, which is about making every contact count and empowering residents to self-serve and being as independent in their own communities for as long as possible. It is a proactive and preventative way of working allowing staff time to listen and engage and ensuring support reaches those who need it most, when they need it. This approach, combined with an increasing use of data will help to provide focussed programming, based on evident need, within the general service offer.

### ***A Revised Area Based 'Hub and Cluster' Model with Consistent Opening Hours***

The proposal is to develop the current hub and cluster model from the existing five hub sites to seven. Hub Libraries would support clusters of libraries and outreach activities based around the North, South, East, West and Central localities. The larger Hub libraries would be open longer and offer more services whilst smaller 'Primary' and 'Secondary' Libraries would support local access.

Using a cluster model helps manage staff and resources more effectively and creates a more consistent level of service across the County. Combined with the blending of Library and Customer Service staff this model will build a more sustainable service with a broader resident and customer offer.

Proposals for the consultation are:

- 7 Hub Libraries would be open with staff for 45 hours per week
- 7 Primary Libraries would be staffed for 28 hours per week
- 7 Secondary Libraries would be staffed for 12 hours per week

This network of 21 Libraries and the Mobile Service, would form the new statutory scope of responsibility for the Council.

These proposals would be a reduction of staffed hours by 6%. Overall opening hours could be increased by creating more Community Access Libraries (CALs), the extension of accessible hours in co-located sites such as leisure centres and cultural venues and introducing new technologies to extend the reach and accessibility of library and other services.

### ***Extension of the Network of Community Access Libraries (CALs)***

Community Access Libraries (CALs) are a valuable asset to local communities and increase the opportunity to access the wider network of Library provision in the County. CALs are operated in the community by the community. The County currently has two CALs, Haydon Bridge open for 15 hours per week and Heddon open for 8 hours per week; between them they issue around 2000 items and have 57 and 83 members respectively. It is proposed that this model is rolled out to extend the provision of Community Access Libraries.

The current CALs are supported with library stock, have access to the library management system (LMS), public PCs, information and professional support from the public library service and appear listed as one of the branch libraries on the NCC website for reservation, collections, issues and returns. They offer a programme of activities and events and participate in county-wide initiatives such as the Summer Reading Challenge.

The creation of a CAL means the buildings and facilities management transfer to the local community; and a Memorandum of Understanding or a Service Level Agreement would set out the responsibilities of each party. The consultation will explore whether more libraries could become CALs by approaching local communities, parish councils, volunteer groups and interested stakeholders at six initial sites:

- Bedlington Station
- Guide Post
- Kielder
- Seaton Sluice
- Seaton Valley
- South Beach

To support the successful transfer, operation and sustainability of new volunteer managed libraries in Northumberland, the Council is setting out a proposed transition period of up to two years, that could include a tapered financial package of support to assist with partial help for insurance, legal, utilities and other building associated costs.

In addition, a long-term support framework would be put in place which could include: an initial collection of books transferred with the building, eBooks, eAudio, and ePress supplied without charge, access to the Library Management System (LMS) for catalogues and loans, basic training in the use of the LMS, Data Protection and public Health and Safety matters provided for volunteers, provision of NCC WiFi and a single public PC with basic software capabilities.

Figure 1 below shows the proposed cluster and operational profile.

	Hub 45 hours	Primary 28 hours	Secondary 12 hours	Community Access Library	Community bookshelf
North	Berwick Alnwick	Rothbury Wooler			Seahouses
West	Hexham	Haltwhistle	Allendale Bellingham Corbridge	Haydon Bridge Heddon Kielder	
East	Ashington	Amble	Newbiggin Lynemouth Widdrington		Ellington Hirst
South	Blyth Cramlington	Bedlington		Bedlington Station Seaton Sluice Seaton Valley South Beach	
Central	Morpeth	Ponteland Prudhoe	Wylam	Guide Post	

Figure 1

### Redesign of the Mobile Library Service

The Council took delivery of a new mobile library vehicle in 2025. The previous vehicles had become obsolete and no longer fit for purpose. The current service is currently operated by the new mobile library in the North of the County and a smaller transit van in the west of the County. The service visits 214 locations on a three-weekly rotation and has 280 active users in total.

Current annual usage of the mobile library service:

	North Mobile	West Mobile
Active users	202	78
Total Membership	264	108

Age profile of active users:

Age	North Mobile	West Mobile
0-9	6	10
10-14	15	0
15-59	58	18
60+	185	80

It is proposed that the mobile library will visit the 214 locations every six weeks, instead of every three. Whilst people value this service beyond the access to books, digital resources, and learning the Council intends to work more closely with the wider VCSE and support sectors to ensure that the social connectivity is maintained and enhanced, particularly for those who need it the most. During the consultation we will consider how the Mobile Library Service and Home Library Service can be more effectively co-ordinated to support residents.

### ***Making the Best Use of Digital***

The service is progressing new digital solutions, including maximising use of existing self-service kiosks and exploring the implementation of fully self-service "open access" library provision. Under this model, a library card functions as an access key, enabling adults and accompanied children under 16 to use library facilities when staff are not present.

Open access would allow members to use the library beyond the standard staffed opening hours, enabling them to choose and return books using the self-service kiosks, use the public access computers and WIFI, and use the space for study or to meet as a community or activity group.

The service is also assessing the potential for automated book-dispensing units in accessible community locations, known as 'smart libraries' to enable residents, particularly in rural or isolated communities, to collect reservations and borrow or return items outside traditional library settings or hours.

## **8. Consultations**

### ***The Public Consultation***

An eight week public consultation is proposed to secure public engagement, support co-production of revised ways of working and gather feedback on the proposals for a new delivery model. Comprehensive background materials will be made available to facilitate informed participation. An adapted version of the consultation materials has been prepared for children and young people under 16, and all documents will be provided online and in a range of accessible formats. Draft versions of these materials are included in Appendices 1- 4.

Subject to Cabinet approval the public consultation, scheduled to run from 16 February to 13 April 2026, is an important element of the Council's commitment to community conversations taking place this year within the 'Big Listening' programme.

During the course of the public consultation, a senior officer team will visit each of the library sites for informal "drop-in" sessions with members of the public and stakeholders to listen to any concerns or ideas raised. Officers will also be attending the Town and Parish Council Conference on 5 March 2026. A list of venues and dates of public engagement meetings is available in the public consultation document attached at Appendix 1.

### ***Staff Consultation***

Any new staffing structures proposed for delivery of the new Library and Information Service will be subject to staff and Trade Union consultation. This is proposed to take place following review of the public consultation data in May 2026. Whilst the consultation will determine the final operating model for the new library and information service, at this stage of proposals, we do not anticipate any compulsory redundancies. Outline proposals will be informally shared with staff and their representatives prior to the commencement of public consultation.

## 9. Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

It is a statutory requirement of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to carry out appropriate consultation before any proposed changes. The proposed changes must be subject to a full consultation process with as wide an audience as possible, including library users, staff and local community groups. Efforts must be made to engage those who do not currently use the service.

No significant changes to the current service can be made without first completing the public consultation outlined within this report. Without changes to the service, there will be consequences for establishing the universal front door and delivery of MTFP requirements.

## 10. Implications

<b>Policy</b>	Northumberland County Council Corporate Plan 2023 – 2026 Medium Term Financial Plan 2025 – 2029 Community Asset Transfer Policy (if applicable)
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	The proposed future Library and Information Service operating model would enable the Library Service to realise efficiencies agreed within in the 2025 MTFP of £344,000 during the period 2025-2027.
<b>Legal</b>	Libraries provide a statutory service in accordance with the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. A public consultation setting out proposed changes to the service will be published on 16 February 2026 for a period of 8 weeks to gain public opinion. Consideration of consultation responses will be made before any significant changes to the service are implemented
<b>Procurement</b>	N/A
<b>Human resources</b>	Any required staffing and structural changes will be subject to a 30-day staff consultation following review of the public consultation feedback. It is currently anticipated that staff consultation will take place in May 2026. Whilst the consultation will determine the final operating model for the new library and information service, at this stage of proposals, we do not anticipate any compulsory redundancies. Outline proposals will be informally shared with staff and their representatives prior to the commencement of public consultation.
<b>Property</b>	Any property implications resulting from the proposals will be managed through the BEST use of assets programme, and the Strategic Property Asset Management Group
<b>Was an Integrated Impact</b>	Yes - required and attached Integrated Impact Assessment for Library and customer service redesign (Appendix 5)

<b>Assessment required and completed?</b> - Equality Act/Inequalities - Carbon Reduction - Health and Wellbeing	
<b>Risk assessment</b>	A project risk assessment has been developed and will be reviewed throughout the project.
<b>Crime and disorder</b>	N/A
<b>Customer considerations</b>	Resident views and suggestions will be obtained through the public consultation and fully considered within any service redesign.  Any changes made to our library service will be based on our understanding of equalities implications and analysis of need.
<b>Wards</b>	All Wards

### 11. Background papers

Appendix 1: Public Consultation Background Information

Appendix 2: Public Consultation Questions

Appendix 3: Children's and Young People's Consultation Background Information

Appendix 4: Children's and Young People's Consultation Questions

Appendix 5: Integrated Impact Assessment - Libraries and Customer Services redesign

### 12. Links to other key reports already published

Cabinet Report 9 March 2021:  
[Public Library Service Consultation.pdf](#)

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