

# Library Strategy 2025-2030

## Vision

To provide a vibrant and inclusive Library Service to all residents and visitors of Neath Port Talbot, inspiring imagination, learning and creating an environment to fulfil individual's potential. The service will be run through a strong sustainable network of public libraries, both Local Authority and Community managed. We will ensure all spaces are safe and encourage community engagement through reading, technology and links to culture and heritage.

## Our Strategy

This strategy will outline our aims and values as a service, and how they align with the four wellbeing objectives and priorities of the Neath Port Talbot Corporate Plan 2024-2027. These are:

1. All Children get the best start in life
2. All communities are thriving and sustainable
3. Our local environment, culture and heritage can be enjoyed by future generations
4. Working with our partners we create conditions for more secure, well paid, green work and will support local people into these jobs

Our strategy also aligns with the Neath Port Talbot Culture Strategy 2023, cultivating the appreciation of the local environment, culture and heritage among residents of Neath Port Talbot.

It will reflect the high standard of service expected from Welsh Government as stated in Welsh Public Library Standards. These standards are made up of a twelve core entitlements and sixteen quality indicators that demonstrate how library services across Wales are meeting their statutory duty. Each year, following an annual report to Welsh Government, an assessment is made that evaluates the performance of the service and identifies the areas where improvement is needed.

Beyond fulfilling our statutory obligations, the strategy emphasises communication and partnership working with other local authority departments like social services, education and children's services, environmental services, as well as external partnerships.

## **Previous Strategy**

The Library Strategy dated 2016-2023 (originally 2016-2021) was extended due to the impact of Covid and a change in the management structure of the service. Of the seven recommendations for future developments, five have been achieved and the remaining two will continue to move forward into the current strategy.

1. Relocation of Port Talbot Library – This will be carried forward into the current strategy.
2. Relocation of Neath Library – As part of the Neath Town Regeneration programme, Neath Library was relocated to a new building in February 2023
3. Building maintenance issues with Sandfields Library – these will be addressed in the forward planning actions for this strategy.
4. Potential of moving Skewen Library with Welsh Government Funding. This was achieved and Skewen Library was relocated to Carnegie Hall.
5. Mobile Library Vehicles – both vehicles have been replaced with a new smaller but more efficient Mobile Library and an Electric Home Delivery van.
6. The implementation of an all Wales Library Management System was achieved in 2019 and moved to a new platform in December 2024 with the aid of Welsh Government funding.
7. Reducing the costs of internal recharges was achieved by a review of current practices.

## **Where we are now**

Neath Port Talbot Library Service provides eight Branch Libraries, a Mobile Library, a Home Delivery service, a Toy Library and a Bookstart Co-ordinator to deliver our statutory obligations. Additionally, the Service provides support to seven community managed, volunteer-led libraries.

The eight Neath Port Talbot run libraries are located in Baglan, Cwmafan, Glynneath, Neath, Pontardawe, Port Talbot, Sandfields and Skewen. These libraries are managed and run by trained library staff employed by the local authority. Each library offers a core library service providing free access to reading materials both physical and electronic, free internet access and Wi-Fi connections, support to improve skills and information on a wide range of council services.

*These libraries are highlighted in blue on the map below.*

Community managed libraries are located in Briton Ferry, Blaengwynfi, Cymmer Afan, Gwaun Cae Gurwen, Resolven, Taibach and Ystalyfera. These are run by charitable organisations supported by volunteers, who deliver a service which is greatly valued. As a local authority service we support these libraries with a library management system, library book stock, training and professional support. Due to Welsh Government guidance in relation to the Welsh Public Library Standards these libraries do not form part of our statutory duty.

*These libraries are highlighted in green on the map below.*



## Serving our Communities

Libraries provide a strong network of support for our local residents, from coffee mornings to engage with others, to reading groups which support adult literacy. Our service can combine combating loneliness and isolation with the benefits of reading all under one roof.

Neath Port Talbot Libraries are free at the point of contact and are often seen by our residents as a 'One Stop Shop' for all their local needs.

Existing services include:

- Access to books, both in English and Welsh language to encourage and support reading for pleasure and increase literacy.
- Help with job searching, writing a CV, meeting with a representative from Workways or the Employability hub
- Building confidence using IT, promoting IT literacy and breaking down barriers to digital inclusion
- Stimulating creativity and learning in adults and children through our book collections, inspiring and exciting learning experiences and author events
- Providing a warm, safe space for our residents of all ages
- Developing cognitive and practical skills with a wide range of craft clubs, knitting groups and board games activities.
- Rediscovering the past with Local History Talks, 'Hand's on History' Sessions and creating an interest in our local area and culture.
- Encouraging early years participation through Song and Rhyme sessions, story times and play activities
- Supporting Health and Wellbeing through reading materials encouraging escapism, information, Reading Well Scheme and creativity.
- Supporting the work of the Council's Home Education Department with induction sessions, regular coffee mornings and learning events held in libraries.

We strive to provide a welcoming space and environment for all, where equality and diversity is championed, creating an inclusive safe space. Earlier this year we participated in the development of Neath Port Talbot Council's Strategic Equality Plan for 2024-2028 reflecting the determination of the authority to promote genuine equality of opportunity, tackle discrimination and create a fairer and more equitable society in Neath Port Talbot. One area we would like to develop is accessibility for our neurodivergent residents. In recent months we have created online

videos of each library, creating a virtual tour which can be taken before entering the library building. This, along with the introduction of noise cancelling headphones will hopefully break down some of the barriers faced.

## **Evaluating our Service**

Evaluation is a key part of our service delivery and the usage is recorded both quarterly and annually.

The infographics shown below gives an overview of library usage for 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.

A comparison with the previous year highlights the areas of increase within the service.

# Neath Port Talbot Libraries 2022-23

Number of Active Borrowers\*



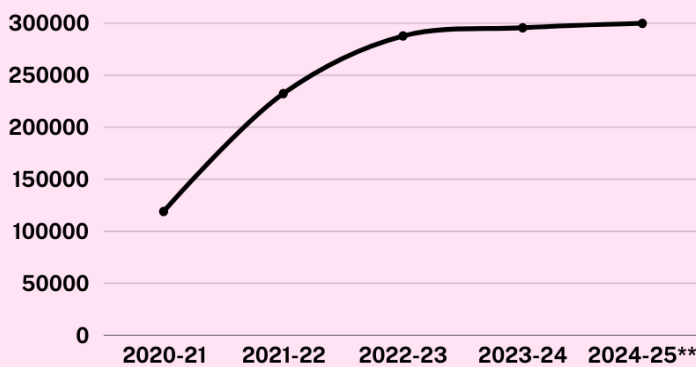
16066

Number of Visits to Libraries\*



355278

Number of Books Borrowed since 2020



% of users satisfied or very satisfied with their library visit (March 2023 survey)

Number of Attendees at Library Events\*



50728

Number of new books added to stock\*



18183

Number of hours library computers used\*



Total Number of Mobile Library Stops



Total Number of Annual Home Deliveries\*



Total Number of Books on Library Shelves\*



201872

Number Books Requested\*

11524



Number of Visits to the Library Website\*

20192

\*2022/23 data  
\*\* 2024/25 estimate



# Neath Port Talbot Libraries 2023-24

Number of Active Borrowers\*



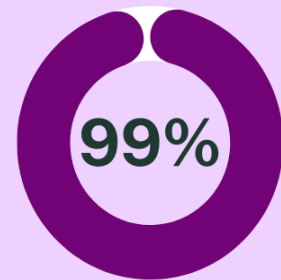
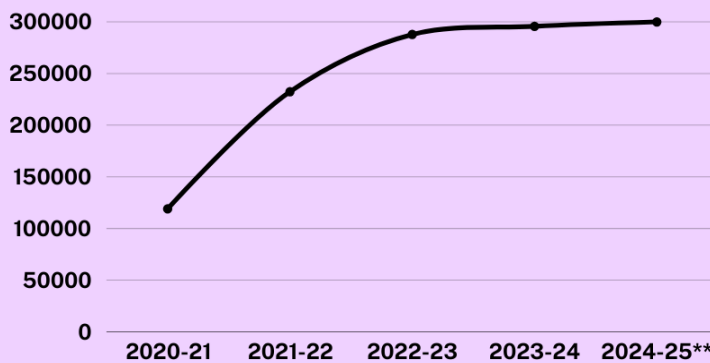
18929

Number of Visits to Libraries\*



431829

Number of Books Borrowed since 2020



% of users satisfied or very satisfied with their library visit (October 2024 survey)

Number of Attendees at Library Events\*



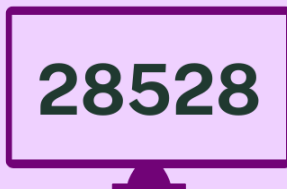
56994

Number of new books added to stock\*



14890

Number of hours library computers used\*



Total Number of Mobile Library Stops



Total Number of Annual Home Deliveries\*\*



Total Number of Books on Library Shelves



199534

Number Books Requested\*



4553

Number of Visits to the Library Website\*

31444

\*2023/24 data

\*\*2024/25 estimate

## **Well-being Objectives**

Over the five years of this Strategy the Library Service will ensure it's delivery programme remains closely aligned with the Council's four well-being objectives, as set out in the 2024-2027 Corporate Plan.

### **Well-being Objective 1. All Children Get the Best Start in Life**

We know that libraries can help to remove some of the barriers that children may face in their lives. There is enough evidence across the UK, and from our library members in Neath Port Talbot, which demonstrates the positive role that the library has had a child's development. Whether it is providing safe, inclusive spaces, high quality book collections or access to learning activities that libraries are delivering for the children of Neath Port Talbot.

The Library Service is dedicated to offering meaningful opportunities for children in their early years, with the shared goal of ensuring they are well-prepared for the transition to formal education.

Through our Bookstart Coordinator we work in partnership with BookTrust Cymru to help young children develop a love of reading from birth. The Bookstart scheme provides young families with bilingual baby packs that are delivered via the coordinator to health visitors, who then distribute widely across Neath Port Talbot. Bookstart in Wales is funded by the Welsh Government and run by the BookTrust. Baby and Early Years packs are also available from libraries within Neath Port Talbot.

In addition, the Library Service delivers a regular programme of song and rhyme events across all libraries that help to encourage a love of shared reading between children and their parents/caregivers. As well as being important sessions to allow opportunities for babies and toddlers to socialise with other children, they also provide an invaluable informal support and advice network for parents and carers.

Neath Port Talbot Library Service is one of the few local authorities in Wales to offer a Toy Library. This is supported through grant funding and caters for registered childcare providers along with playgroups, after school clubs, foster carers and childminders. Toys are also loaned to schools through an agreement set up with the Education Library Resource Centre. The aim of the Toy Library is to provide a free toy loan facility to enable children to have access to stimulating play, enhancing all aspects of their development. The Toy Library has engaged with Neath Port Talbot's Early Years Department to discuss opportunities in developing play sufficiency within the borough and has contributed to the

creation of Neath Port Talbot's Play Strategy. As with Bookstart, the Toy Library is also a vital part of our work in supporting children in their transition into education.

Once children are of school age the Library Service delivers a range of materials and a regular activity programme to support home educators. As well as playing a significant role in ensuring that literacy, including reading for pleasure, is a vital part of a child's development, this work helps to remove barriers to participation that some children may have. Through the provision of high-quality events, which can include learning from professional authors and illustrators, we can help nurture the aspirations and ambitions of children in Neath Port Talbot. Furthermore, these events can provide children with enjoyable, stimulating, and inspiring experiences which can help to build positive experiences in school. This in turn can contribute our collective responsibility to encourage greater attendance at school.

In October 2024 the Library Service held Neath Port Talbot's first Children's Book Festival. The Neath Port Talbot Children's BookFest: Write, Draw, Create ran for over five weeks and delivered twenty-five creative writing and illustration events, together with storytelling for children aged 4-16 years. Events were held at libraries, schools and at Margam Park. The Festival featured workshops and performances from many well established writer and illustrators from Wales, including events in the Welsh language. The aim of the festival was to provide opportunities for children and young people of Neath Port Talbot, and their families where appropriate, to engage in inspiring and stimulating creative activity. As well as providing an inspiration, the festival also sought to equip children with practical skills and ideas to enhance their own creativity and learning.

The Library Service can play an important role in providing children with the best start in life. Working with our partners in education we can help to break the link between literacy and social background and help to ensure all children get the best start in life.

## **Well-being Objective 2. All Communities are Thriving and Sustainable**

At the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020 libraries were one of the very first public-facing services to reopen to the public. Despite further

lockdowns Neath Port Talbot's Libraries did not fully close its doors, continuing to offer a basic library service to many people. But this basic library service did so much more than that. Many library visitors at this time said how important the library being open was to them. It helped to build a regular pattern to their weekly life, allowed them to have contact with others and kept them part of their community. The pandemic highlighted the essential role libraries have in many of our communities, helping to connect residents to one another, and to the Council.

Providing services to residents who, for whatever reason, are unable to visit the library is an important part of our work. Through our Community Services Department we provide a Home Delivery Service, often to the most vulnerable people in the community. The department also caters for residential care homes and sheltered accommodation, delivering regular book collections to residents there. In addition, for residents who live further than 5 miles from a local library, our mobile library service will visit designated areas on a three-weekly basis. This rota is continuously monitored to cater for demand and use. The mobile library has an additional role in supporting local schools, encouraging children to develop a love of reading by choosing their own reading materials.

In recent years branch libraries have been places which have supported the development of community groups. At Sandfields Library, for example, the library has been pivotal in establishing the Library of Things with local community groups and has been instrumental in supporting the growth of local men's mental health support groups.

As well as providing physical services and resources to our communities we also provide a range of electronic resources. These have enabled our service to provide access to information and reading materials 24/7. There are a wide range of resources available such as electronic books (eBooks), audio books (eAudio), and digital newspapers and magazines (ePress, PressReader) all supplied via the Borrowbox and PressReader app. Furthermore, with Welsh Government support we offer additional resources such as Ancestry Library Edition, Theory Test Pro and Access to Research.

In 2023 Neath Port Talbot Libraries joined the national 'Warm Welcome Spaces' campaign signposting members of the public to their local library to keep warm during the winter months. We were privileged to have BBC Wales highlight this with local actor Michael Sheen endorsing these facilities on national TV. Our libraries offer a welcoming environment, free facilities and a warm drink.

This strategy will ensure that libraries continue play a vital role in helping the Council meet its longer term of creating sustainable communities where people can live, work and enjoy leisure time in their own locality. It also contributes to the Well Being of Future Generations Act 2015 and plays an important part in supporting Neath Port Talbot's Culture Strategy 2023.

### **Well-being Objective 3. Our Local Environment, Culture and Heritage Can be Enjoyed by Future Generations**

Libraries help to create a sense of cultural belonging and pride in their community. Whether it's attendance at literary events, the provision of reading material or opportunities to speak and use Welsh in a social setting, our members tell us that the library fosters this sense of cultural belonging. It is an important part of what the library delivers everyday across all ages. We are dedicated to embedding a love of traditional Welsh stories in the children who visit our libraries. We engage with Welsh learners and offer a space for them to practice conversational Welsh in a relaxed environment. Additionally, we provide opportunities for adults to write about and share their cultural experiences with others. Our goal is to actively involve individuals in both culture and heritage in their community.

Our service supports the Neath Port Talbot's Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2023-2028 and Welsh Government's goal to have "a million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050" by actively providing a wide range of Welsh language materials like books, audiobooks, and ebooks, employing staff fluent in Welsh who can assist patrons in the language, hosting Welsh language events like author visits and reading groups, and generally promoting the use of Welsh within the library space, often in accordance with local Welsh Language Standards, essentially making Welsh language access readily available alongside English services.

The Service has a dedicated Heritage Education Officer who supports formal and informal learning through a range of events and activities to both adults and children. Working with colleagues in Education they support the work of schools by creating a learning plan tailored to each individual request. The work has a strong link to *Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig*, (the Welsh Curriculum) and is rooted in the principles of Cynefin, which links both culture, place and education together. These sessions can

include class visits, guided walks and tours of historical interest around Neath Port Talbot.

The Heritage Education Officer will also develop regular exhibitions featuring artefacts from the local area. These are often placed in libraries and public spaces, as well as online.

Many of our residents enjoy regular local history talks based in our libraries, as well as free access to Ancestry Library Edition UK. In recent years a new Neath Port Talbot Young Archaeologist Club has been established, affiliated with the Council for British Archaeology, and runs monthly sessions for children to engage with the past.

Central to the recent redevelopment of both Neath and Port Talbot Libraries was the idea of establishing them as destination libraries. These two libraries, with modern facilities and enhanced resources, contribute to attracting visitors to our town centres. They have an important role in signposting visitors, especially tourists, to other locations and venues in the county.

The previous Library Strategy 2016-23 began the process of change to ensure sustainability and environmental impacts are key factors in any developments. This Strategy will take this further forward.

Libraries are natural recyclers, providing our residents with reading materials that can be enjoyed over and over again. Our book suppliers work tirelessly to reduce the environmental impact of producing and publishing a book, sourcing paper and material with a focus on sustainability. We are collaborating with our suppliers and across our supply chains to create a positive change. One example of this is working to reduce the use of plastic book covers.

Further contributing the green agenda we plan to introduce bio degradable and digital library cards to reduce our use of plastic library cards. In addition, we will also work towards reducing paper use, using digital alternatives in libraries where practical to do so.

More recently we have made changes with how we replenish and recycle our old book stock. When a book reaches the end of its life with our service, it makes its way on another journey to pastures new supported by a partnership scheme with Betterworld Books. As a result of this partnership scheme, it has been calculated that we have saved 333 trees in the last year.

We also plan to make further changes to our fleet of vehicles. Since 2020 we have switched to an electric van for our Community Services team, the aim is to become fully electric with another vehicle planned to become electric in the next 5 years.

A recent collaborative project with 'Lend Mend and Tend' has seen the creation of a 'Library of Things at Sandfields Library. Library staff and the Local Area Coordinator recognised a need for the community to have a common purpose. Tools and equipment can be borrowed with a library membership card and returned for a small refundable charge. As well as considering the benefits of sharing household items, this contributes to the Net Zero Strategy for Neath Port Talbot and Welsh Government's Green Agenda by mending broken items rather than adding to landfill. The last part of this project has been to create a green space for residents around the library. Benches have been installed around the exterior of the library, woodchips laid, and flower boxes provided. The project creates volunteer opportunities and educational support for the local primary schools on environmental issues.

#### **Well-being Objective 4. Local People are Skilled and Can Access High Quality Green Jobs**

Libraries have always been places of learning. In Neath Port Talbot we support independent learners with access to resources and facilities, informal learning through support and advice from our trained staff and formal learning with classes in partnership with our learning providers.

Partnership working is a key part of our daily structure, and over the years we have built strong working relationships with many learning organisations, charitable and volunteer groups to help them develop the skills of our residents. The provision of a safe environment to meet clients is crucial for many workers. As many organisations struggle to find office space, our libraries offer a welcoming, warm environment.

We are active partners with Adult Community Learning across the region, with Swansea University and with NPT Employability. In addition we work closely with the Learning and Work Institute to develop an Adult Learners Week programme each year.

Over the course of this Strategy we will seek to further strengthen our partnership links to support learning, upskilling and employment in Neath Port Talbot. With an ever-changing economic climate it is important that libraries are there to serve the people in the community with locally based resources and play a part in reducing poverty.

Two areas where we have seen development in recent years have been supporting small businesses and the self-employed, and in contributing to the circular economy. Libraries have become invaluable for many small local businesses and self-employed as places where they can access resources, utilise meeting/workspaces, share skills and knowledge and connect with others in the same field. In 2023 we developed a new 'Makerspace' area at Port Talbot Library. One of the aims of this project was to create a resource where businesses and individuals could benefit. In 2024 we have given opportunities to people to improve their skills, helped small businesses function and contributed to the circular economy. Over the next five years we will continue to enhance our libraries and revitalise our spaces so that many more may benefit in the same way.

### **What the People of Neath Port Talbot Say?**

In October 2024 a survey was published by the Library Service giving residents of Neath Port Talbot the opportunity to provide feedback on the service currently offered. This also included a section for suggestions of what they would like to see from their local library. A summary of the results is provided in Appendix A.

### **The Future of Neath Port Talbot Library Service**

The role of the public library has changed many times over the years. One area libraries excel in is adapting to the changing needs of our communities. Regular engagement and community involvement ensures we are providing the best service along with catering for changes in our local area.



Our priorities for the next five years are outlined below and will continue to focus on the improvement and investment in our services.

## How we will deliver our priority areas

Objective	Actions	Outcome
Improve Facilities in Sandfields and Pontardawe Library	Apply for Capital Transformation Grant Funding	Improved user experience
Invest in an Electric Transit Van	Secure an affordable lease	Greener and more efficient delivery method
Accessibility to Libraries	Create videos of each Neath Port Talbot run libraries	Removing barriers to entering a building for the first time
Introduce Digital Library Cards	Investigate option with the new Library Management System	No need to provide a physical card, ease of use for the user and reduction in spending costs.
Roll Out of New Public Access PCs	Create and plan a five year roll out to all NPT Libraries	Greater security, updating applications and technology.

Online Event Booking System	Staff training to utilise the system offered through the new Library Management System	Bookings can be made 24 hours a day. Improving facilities and the user experience.
Develop reading promotion initiatives	Consider creating an online subscription service	Convenient access to the library service tailored by the user/individuals
Consider the relocation of Port Talbot Library	Explore co-location or integration with other council services.	Potential savings moving from a retail rented site
More integration with other council run services to provide a better customer experience across the local authority.	Train frontline staff to support, assist and signpost local residents to relevant departments within the authority.	Increased customer satisfaction

## Appendix 1

In total 667 responses were received of which the top 5 main benefits from using our libraries were listed as :-

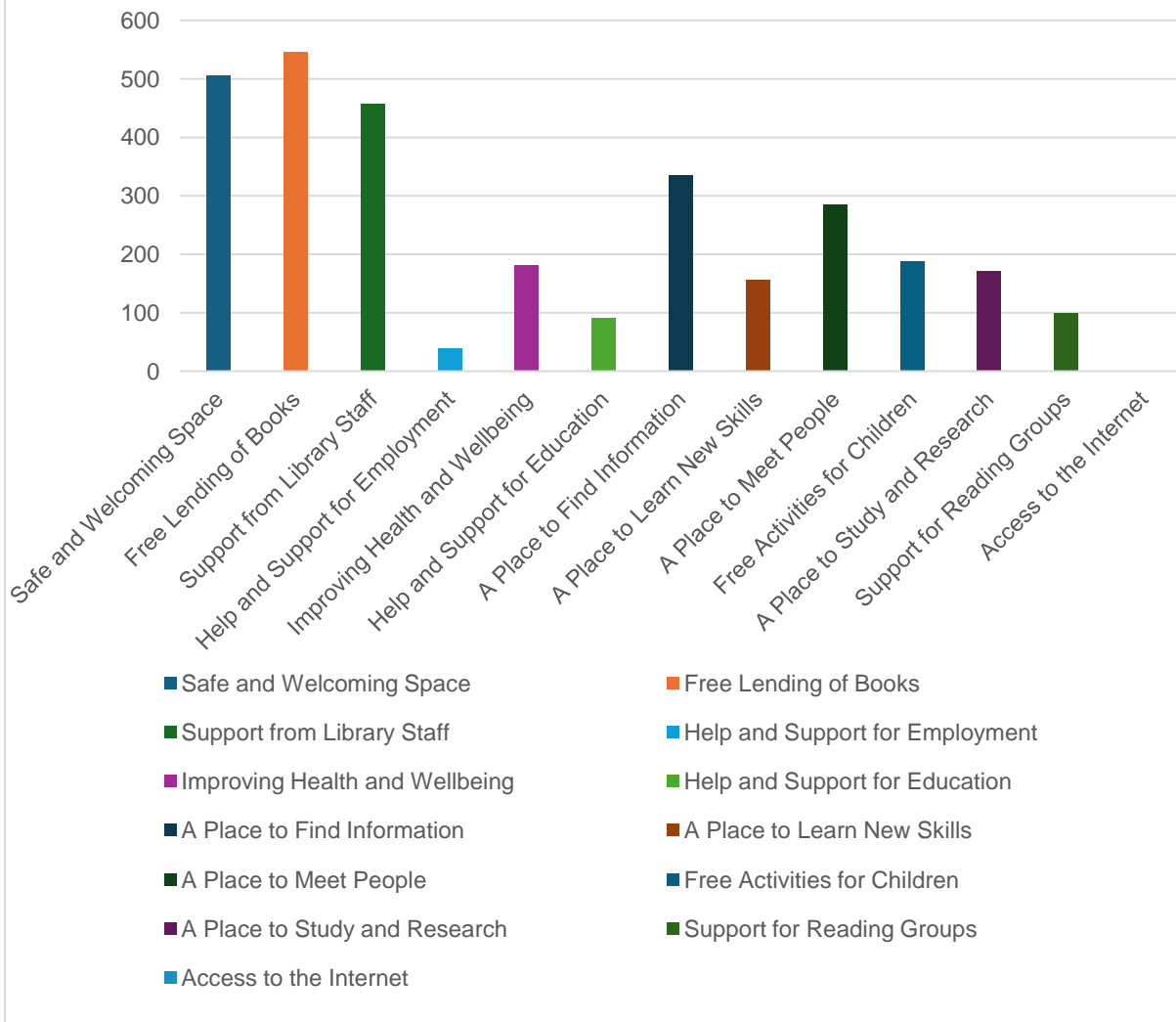
- Free lending of books
- Safe and welcoming space
- Support from library staff
- A place to find information
- A place to meet people

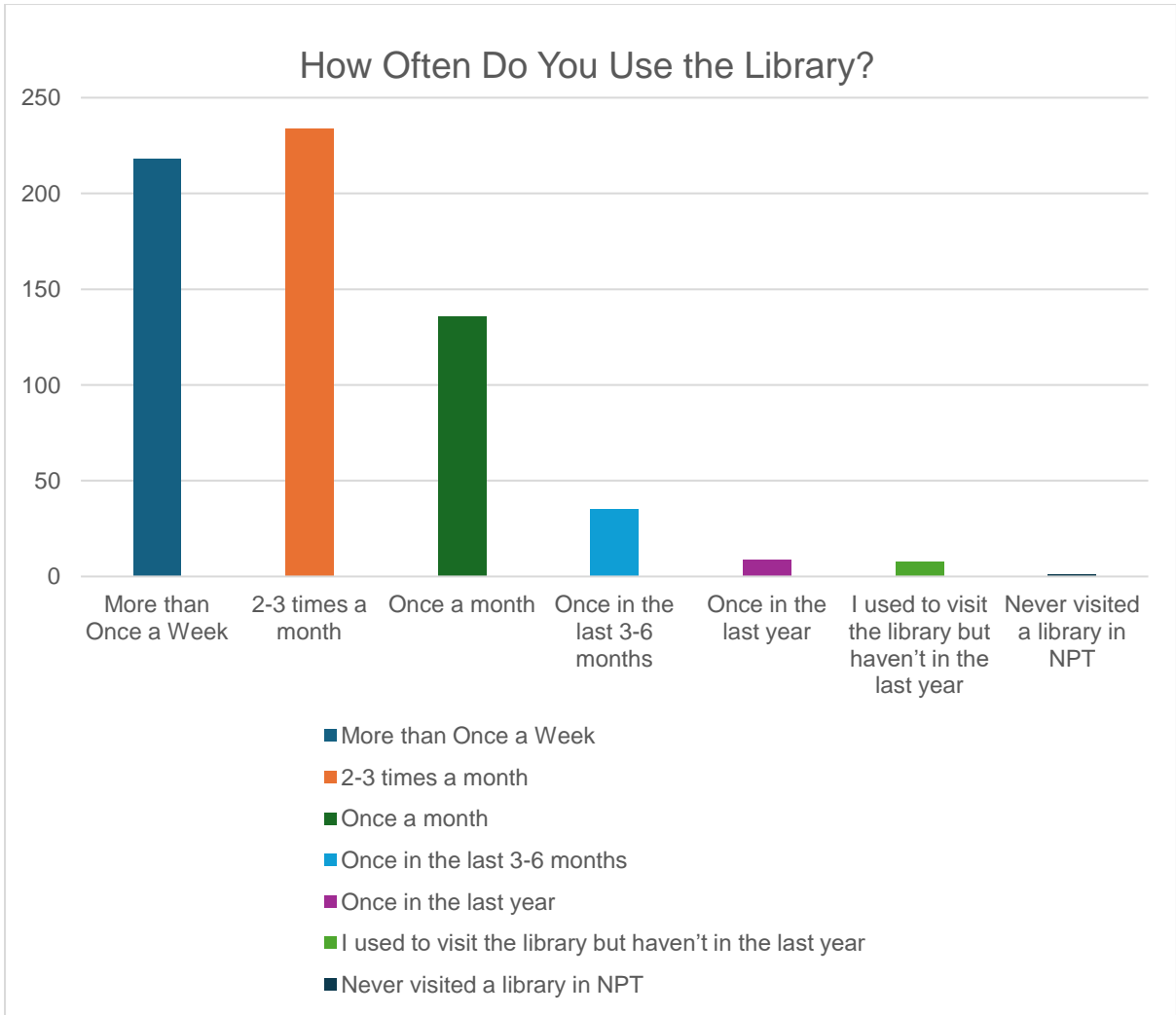
The data collected shows that the top benefit listed was 'being able to access the free lending of books'.

When asked how frequently the library is used, the data collected shows that 2-3 times a month was the most populated answer.

The graph below displays the main benefits and the results.

## In Your Opinion Which Are the Main Benefits for You of Using the Library?





Additional space was given for comments, some of the most popular comments are worth noting.

*"Our local library is a fantastic resource. Our children are 4 and 8, and there is always a new book for them to read or us to read with them. It keeps them enthused, encourages them to read and to learn to, keeps them away from the lure of screens, allow them to escape to another world, learn, laugh and enjoy a different story. We also read ourselves as adults, as well as us borrow box to listen to audio books on our travels. The staff there have gotten to know us, know what we all like to read and enjoy, so try and recommend or find new and different books for us. We always feel welcomed, and the kids enjoy our visit there on the weekend, as well as when they run an activity or function for them, like the upcoming Harry Potter one. It's a great place and a wonderful resource for the family. Borrow books is also more environmentally friendly of course."*

*"I use the libraries to meet with my participants as I am an Employment Mentor for NPT Employability. My participants feel that they are free to discuss issues around their personal problems affecting work. I also feel more secure meeting participants in a public place."*

*"It gets me out of the house to socialise with people, they provide free tea and coffee, and it is a great help in the winter months with me having to keep my house warm, it is a life line for me"*

Suggestions also included evening activities, additional author events, extended opening hours, study/working space and having access to hot drinks or refreshments.