

Camden Reading Together

2025-30



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Foreword

Reading has the power to change lives.

It is an act of creativity and empowerment, building empathy and enhancing people’s ability to understand themselves and others.¹

Reading is a vital skill – one that shapes opportunities from early childhood through to later life. Yet, we know that not everyone in Camden has equal access to the benefits that reading can bring. At a time when many are experiencing isolation and the impact of the cost of living crisis, ensuring everyone in Camden has access to the joys and benefits of reading has never been more important.

That’s why we’ve developed Camden Reading Together 2025-30 – our first borough-wide strategy dedicated to reading for pleasure. Led by Camden Libraries and shaped through cross-authority work and extensive consultation with partners and residents, this strategy sets out how we will use the power of reading to build skills, confidence, and community over the next five years.

Drawing on the **We Make Camden** principles of ‘working with people and organisations with first-hand knowledge of problems, with the Council taking a partnership role but responding to new information and ideas from our communities,’ this collaborative approach ensures that the strategy is rooted in the real needs and experiences of Camden residents.



Our priorities focus on lifelong learning, supporting young people, early years development, and improving mental health and wellbeing – all of which are key to making Camden a fairer, more inclusive borough. Through collaboration across council services, schools, community groups, and cultural organisations, we will widen access to reading, nurture a love of books, and ensure Camden residents of all ages and backgrounds can experience the joy that reading brings.

To ensure Camden Reading Together delivers real impact, Camden Libraries and partners across the Council will regularly collect and share evidence on how reading activities and promotion support the strategy’s objectives. This will be closely linked to the Good Life Camden measurement framework, helping us track progress in building skills, confidence, and community across the borough.



The aim of Camden Reading Together is to build skills, confidence and community through partnership working and the council-wide promotion of reading. This approach will support Camden residents to live a good life.

Camden Reading Together will do so by achieving the following objectives:



This strategy also aligns with key council priorities, including those of the Camden Health and Wellbeing Board, Adult and Community Learning, and Adult Social Care, as well as the Carers Action Plan and the priority themes of the Cultural Strategy.

By embedding reading into these wider efforts, we will ensure that more residents – at every stage of life – can experience the proven benefits that reading brings. Camden Reading Together is our commitment to making sure every resident has the chance to experience that. I look forward to seeing this strategy in action and the impact it will have on our communities.



Councillor Sabrina Francis,
Cabinet Member for Jobs, Young People and Culture

Introduction

In 2023-24, Camden Libraries successfully expanded its reach and impact within communities across the borough, resulting in the second highest adult engagement rate in England.

In addition, recent mapping shows that almost all Camden residents live within a one mile walk of a local public or community-managed library. The libraries are innovating through building renovations, an expanded digital offer, developing the skills of the libraries team and by working together with communities, partners and other local stakeholders to create spaces that foster a lifelong love of reading, thereby opening the doors to all of the benefits this provides.

Sitting alongside these activities is the creation of Camden Council's first reading for pleasure strategy. Camden Reading Together sets out objectives for the next five years, supporting the We Make Camden missions and challenges by using the proven power of reading to build skills, confidence and community.² Camden Reading Together will do so through collaborative working and initiatives, led by Camden Libraries and including council and other local community partners to embed reading within all communities across the borough.

We will use the **Good Life Camden framework (GLC)** to measure the impact of the objectives on Camden communities. GLC is a wellbeing framework which was co-produced with Camden residents

and outlines what they said they need to live a good life. Their priorities include lifelong learning, health, social connections and communities, and equality – all priorities that align with the aims and objectives of Camden Reading Together.



Although this council-wide strategy has been commissioned and led by the library service, it has been shaped through cross-authority and partner consultation, drawing on the We Make Camden principles of 'working with people and organisations with first-hand knowledge of problems, with the Council taking a partnership role but responding to new information and ideas from our communities'. The strategy also closely delivers against strategic priorities and actions for council services such as the Camden Health and Wellbeing Board, Adult and Community Learning and Adult Social Care, as well as the Carers Action Plan and each of the priority themes of the Cultural Strategy.

Methodology

The Reading Agency worked together with Camden Libraries using a methodology tested and piloted in multiple local authority contexts, including neighbouring Islington.

The model is driven by the Library Service, aligned to the needs of local communities and delivered in collaboration with key partners across the local authority, using reading to deliver local priorities and targets.

The Reading Agency began by undertaking mapping of evidence of need, with reference to the impact of the cost of living crisis, and existing council strategies and community support. These findings led The Reading Agency, together with the Camden Libraries team, to identify four priority areas to explore further through stakeholder consultation:

- Lifelong learning, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Engaging young people
- Supporting the early years
- Supporting mental health and wellbeing across the life course

The consultation period included four focus groups and follow-up interviews during June-July 2024, with The Reading Agency drawing

on the knowledge and insights of 27 total partners and stakeholders. This included Camden Council stakeholders from a range of services and education settings as well as Camden community stakeholders, representing Camden residents of all ages.

Stakeholders were asked to reflect on the ways they had engaged with reading and Camden Libraries in the past, their work with different target audiences and community partners, their organisational priorities over the next five years, and the ways that reading and/or engagement with the Library Service might fit into these aims.

Following the stakeholder consultation process, a Camden Reading Together Steering Group was formed, with a membership representative of the needs and audiences identified as part of the work to date. Through a collaborative process, The Reading Agency, Camden Libraries, and the Camden Reading Together Steering Group reviewed evidence mapping, stakeholder consultation findings, and wider research on the benefits of reading for individuals and communities. This informed the development of a set of recommended aims and objectives to shape the strategy, along with a five-year high-level action plan for delivery and evaluation.

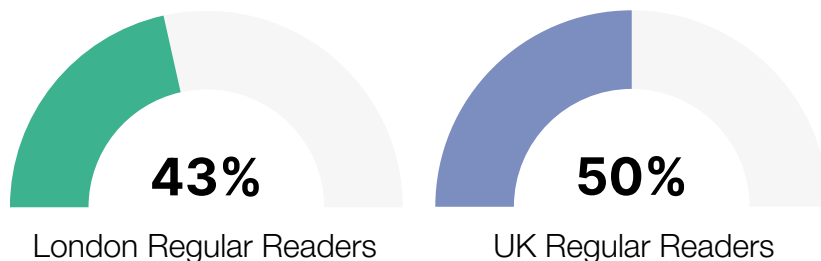
Value of reading

Reading has a proven power to transform lives.

It is an act of creativity and empowerment, building empathy and enhancing people's ability to understand themselves and others.³ It supports learning, enhances wellbeing, and fosters social and community cohesion. Reading is also strongly linked to positive mental and physical health, social connections, cultural participation, self-expression, confidence and self-esteem.⁴

While many face challenges reading, it is nevertheless an accessible and widespread cultural activity, reaching a large number of people at relatively low cost and with profound impact, making it a critical tool for addressing inequalities and helping individuals grow and contribute positively to their local communities and society as a whole.

Recent research on the UK's reading habits, conducted by The Reading Agency, shows that adults in London are less likely to be regular readers (43% in London vs 50% UK average), reading fewer hours per week (2 hours in London vs 2.83 UK average).⁵



However, despite the disparity against the UK-wide picture, this dataset shows that Londoners are much more likely to engage with reading spaces and materials than their peers.⁶ They also show more positive attitudes towards reading, with a real appreciation for and value of the role of reading in their lives, with nearly 2 in 3 saying 'reading is an important part of my life'.

Nevertheless, these adults are experiencing barriers preventing them from turning those positive attitudes and association with a reader identity into a regular reading habit. Despite engaging in reading-related activities in their communities, time pressures, poor mental health, poor vision and financial pressures are all stopping many Londoners from reading much of anything outside of what they feel they 'have to'.

This strategy enters within this context, drawing on data showing how we might help change those habits – by increasing knowledge about where and how to choose books, boosting confidence to do so and providing accessibility in different formats. At a foundational level, libraries have the power to validate non-traditional types of reading, such as comics and graphic novels, magazines, long-form content online or song lyrics. This contributes to breaking stigmatisation of what 'counts' as reading and thereby widening reader identities and engagement with reading.

Supporting skills and lifelong learning

Despite reading being a low-cost and widespread cultural and creative activity, it remains a challenge for many. More than 1 in 6 adults in the UK (18%) struggles with reading skills, and with the same proportion reporting that they have never chosen to read in their free time.⁷



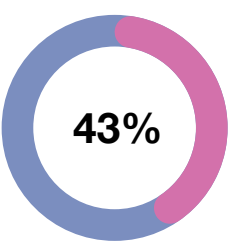
More than 1 in 6 struggle with reading skills

For these individuals, providing tailored pathways into reading – through accessible, engaging, and age-appropriate materials – can significantly enhance their confidence and skills.⁸ Evidence shows that reading for pleasure has a greater impact on literacy development than formal lessons, helping individuals build stronger reading habits over time.⁹

Adult reading engagement also has a powerful influence on children’s reading skills, confidence and attitudes.¹⁰ Families that prioritise shared reading activities see significant benefits, including greater speech and language development, communication skills and confidence.¹¹

Recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research has confirmed that reading for pleasure is the single most important factor in determining a child’s future life chances – more significant than their parents’ level of education or socioeconomic background.¹²

Enabling positive health and wellbeing



Reading contributes significantly to both physical and mental health. Studies show that 43% of working-age adults in England lack the confidence to navigate essential health information, known as ‘health literacy’, leading to higher risks of poor health outcomes.¹³ By improving health literacy, reading empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their wellbeing, which contributes to living a long and healthy life.¹⁴

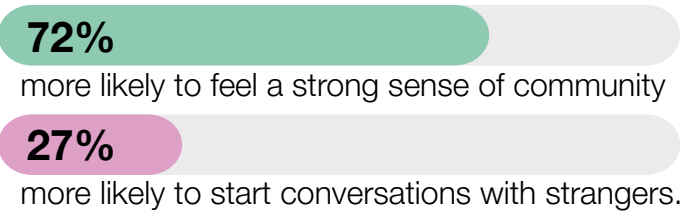
The wider mental health benefits of reading are also well-established: reading fosters relaxation, protects against stress and anxiety and is associated with higher life satisfaction.¹⁵ Regular readers are 18% more likely to report high self-esteem than non-readers.¹⁶ For children, reading is a powerful determinant of emotional wellbeing—those who enjoy reading regularly are three times more likely to have high mental wellbeing than their peers.¹⁷

Reading can also reduce healthcare burdens: A study by Arts Council England found that reading saves the NHS £27.5 million annually by enhancing wellbeing and reducing the need for medical interventions.¹⁸ These outcomes link directly into the priorities and objectives of initiatives underway through Adult Social Care and the Carers Action Plan.

Building social connections and community cohesion

Loneliness is a growing societal challenge, but reading engagement can offer an evidence-based solution. Approximately 1 in 5 readers cites reading as a key factor in alleviating loneliness.¹⁹ Programmes such as shared reading and reading befriending initiatives have shown that reading together can create meaningful social connections, measurably reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation.²⁰ These outcomes deliver against one of the strategic priorities for the Camden Health and Wellbeing Board and Camden Borough Partnership and short-term priority in **Camden’s Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2022-30)**, to reduce loneliness and social isolation through effective promotion of community connectedness and friendships.

Reading as an activity in itself is also found to contribute to stronger community bonds. Individuals who read for 30 minutes weekly are 72% more likely to feel a strong sense of community and 27% more likely to start conversations with strangers.²¹



These actions can strengthen the sense of belonging people have in their neighbourhood and feeling that they can trust their neighbours and ask them for help. Libraries play a pivotal role in these interactions by offering inclusive spaces where people of all backgrounds can come together to engage with books and one another.²²

Libraries offer books and so much more – they are vital hubs for cultural, social, and educational engagement. Regular library users report higher levels of wellbeing than non-users, with benefits extending beyond individual satisfaction to collective community health.²³ Libraries promote access to diverse reading materials, support digital inclusion which enables people to apply for essential benefits and job opportunities, and provide safe spaces for social interactions.

Alongside these benefits, reading builds critical thinking skills. In an age of misinformation, reading for pleasure can empower people with not just empathy, but the skills to discern information and analyse media, which can lead to greater community belonging and civic pride. By fostering belonging and shared purpose, reading and library use help bridge gaps across demographic and socioeconomic divides.

This is further reflected in the wide and representative spread of Camden Libraries’ catchment areas and their success in capturing and engaging with a wide variety of communities across and beyond the borough. When we looked at the data in the 2021 Census about the population around each of the nine library branches, we found that the populations around the libraries had different compositions in terms of the age, ethnicity, English proficiency, main language spoken and other characteristics. This helped us understand what the unique interests in each area around the libraries would be and to adapt services to these.²⁴

In addition to being healthier and happier and having better life chances, readers are more likely to be connected to others and engaged in their communities.²⁵ Research clearly demonstrates the ways reading positively impacts upon the lives of families, groups and communities as well as on the UK as a whole.

Evidence of need in Camden

Camden is a borough of contrasts, where significant cultural diversity and economic dynamism coexist with pronounced inequalities in health, education, and economic opportunity.

The following section outlines the evidence of need in Camden, highlighting disparities, gaps and areas where reading intervention – powered by partnership working – can address these interconnected issues, offering pathways to learning, wellbeing, and community cohesion.

The evidence in brief

The evidence base identified the greatest essential skills needs (literacy and numeracy) in St Pancras and Somers Town, Gospel Oak, Haverstock, Kilburn and King's Cross. This data also showed a range of health and wellbeing and employability needs, especially for specific groups such as young people, older adults, people living in social housing and people who speak English as a second language (ESOL).

Primary gaps and needs identified through this analysis include:

- High rates of children in poverty and 'working poor'
- Age disparities for poor mental health and loneliness
- Ethnic disparities for educational attainment and poor mental health
- Dementia and diabetes as significant health risks
- Language and communication needs
- Lack of provision for young people

Key opportunities identified through this analysis include:

- **Audiences:** Young people, growing older population and early years
- **Outcomes:** Supporting mental health and wellbeing for people of all ages
- **Outcomes:** Empowering adults with ESOL needs
- **Methods of outreach:** Cross-council collaboration and partnerships with Camden-based national institutions such as the British Library, British Museum and the many higher education institutions in the borough

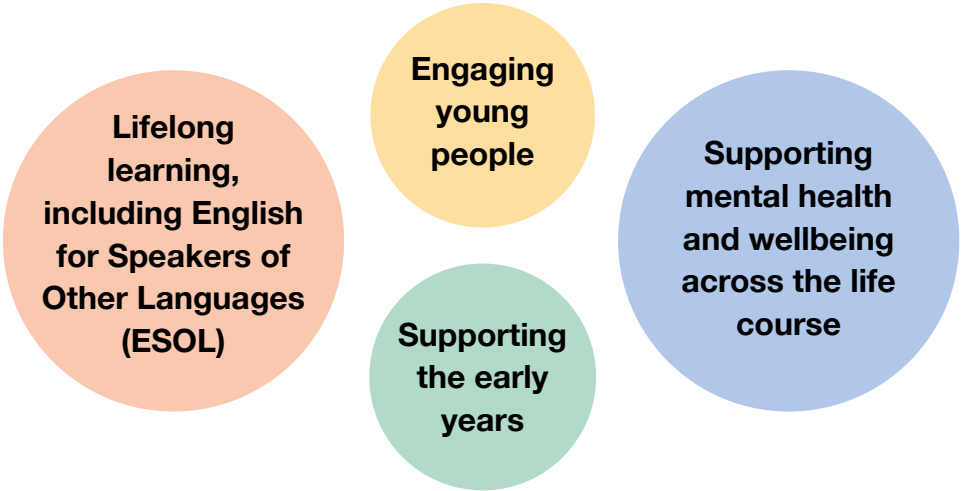
More details on the evidence of need identified through the comparative analysis of local data can be found in the Appendix.

Consultation findings

Successes and opportunities

As outlined in the methodology and advised by the We Make Camden strategy, stakeholder consultation was a core method used to shape the aims and objectives of Camden Reading Together. This involved four themed focus groups.

Four priority areas to explore further through this consultation were identified from the findings of this needs analysis. These included:



Through these focus group conversations, it was clear that Camden Libraries is uniformly recognised by stakeholders to play a key role in developing reading provision and skills across the Council, with potential to expand the scale and scope of these activities through connections with other council and local partners.

A strong set of themes emerged from those sessions, for example, the need to:

- Widen, and in some cases, shift public and council perceptions of reading and the library space.
- Take a less siloed approach in partnership working, for example, by offering consistent and continuous support for residents being referred from one Camden-based activity into the next.
- Promote the role of reading and libraries:
 - within language development, educational support and connections with Adult and Community Learning.
 - for their wider outcomes beyond literacy, including mental health, wellbeing and social connectivity outcomes.
- Develop critical reading skills to build diverse forms of literacy, including health literacy, digital literacy, media/information literacy, carbon literacy, political literacy.
- Reduce stigma of aspects such as low literacy, English language needs and loneliness.

Consultation findings

- Recognise and understand those most affected by digital exclusion to facilitate and upskill for digital inclusion.
- Bridge community, school and library provision and activities to more effectively reach children and young people and their families.
- Improve motivation to read for pleasure, also known as reading for enjoyment, reading for joy or volitional reading.
- Foster a sense of creativity for heritage and culture.
- Celebrate the pleasure and joy of being in the library space.
- Tackle inequalities to improve access for all residents.

Additional detail on findings from the stakeholder consultation can be found in the Appendix, alongside a list of stakeholder partners and representatives consulted.



Aims and objectives

The aim of Camden Reading Together is to build skills, confidence and community through partnership working and the council-wide promotion of reading.

This approach will support Camden residents to live a good life. Camden Reading Together will do so by achieving the following objectives:

- **Widen understanding of reading and the library space**
- **Nurture lifelong learning, the joy of reading, and language development**
- **Build skills and pathways into meaningful employment**
- **Promote and support better health and wellbeing**
- **Support Camden residents to live and age well**

Each of these objectives is closely interconnected, with positive change in one area having the potential to lead into or support positive change in other areas. These objectives are aligned with and will deliver against the We Make Camden mission and challenges. This work will be led by Camden Libraries working across the Council and with community partners to embed reading within communities.

These five objectives will be delivered through the following universal and targeted approaches, engaging all residents but with activity targeted to audiences most in need, as identified through the

evidence review and stakeholder consultation. The Good Life Camden framework for measuring wellbeing (GLC) will be used to measure the impact of this strategy and how the work is improving people's lives.

The methods for achieving these objectives as outlined in the following pages should be taken as high-level approaches; specific examples and suggested actions for how these objectives will be achieved can be found in the action plan.

Camden Reading Together is a strategy for all residents across the borough. It aims to build engagement and enthusiasm for those who already understand the joy of reading. It also seeks to ignite an interest in those who have not yet reached that point and widen engagement for those who use the Library Service for other reasons. The audiences on the following page have been identified as groups that experience particular barriers or support needs around areas such as skills development, health and wellbeing, or social connections, where engaging in – or deepening engagement in – reading for pleasure and library use can make the most impact.

Targeted approaches

Objective 1: Widen understanding of reading and the library space

To achieve this objective...

We will make reading a part of everyday life by rooting activity in the places people live, making reading more culturally accessible.

This might include, for example, reading activity as linked to community interests and concerns, embedding reading as part of existing activities in other community spaces, promoting the library’s digital offer, or by exploring alternative ways people are reading for pleasure (gaming, songwriting, etc.).

We will work to increase community familiarity and confidence with reading and libraries by enabling community leadership and ownership of the library space.

This might include, for example, visits to or from the library, peer support, and providing guidance and strategies on selecting reading materials.

We will continue enabling residents to have access to a wide range of reading materials that are accessible for support needs and diverse in format, content and reading level.

We will target messaging and strands of activity to hyperlocal areas around library branches, using Libraries’ and council data, such as geospatial and demographic analysis of Camden Libraries’ catchment areas and userbase, and collaboration with community partners to understand the needs and interests of service users.



We will maintain regular communications with partners through marketing and communications tools to take advantage of new funding and service delivery opportunities.

We will collect and share evidence and data on the benefits of reading, library use and cultural engagement in supporting these objectives.

We will work with expert external partners, businesses and charities supporting reading and reading promotion.

Objective 2: Nurture lifelong learning, the joy reading can bring, and language development

To achieve this objective...

We will continue supporting Every Child a Reader, which has been successful in raising aspiration and achievement in children through the promotion of reading for enjoyment.

We will strengthen existing partnerships with Public Health and Children’s Services to ensure ‘book sharing’ is positioned centrally as building a good foundation for language development, reading habits and family bonding.

We will support parents and families to become reading role models for the children in their lives by enabling opportunities to develop adult reading confidence.

We will co-create, with Adult Community Learning and through the recommendations of the Cultural Strategy, methods of using interest pathways to develop routes into regular reading activity and other forms of cultural engagement.

Key target audiences for this strand of work include:

- Early years children (0-3)
- Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Adults in the very early stages of their reading journey or who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), especially parents and grandparents of children in the borough
- New parents, especially young parents

Objective 3: Build skills and pathways into meaningful employment

To achieve this objective...

We will promote the relationship between reading and the achievement of personal goals to support regular reading activity.

We will build networks and support structures to develop this objective, including quarterly meetings with Adult Community Learning.

We will help Camden residents navigate other council services, support mechanisms and cultural activities more easily, for example, by signposting to leaflets, digital or physical resources and booklists.

We will build community and school provision by strengthening links between school libraries and public libraries, meeting young people where they are and working together to understand their needs and interests.

Key target audiences for this strand of work include:

- Teens (13-18)
- Young people (18-24)
- People with learning support needs/SEND
- Adults in the very early stages of their reading journey
- Adults who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Adults facing major life transitions

Objective 4: Promote and support better health and wellbeing

To achieve this objective...

We will position libraries as health information destinations.

We will increase access to and accessibility of reading materials and information linked to understanding and managing mental and physical health and the needs of carers.

We will embed the value of reading in supporting positive mental health and wellbeing into all reading-related activities and messaging.

We will help Camden residents navigate other council services and support mechanisms more easily, for example, by signposting to leaflets, digital or physical resources and booklists.

Key target audiences for this strand of work include:

- Teens (13-18)
- Older adults
- Adults in the very early stages of their reading journey
- Adults who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- New parents
- People with learning support needs/SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)
- People living in social housing
- Unpaid carers and young carers²⁶
- People from global majority communities

Objective 5: Support Camden residents to live and age well

To achieve this objective...

We will expand the provision of shared reading activity and cultural engagement, creating opportunities for Camden residents to engage with others experiencing similar experiences or challenges.

We will support social connections and community cohesion by offering both informal and purposeful activity.

We will strengthen existing partnerships with Public Health and Adult Social Care by offering consistent and continuous support, for example, by referring from one programme or partner's activity into another, including services that support residents throughout the day, in the evenings and at the weekends.

Key audiences for this strand of work include:

- Older adults, especially those at risk of developing dementia and their carers
- Young people (16-24), especially students in further education and higher education
- Adults facing major life transitions
- Adults living in care homes or receiving care and support in their own home
- People living in social housing
- Unpaid carers and young carers
- People from global majority communities


Universal approaches

In addition to the targeted approaches, the following universal approaches will span across each objective, helping to deliver against the overall strategy:


- Promotion and communication of the existing library offer and its value.
- Taking a less siloed approach in partnership working.
- Facilitating and upskilling for digital inclusion.
- Building networks and support structures through a Camden Reading Together Steering Group.
- Prioritising residents’ experiences through community outreach and engagement.

Our Camden libraries

Welcome to the Libraries Newsletter



March



Latest news

Welcome to the March newsletter. This month we are continuing our investment in library services with the reopening of West Hampstead Library and an IT upgrade of our PCs. The newly reopened Swiss Cottage children's library is up and running with drama workshops and children's theatre lined up for March and April. Meanwhile Holborn Library is undergoing extensive redevelopment. See the reports below and the community story for further information about all these initiatives.

Action plan

The universal and targeted approaches suggested as part of this strategy and outlined in previous pages will be taken forward through a series of next steps, rolled out over the next five years. This strategy has been shaped by a needs-based, iterative process, and has been deliberately left open to reflect learning and development taken through from the first years of the strategy.

These actions will be carried out on the following proposed timescale, with the opportunity to shift and flex actions based on the learnings and evidence captured throughout the delivery of Camden Reading Together.



Quick wins: 2025-26

Continuation or expansion of existing activity

- Expand regular email and newsletter communications from library service across the Council, community partners and VCSEs (voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors) – highlighting provision and value.
- Continue to signpost the ways existing reading provision and library services fit into other council service priorities and signposting council services back to library users:
 - Embed library activity into other council communications and services, for example, WISH Plus, Camden Care Choices, signposting to the nearest Camden public library within 'little libraries' at community centres, or GP and primary care centres.
- Continue development of Storytime and Rhyme Time sessions, including tailored support/adaptations for SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) families, additional parent resources – 10 top tips/evidence-led, and speech and language therapist observations (led by Camden Kids Talk).

New activity

- Identify representative membership for Camden Reading Together Steering Group, establishing biannual meeting structure and new quarterly meeting schedule with Adult Community Learning.
- Expand work with Steering Group through posters, Padlet and existing community groups to signpost to existing provision, including:
 - Rhyme Time
 - Summer Reading Challenge
 - Arsenal reading groups and activity
 - Every Child a Reader
 - Play Reading Group
 - Shared Reading groups
 - ReadOn app
 - British Library Community engagement
 - Poetry Bus
- Regularly use social and digital media, alongside other communications channels, to engage Camden residents, encouraging them to use our libraries and the full range of services and support they offer.

- Bridge school, community and library provision through activity such as:
 - Auto-enrolment of children's library cards.
 - Development and delivery of the New Mercers-funded **Read, Write, Share project**.
 - New book pop-ups in community settings such as leisure centres, GP surgeries, foodbanks, community hubs, Kingsgate Centre and Family Hubs through links with voluntary organisations like Bookbanks and British Land.
 - New delivery of spoken word poetry and artist-in-residence activities through **Apples and Snakes**, such as SPINE Festival (a spoken word and arts festival for children and families), and **Telling Tales** (targeted to KS2).
 - Begin hosting Adult Early Help, Family Hub and employment services activity and resident appointments in libraries outside of traditional working hours, linking in with parenting and employment-related books and media, working with the Jobcentre to host CV writing sessions or review and interview techniques, and signposting to job fairs for local employers paying the London Living Wage.
- Begin offering informal 'drop-in' sessions facilitated by council and community partners and hosted at libraries, for example, information literacy or book sharing support and learning how to use RNIB Talking Books, Envoy Connect and the digital newsreader service.
 - Recruit Community Connectors to share their experiences: parent/caregivers, teens, adults.
 - Explore the possibility of creating WhatsApp groups for library branches or topic areas/activity areas, within the guidelines of compliance with GDPR and safeguarding policies.
 - Learnings from other council services with similar WhatsApp groups, such as Community Champions and new parent groups/Rhyme Time, indicates that these could be resident-led and are a successful method of sharing information and fostering social connections.
 - Empower secondary school librarians to raise awareness of the public library offer and build familiarity with the library space by signposting to local library provision directly in schools.

Short-term actions: 2026-28

Continuation or expansion of existing activity

- Expand delivery of Mercers-funded Read, Write, Share project
- Continue auto-enrolment of children's library cards
 - Camden's Library Team to visit Holiday, Activity and Food (HAF) venues and Family Hubs across the Borough to help families sign up for a library card.
 - Begin introduction of packs, including a library card and leaflets to signpost to support services and libraries, to be gifted by the Registrars when parents register the birth of their babies. Activation to support use of the cards could, for example, link in to newborn memory books' focus on children's firsts by including 'my first visit to the library', 'the first book I borrowed' or 'my first Rhyme Time'.
- Begin 'community connectors' activity.
- Expand delivery of joint staff training sessions with other council services around each of the four objectives.
- Embed ReadOn app into council and community partners' existing activity, for example, Adult Learning, Family Hubs, etc.
- Continue developing Bookbanks activity and build on Home Library Service through 'pop-up library', curated book boxes, and 'mobile' library visits, for example, in leisure centres, parks, food banks, care homes, extra care and supported accommodation settings, estates, GP and primary care centres, the Kingsgate Centre, through homecare providers, etc.
- Expand delivery of sensory-friendly, inclusive storytime and events series to engage different age ranges, from early years foundation stage (EYFS) through older adults.
 - Drawing on **Beyond Words** training for facilitating Word-Free Book Clubs, which equips facilitators with the skills to engage readers using picture books that explore complex topics and emotions.
 - Exploring training and delivery with **Bag Books**, which provides multi-sensory stories designed for people with learning disabilities, or use of **Brillder**, an interactive learning platform that uses builder-based models to create engaging and structured educational experiences.
- Expand interactive workshops for early literacy, for example, for parents/caregivers and children including reading tips, phonics games, and interactive storytelling.
- Expand reading group/book club provision to specific priority audiences, allowing residents to engage with others experiencing similar experiences or challenges such as unpaid carers or young carers.

New activity

- Begin connecting Ageing Well Human Library with Reading Well for Dementia books and activities.
- Curate and promote books, articles and media that feature the experiences of carers, especially unpaid carers and young carers, to raise awareness and signpost routes to access support.
- Begin wider literacy (information, digital, media, carbon, etc.) sessions hosted by council and community partners in Camden Libraries, for example, workshops for students such as 'how to reference properly' or 'responsible use of AI'; digital literacy and safety for parents/caregivers, teens and older adults.
- Begin co-production with specific user groups to shape new targeted activity, starting with teens, for example:
 - Test additional methods of bridging community, libraries and schools that emphasise choice and community, for example, Meet at the Library.
 - Link in with Poetry Bus to test and deliver lyric reading, writing, and performing activity, building on partnerships and learnings from the British Library's Beyond the Bassline. The programme explored the rich history and impact of Black British music through exhibitions, events, learning initiatives, and partnerships with communities and institutions.
- Develop adapted versions of the Camden Reading Roadmap, a reading initiative that nurtures reading for pleasure in school children, for early years children and adults.

- Develop themed cultural activities or conversations about mental health in a range of formats linked to reading – for example, featuring food, 'famous faces', authors, people from the community ('It's ok to talk about things').
- Develop themed celebratory events and exhibitions celebrating the literary traditions and cultures of global majority communities, building on existing activity related to celebrations such as Black History Month, Asian literature festivals, LGBT History Month, and more.
- Strengthen and expand relationships with higher education institutions, for example, MakerSpace in Senate House, and through collaborative funding bid for Being Human festival.



Photo credit: Stuart Keegan

**Medium and long-term actions:
2028-30**

Continuation or expansion of existing activity

- Establish teens’ offers based on methods tested as part of co-production phase, for example:
 - ‘Meet at the Library’, especially for vulnerable transition time from primary to secondary school.
 - Supporting young people as content creators, for example, writing shelf talkers or giving reviews in video format.
 - Intergenerational activity series connecting older adults and younger people (for example, storytelling events, skills exchanges).
- Expand co-production with specific user groups to shape and test new targeted activity, for example:
 - Supporting parents and caregivers during cost-of-living crisis; families of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); adults who are English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); unpaid carers or young carers.
- Expand mental health-focused activity by developing wider local, Camden-wide reading for health and wellbeing campaign for all ages, for example, led by ‘community connectors’ and potentially linking in with stakeholders such as the Wellcome Collection, a free museum and library exploring health.

- Continue expand reading group/book club provision to reach additional or new priority audiences, allowing residents to engage with others experiencing similar experiences or challenges.

New activity:

- Launch annual ‘Camden Library Awards’ event:
 - For example, recognition of ‘gold star’ examples – Camden Library Awards recognising volunteer/reader/book/partners as aligned with the strategy objectives.
- Develop Easy Read or visual guides to the library and choosing reading materials for people with learning support needs, ESOL needs or functional literacy support needs.
- Continue identifying methods of developing reach and impact of existing activity.
- Additional new activity to be identified and actioned as led by local needs and learnings from previous phases.

Ongoing activity: Review, growth and sustainability

In addition to the staged timescales outlined on previous pages, the following activity will take place throughout the delivery of the strategy:

- Build reach and impact of current and newly developed programmes to address priorities and build partnerships across the borough.
- Build in regular review points for the strategy, creating a feedback loop with Steering Group and communities and further developing and refining activity for the short, medium and long term.
- Continued mapping of activity against library branches for hyperlocal approach.
- Collaborate with partners to identify and secure funding for development and piloting of new activity.
- Develop and embed success measures for evaluation.



Measuring success

The ability to capture evidence demonstrating the impact of Camden Reading Together will be vital in making a case for the strengths of the work undertaken and success of the strategy as a whole.

To understand the difference this strategy has made in **building skills, confidence and community**, Camden Libraries and partners across the Council will regularly collect and share evidence on the ways reading activity and promotion has supported the strategy’s objectives and outcomes. These will be linked to the Good Life Camden measurement framework outcomes.

Key expected outcomes of Camden Reading Together include:

- Increased/widened access to reading
- Increased/widened reach and engagement in reading-related activity
- Increased collaboration and partner engagement in promoting reading and recognition of the role of the Library Service in leading this work
- Increased awareness of reading/confidence to engage with reading
- Increased reading engagement leading to wider benefits supporting residents to live a good life (for example, better health outcomes, better socialisation, increased confidence, greater life satisfaction, reduced sense of loneliness)

The following success measures will be used beginning from the outset of Camden Reading Together, drawing on existing data collection methods:

Increased/widened access to reading

- Number of reading initiatives/activities developed and offered
- Type of audience or community targeted as part of reading activities and initiatives
- Number and type of community partners and spaces engaging with reading and Library Service through library visits
- Number and type of visits from library to other council and community partners
- Number and type of community spaces supporting, hosting or promoting collections of reading materials to service users

Increased/widened reach and engagement in reading-related activity

- Website page views, social media and other online platforms
- Library footfall
- Issues of books and other reading materials, including digital issues
- Event attendance
- Participation in reading programmes, initiatives and activities hosted at library
- Participation in reading programmes, initiatives and activities hosted in other council or community spaces
- Type of audience or community reached as part of reading activities and initiatives – community profile

Increased collaboration and stakeholder engagement in promoting reading and recognition of the role of the Library Service in leading this work

- Increased number of community stakeholders engaging in the development and delivery of the strategy, including attending the Camden Reading Together Steering Group
- Composition of the Camden Reading Together Steering Group, including spread across council services and type of community partners
- Number and type of reading activities delivered by council and community partners

As part of the action plan of this strategy, Camden Libraries will work together with council and community partners to build their capacity and skills around evaluation, drawing on tools such as the Good Life Camden framework, with the aim of capturing data using the following success measures by year three of the strategy:

Increased awareness of and confidence to engage with reading and the Library Service

Measures will be developed in collaboration with council and local partners and could include, for example:

- I know how to access books and other reading material.
- I know how to find reading material that interests me.
- I feel more confident about my own reading.
- I feel more confident sharing books and stories with my family.
- Reading is important to me because.../I like reading because.../Reading can help me by...
- I know about other services or activities offered by the library.
- I know where to find information about other council services.
- I know where to find information about reading programmes or events in the community.
- I feel more confident to try new things (for example, starting a course, work experience or applying for a job).

Increased reading engagement leading to wider benefits supporting residents to live a good life

Good Life Camden (GLC) will support Camden Libraries and its partners to develop an evaluation plan for the strategy which is linked to GLC and uses various methods to collect data evidencing the wider benefits of reading that contribute to supporting residents to live a good life.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Camden needs analysis

Camden is a Borough of vibrant diversity and world-renowned cultural assets, as well as home to around 218,000 residents.²⁷ However, it also faces complex social and economic challenges. Despite its strong education and employment infrastructure, Camden ranks as the 18th most deprived local authority in London, with one-third of households living on incomes below 60% of the national median after housing costs.²⁸ Deprivation is concentrated in specific wards, such as St Pancras and Somers Town, where stark disparities affect outcomes across health, education, and employment.

Reading is a proven mechanism for bridging inequalities, strengthening community cohesion and supporting positive outcomes across the life course.²⁹ Evidence shows that reading for pleasure is associated with improved mental wellbeing, educational attainment and employability. In Camden, where 12% of adults have no qualifications and 23.6% have essential skills needs,³⁰ investing in access to reading and community-based learning has the potential to address deep-rooted structural inequalities and improve quality of life.

This section provides an overview of the key evidence around need in Camden and identifies where reading-focused interventions could support wider strategic outcomes.

Demographic profile and socioeconomic inequalities³¹

Camden's population is younger than the national average, but with a growing older population creating new demands for services and support. Nearly half (45.4%) of residents were born outside the UK, with prominent communities from Bangladeshi, Indian, Somali, Chinese and Arab backgrounds. 6.9% of residents identify as LGBTQ+, exceeding London and national averages.

Camden also faces stark socioeconomic disparities. Income inequality is pronounced, with median household income ranging from £29,700 in St Pancras and Somers Town to £61,400 in Hampstead Town. Camden also has one of the highest rates of in-work poverty in Inner London, with 75% of those experiencing poverty living in working households.

A third of residents live in households earning less than 60% of the UK median income after housing costs, and 27% of children live in low-income households. Child poverty rates are highest in St Pancras and Somers Town, where eligibility for free school meals has surged from 25% in 2018 to 41% in 2021/22, the second-highest rate in London. These figures reflect a wider pattern of persistent disadvantage for families in specific areas.

Educational and employment outcomes³²

Educational outcomes in Camden present a mixed picture. Early Years and Key Stage results are broadly in line with or slightly above national averages, yet significant inequalities persist. Special Educational Needs (SEND) diagnoses are on the rise, reflecting the increasing complexity of support required in schools.

Black children in Camden consistently record the lowest attainment levels, while students living with economic disadvantage in the Borough still face barriers to achievement, despite performing better than their counterparts nationally. Reading for pleasure has the potential to close these gaps. Evidence from neighbouring Boroughs highlights the positive impact of reading initiatives on attainment, particularly among disadvantaged students.

Camden’s economic activity profile is shaped by its position as an employment hub, contributing 7.3% of London’s jobs while representing only 2.5% of its population. However, unemployment, though improving, remains slightly above the national average. Disparities in economic outcomes are stark among global majority groups and those with disabilities, who are overrepresented among benefit claimants. More than one in five (21%) residents do not speak English as their main language, indicating a need for a robust network of ESOL and adult learning programmes.

Health and wellbeing³³

Camden’s health outcomes reveal deep inequalities. Life expectancy for men and women in disadvantaged areas is 11.7 and 10.2 years lower, respectively, than in affluent areas. Diabetes and obesity disproportionately affect Black and Asian residents, and Camden’s

dementia diagnosis rate, the highest in London, underscores an urgent need for preventative health measures.

Mental health is another area critical area of concern in Camden. The Borough has the third-highest prevalence of serious mental illness in London, with certain groups, including Black men and those in deprived areas, at higher risk. Loneliness exacerbates these issues, with Camden recording higher rates of social isolation than the national average.

In addition, there were almost 4,000 people requesting support from Adult Social Care in 2023/24, an increase of 6% on the previous year. Approximately 5,500 adult accessed support in 2023/24, with 3,419 drawing on long-term care and support (59% of whom were 65 and over).

Housing and community cohesion³⁴

Like many Boroughs in London, adequate housing remains a challenge. Overcrowding affects 9.5% of households, with significant disparities among ethnic groups. Rough sleeping rates are persistently high, placing Camden second among London Boroughs and third nationally.

Loneliness levels in Camden are in line with regional and national proportions, but Camden residents are less likely to report feeling lonely ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’. 18% of the population in Camden live alone, higher than the London and national averages, a key risk factor for isolation and loneliness. In addition, almost 2 in 5 (39%) of those drawing on care and support believe they ‘spend too much time alone’.

Libraries and community hubs serve as neutral spaces where

individuals can access information, build skills, and engage in reading and shared activities. Mapping shows that almost all Camden residents live within a one-mile walk of the Borough's nine public libraries or community-managed libraries. By nurturing a sense of belonging, fostering community cohesion and reducing isolation, reading-related activity within these spaces could help mitigate the social consequences of housing insecurity, social isolation and loneliness.

Appendix 2. Stakeholder consultation

As outlined in the methodology and led by the mission and vision of We Make Camden, stakeholder consultation was undertaken in the form of four themed focus groups, supplemented by follow-up interviews. These sessions captured the voices and insights of Camden Council and community stakeholders to inform the strategic priorities and actions of this strategy.

Together, we identified four priority areas to explore further through consultation. These included:

- Lifelong learning, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Engaging young people
- Supporting the early years
- Supporting mental health and wellbeing across the life course

A broad network of contributors took part in these focus groups, including Camden Council services such as Public Health, Adult

Social Care, Children's Services, Community Partnerships, and Adult Community Learning, as well as local stakeholders from charities, health services, schools, Higher Education, cultural institutions including the British Library, and independent researchers.

This series of thematic discussions highlighted a strong recognition of Camden Libraries as a trusted community asset delivering a high-quality, varied offer and innovative projects, with the potential to reach even more residents through reading for pleasure.

A series of key themes emerged from these sessions:

- The value of whole-life, whole-community reading engagement, with libraries seen as central to building lifelong learning habits, reducing stigma around poor mental health or low literacy, and offering accessible, informal opportunities to engage with content. Stakeholders highlighted the role of reading in both personal development and for its wellbeing and social connectivity potential.
- Improved promotion of the existing library offer, for example, sharing through videos or hyperlocal messaging that the library is free to use and a welcoming space for everyone in the community. Familiarisation with the physical space and what to expect when entering and using the library was cited as key to reducing barriers, especially for those who might never have used the library before.
- A clear appetite for a less siloed approach to delivery, with stronger collaboration between libraries, schools, healthcare services, formal and informal learning, community organisations and Council services to align training, messaging and outreach. In particular, bridging activities delivered across school, library and community provision was seen as an effective method of engaging children and families.

- The importance of diverse reading materials (format, language, genre, representation, etc.) was widely noted, with accessibility and inclusivity cited as key guiding principles. Stakeholders expressed a keen interest in targeted offers to engage audiences with specific support needs, such as families with children with special educational needs (SEND), English language learners and groups at higher risk of poor mental health. For parents of children in the early years, for example, using accessible, non-judgemental language such as ‘book sharing’ as opposed to ‘reading’ was seen as a valuable method for increasing confidence.
- Better supporting young people across the Borough, particularly those at vulnerable transition points, such as moving from primary to secondary and from secondary to Further or Higher Education. Increasing opportunities to use the library as a social space or for creative activities was viewed as a potential method for appealing to teens, to balance out existing perceptions of the library as a space for study.
- Recognising the role of reading in developing wider forms of literacy, such as health literacy, digital literacy, media/information literacy, carbon literacy, political literacy. Stakeholders discussed the ways partnership working could help upskill communities in these areas. On a similar note, rich discussions took place around the consequences for those affected by digital exclusion and the need to provide access and opportunities for enabling digital inclusion.
- Uplifting messaging around the joy of reading and library use. The idea that reading and libraries can be ‘fun’ is a key priority in supporting and improving motivation to engage in creative activities, such as reading, heritage, arts and culture.



Click on the endnote number to take you back to that reference page.

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2 Where the term ‘reading’ is used in this strategy, this refers to reading for pleasure, as defined as a way to spend time and for entertainment or for self-development. It is reading that takes place voluntarily; the reader chooses what, when and how to read. It includes reading in the widest range of levels, formats and content: fiction, non-fiction, digital materials, print materials, picture books, comics, newspapers, magazines, reading aloud, reading together, listening to audiobooks, and more.

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