



INDEPENDENT MIND

LIBRARY LOANS REVIEW REPORT FOR



**Libraries
Connected**

17.10.2025

CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	3
Overall trends in borrowing	3
Glossary of terms.....	5
2. Introduction	6
3. Method	7
4. Main findings	9
4.1 The baseline year: 2019-20.....	9
4.2 Overall trends in library borrowing since 2019-20.....	12
4.3 Trends in format of library borrowing since 2019-20.....	13
4.4 Trends in fiction and non-fiction library borrowing since 2019-20.....	17
4.5 Trends by adults/children's stock issues since 2019-20.....	21
4.6 Trends in active borrower numbers	27
4.7 Trends in library visits.....	29
4.8 Demographic analysis of library borrowers	31
4.9 Library services which have maintained high levels of loans over time	34
4.10 Case study analysis	35
5. Conclusions and implications	36
5.1 Conclusions.....	36
5.2 Implications.....	38
Appendix	39
1. Case studies.....	39
2. Analysis of variation in library loans across services participating in the study, over time .	54
3. Library loans steering group members	56
4. Stock managers working group members.....	56

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Libraries Connected Universal Reading Offer Group identified concerning trends around book loans, especially as people return to physical use of libraries post-Covid. Adult ebook and eaudio issues are on a rising trend but e-issues are not replacing book issues proportionately.

Independent Mind was commissioned to better understand how book lending is performing and why. The objectives of the research were to:

- Understand trends and current levels of book loans
- Analyse trends in the context of other research and contextual factors
- Identify successful practice which has increased loan figures.

OVERALL TRENDS IN BORROWING

- At the end of the 2024-25 financial year, total loans had increased by 14% vs the baseline year of 2019-20.
- There are large differences across library services in terms of borrowing trends. Some have seen huge growth, while in other services borrowing levels have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels.

Trends by format

- The data shows that there has been significant change in library loans across different formats since 2019-20.
- In 2019-20 physical formats made up 87% of loans, but by 2024-25 they made up 65% of loans.
- While the overall trend shows growth in the total number of loans, analysis of loans by format shows that this growth is primarily driven by digital formats.
- Physical loans rates continued to recover until 2023-24, albeit remaining 12% lower than in the baseline year of 2019-20, but in 2024-25 they began to decline again and were 16% lower than the baseline year.
- All digital forms of stock (ebooks, eaudio and epress¹) have seen growth which was fuelled by changes in borrowing habits during the pandemic caused by the closure of physical libraries. However, this growth has been particularly strong for epress, which made up 22% of all library loans in 2024-25 and has been instrumental in driving loans growth overall.
- Without epress loans, library loans would have been 4% lower in 2024-25 than they were in 2019-20.

Trends by fiction/non-fiction

- In 2019-20, just over seven in 10 (73%) loans were fiction and just under three in 10 (27%) loans were non-fiction.
- By 2024-25 just over six in 10 (63%) loans were fiction, while just under four in 10 (37%) loans were non-fiction.
- For both fiction and non-fiction the proportion of loans that are in e-formats has increased.
- The majority of fiction loans were still in physical format (82% physical format, 18% digital) in 2024-25, but the majority of non-fiction loans were in digital format (64% digital format, 36% physical). This may be supported by the growth in epress, which is always classified as non-fiction.

¹ this means any magazine, newspaper or journal which can be accessed via the library service's digital portal

Trends by adult/children's stock

- In 2019/20 63% of loans were adult stock while 37% of loans were children's stock. Children's stock issues reduced to 20% of all loans during the pandemic but, in subsequent years, the ratio of adult/children's stock returned to approximately pre-pandemic levels until 2023-24.
- However, in 2024-25 children's stock loans reduced by 6% relative to the previous year and stood at just 32% of all loans.
- Borrowing trends in adult stock changed markedly in the wake of the pandemic year of 2020-21: in the baseline year 82% of adult loans were physical format but in 2020-21 digital loans made up the majority of all adult loans (64%). Once libraries reopened in 2021-22, there was an initial rebalancing with physical loans regaining share of borrowing. However, digital loans began to grow again from 2022-23 and by 2024-25 digital loans formed 50% of all adult loans.
- This change in format preference also saw a growth in non-fiction loans of adult stock. In the baseline year of 2019-20 65% of all adult stock borrowed was fiction, however by 2024-25 only 52% of all adult stock borrowed was fiction.
- Children's stock borrowing trends have not seen the same changes as adult stock. In 2019-20 children's loans were strongly weighted towards physical stock and fiction: 87% of all children's loans were fiction and 98% were physical stock. In 2024-25 88% of all children's loans were fiction and 94% were physical stock.

Trends by active borrower and visitor numbers

- In the baseline year of 2019-20 there were c. 1.6 million active borrowers recorded across the sample. This halved to 0.8 million during 2020-21 when libraries were closed or had restricted access due to the pandemic.
- From 2021-23 active borrower numbers grew until they nearly achieved similar levels to before the pandemic (1.5 million), however since 2023-24 active borrower numbers began to decline again. By 2024-25 they had reduced to 1.3 million. This is 21% below the baseline year of 2019-20.
- New member sign up rates declined by 74% in 2020-21 but by 2022-23 they were 7% higher than the baseline year. This rate was sustained in 2023-24 but dropped to parity with the baseline year of 2019-20 in 2024-25.
- Library visits declined by 85% in 2020-21 but they have continued to grow steadily since 2021-22. By the end of 2024-25 library visits were still 21% lower than before the pandemic but showed indications of continued steady growth.

Demographic analysis of library borrowers

- A small number of participating library services were able to provide detailed demographic data about their active borrowers. This data suggests that men and those aged over 70 have not returned to library use at the same rate as women or younger adult borrowers.

Library services which have maintained high levels of loans over time

- 15 of the 34 participating library services outperformed the average in one or more metrics where services in general were experiencing declining loans rates.
- Funding is a common factor in these success stories: analysis of these 15 library services shows that 7 services experienced small or large **stock budget increases** since 2019-20
- The qualitative case studies of 7 library services which have 'bucked the trend' identified the following success factors:
 - Investment in stock, library refurbishment, expert staff, staff training and infrastructure
 - Removing barriers to library use
 - Community engagement, partnership and outreach
 - Data-driven service development and approaches to increasing loans rates
 - Evolving/modernising the offer so that it meets the needs/expectations of users.

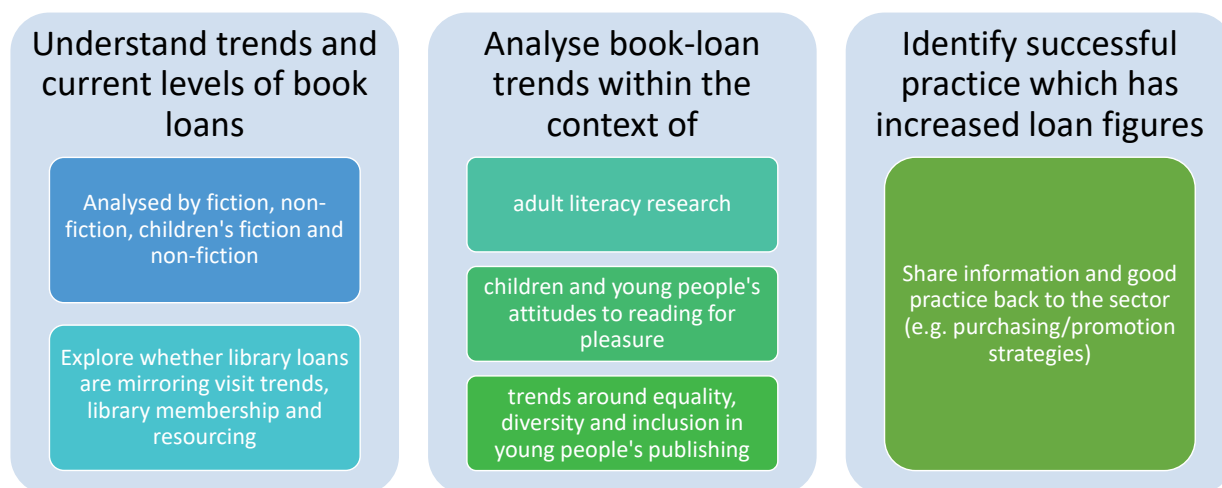
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Total active borrowers	All members who have borrowed at least one item that financial year
Total active users	This includes active borrowers on both physical and elending platforms, People's Network users, library app users and any other authenticated way of counting active engagement
Number of public library branches	All individual buildings/spaces where a library service is offered e.g. could be a small branch co-located with a GP surgery etc. Does not include 'book drop' locations where formal borrowing cannot be monitored
Stock purchasing budget	If possible this should be the budget available to buy new titles whether physical or eBook titles. If you cannot provide information with this level of detail please state the parameters of the budget in the notes/explanation column (e.g. total materials budget or budget for stock and processing). This should correlate to Q103-119 on the CIPFA returns for those of you who are still completing these.
Childrens fiction/non-fiction	This includes teen and Young Adult fiction
Physical book	This is any printed and bound book, including Large Print books
Physical audiobook	These could be "Playaway" devices, cassettes or CDs or other physical devices to play audio books
ebook	These are the text/images books offered on elending platforms
ePress	This is magazines/newspapers and other print items available on library elending platforms but which are not books.
eaudio	eaudio books available on library elending platforms

2. INTRODUCTION

The Libraries Connected Universal Reading Offer Group identified concerning trends around book loans, especially as people return to physical use of libraries post-Covid. Adult ebook and eaudio issues are on a rising trend but e-issues are not replacing book issues proportionately.

Independent Mind was commissioned to better understand how book lending is performing and why. The project objectives are to:



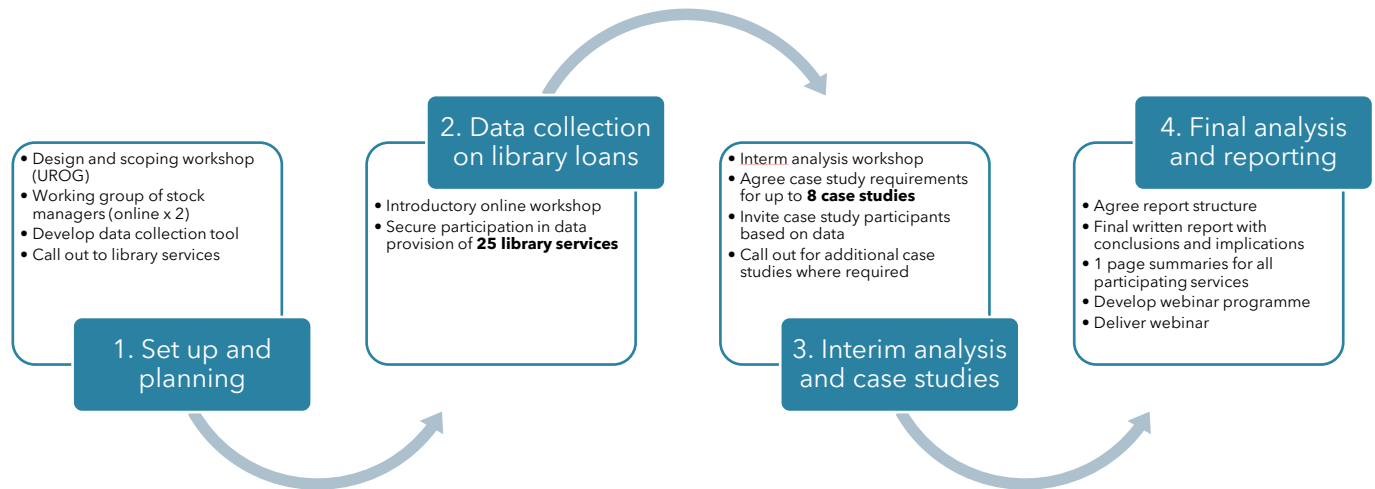
Library services from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland were invited to participate in the study.

37 library services provided data for the project, however three data returns were not able to be incorporated into the analysis because either they did not have any data for the year 2019-20 or because they did not collect detailed data about their library loans. In total 34 library services provided data which was used to create this report. The following library services have provided usable loans data for the review:

Participating services A-L		Participating services M-W
Blackpool		Manchester
Cheshire East		Norfolk
Cheshire west		Northumberland
City of London		Oldham
Cornwall		Portsmouth
Devon		Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Doncaster		Shropshire
Gateshead		St Helens
Gloucestershire		Staffordshire
Greenwich		Sunderland
Halton		Torbay
Hampshire		Wakefield
Hertfordshire		Westminster
Kent		West Sussex
Lancashire		Wiltshire
Lewisham		Worcestershire
Liverpool		York

3. METHOD

The approach that Independent Mind took to the project as a whole is set out below.



The library loans data tool was co-designed with a working group of stock managers who helped define the scope of data collection to answer the project objectives and the best way to set out the tool to help library staff complete it. They tested and helped to refine the draft tool. Membership of the stock manager steering group is detailed in the Appendix.

Interest in participation was generated through the Reading Offer Group membership, invitations to participate through regional Libraries Connected Chairs, inclusion of an article about the project and invitation to participate in the Libraries Connected weekly newsletter for Heads of Service and via an online webinar in June 2025 which explained the project and how to participate.

This project has also aligned itself and is sharing data with other similar work taking place, including Arts Council England's annual library data set, Library Insights Tool data collection, and a project commissioned by The Combined Regions with the University of Sheffield to explore the state of collections development in public library services.

A note on data

The financial year for 2019-20 was adopted as the 'baseline' year because it was nearly complete when lockdown restrictions were implemented on 17th March 2020².

The tool also collected data for the five following financial years:

- 2020-2021
- 2021-2022
- 2022-2023
- 2023-2024
- 2024-2025

In several cases, library services were not able to provide breakdowns of fiction/non-fiction or adult/children's stock for digital – in this case only those library services who are able to provide this data are included in the breakdowns.

² Indicative data from Libraries Connected relating to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that visits and borrowing figures may be around 5% lower than the previous year, due to the impact of the pandemic in the first quarter of 2020.

In addition, there were only 14 library services who were able to provide any membership or loans information by age and/or gender. Some of these library services adopt different parameters for what an 'adult' or 'child' is (e.g. 20 years + vs 18+) and there is little consistency in the type of data collected. Some collect data only on membership while only 5 library services were able to provide breakdowns of different types of loans by age and/or gender. For that reason, the analysis of behaviour by age and/or gender is presented in narrative form, outlining possible trends and areas for further enquiry rather than drawing conclusions and recommendations.

Almost all library services do not categorise stock by whether it is 'young adult' or not. Young adult stock could be classified as children's stock or adult stock depending on the library service.

Although the sample size is meaningful and robust, showing clear and consistent trends in library borrowing, there is significant variation in trends in library borrowing across the individual library services. In particular, those services which did not have large take-up of their elending offer prior to the pandemic tender to have seen much larger percentage growth than those whose elending offer was more established. This report provides aggregated data but each individual library service will have its own story to tell in terms of local factors, financial and other pressures, projects and initiatives that impact on borrowing in their service.

The report refers to the following format types:

- Physical books
- Physical audiobooks
- ebooks
- eaudio books
- epress (this means any magazine, newspaper or journal which can be accessed via the library service's digital portal)

The appendices will include definitions of each loan type, but it is important to note that not all library services record their loans in exactly the same manner. When it comes to format, several participating library services were not able to provide a breakdown of ebook and eaudio loans by fiction and non-fiction. For that reason, sample sizes for breakdowns of ebook and eaudio loans by fiction and non-fiction are smaller than for physical fiction. All epress is considered non-fiction and this may impact the rate of digital non-fiction loans.

Active borrowers are defined as individual library members who have borrowed at least one title in the time period defined (e.g. the financial year). Active users are individuals who the library service has some way of tracking, which may be a library card or a digital ID login e.g. for the People's Network, and who have engaged in some form of trackable activity over the time period defined. This could include borrowing or using library equipment, attending facilitated sessions or some other activity.

4. MAIN FINDINGS

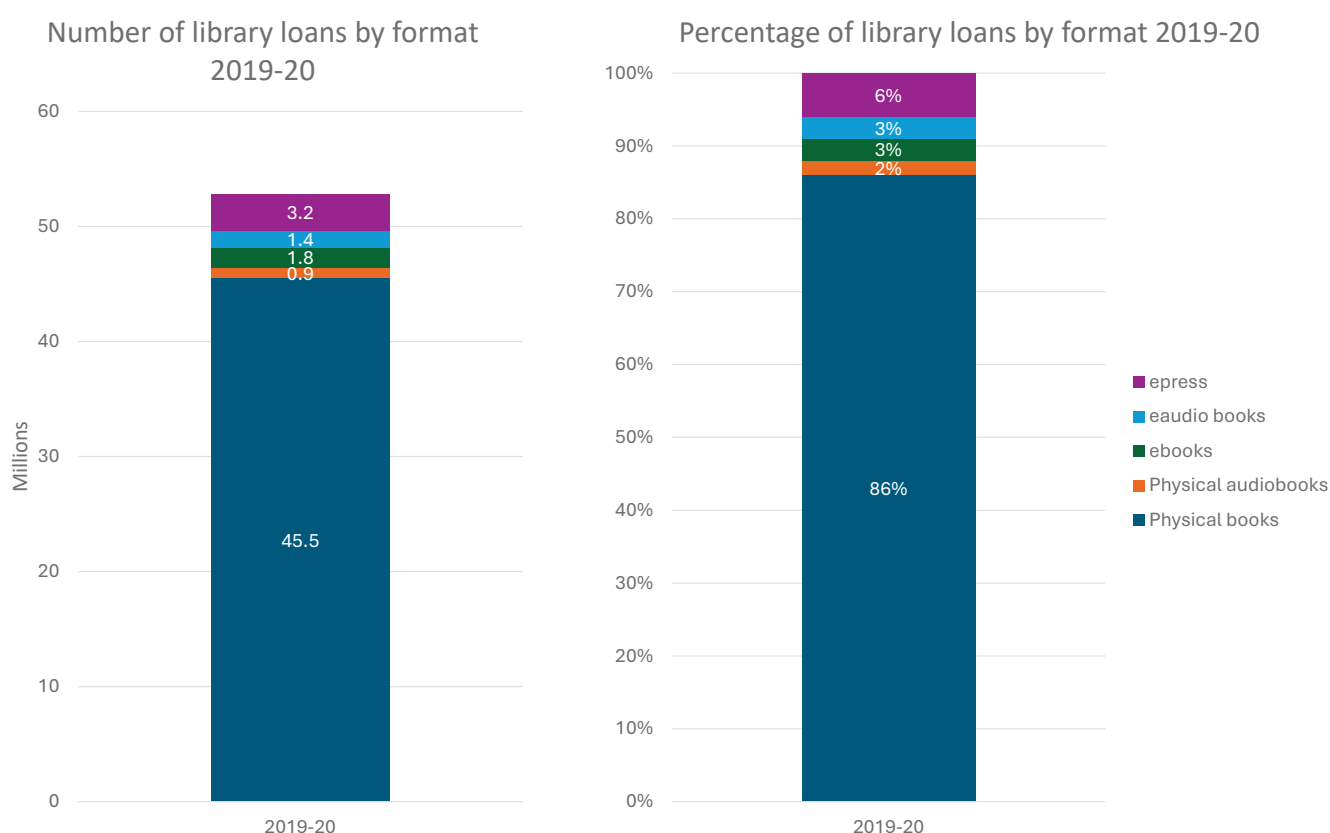
4.1 THE BASELINE YEAR: 2019-20

For the remainder of the report 2019-20 will operate as 'year zero' in terms of trends. Before exploring those trends, this chapter of the report will outline the state of borrowing for this baseline year, funding, visits and library opening hours among the 34 library services who were able to provide valid loans data for this study.

Overall loans and loans by format

In 2020 a total of 52,825,003 items were loaned across the 34 participating library services. Of these loans, 86% (45.5 million) were physical book loans, 2% (0.9 million) were physical audiobook loans, 3% (1.8 million) were ebook loans, 3% (1.4 million) were eaudio book loans and 6% (3.2 million) were epress issues.

Figure 1: Number and percentage of library loans by format in 2019-20



In total 46.4 million loans (88%) were physical stock (books and audiobooks) while 6.4 million loans (12%) were digital (ebook/eaudio book/epress).

Loans by stock type

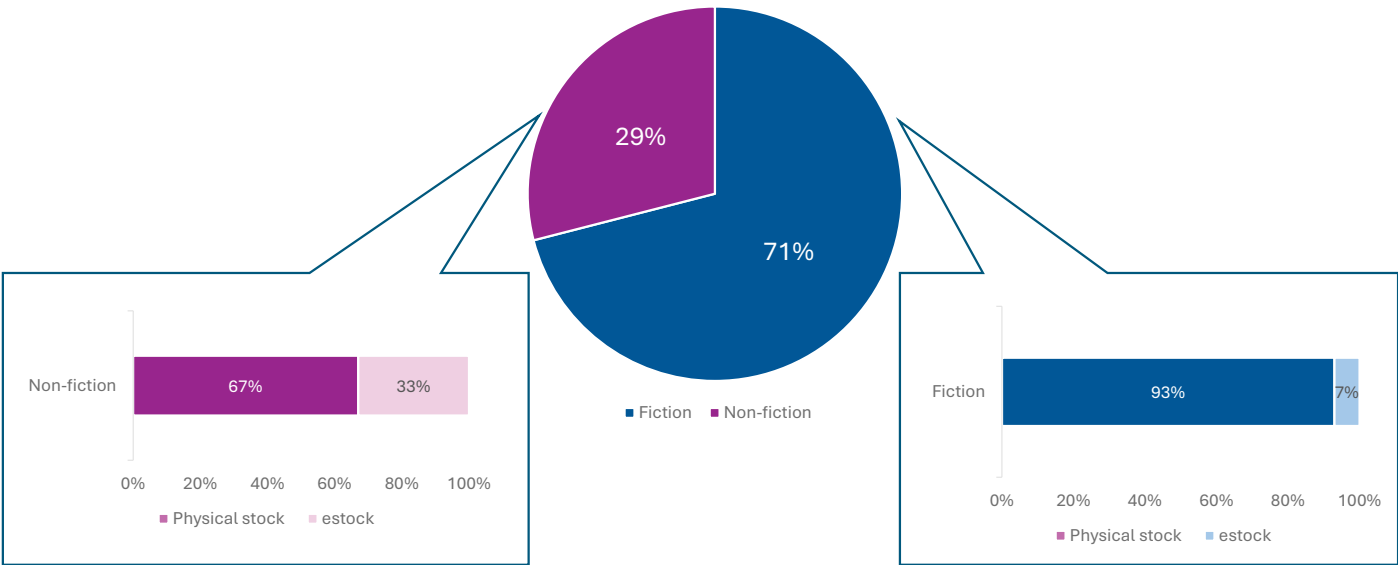
In 2019-20 fiction comprised 32.6 million or 71% of all loans and non-fiction comprised 12.6 million or 29% of all loans.

Although not all library services are able to provide data about whether their digital was fiction or non-fiction it has been possible to develop approximate figures relating to the format split within fiction and non-fiction.

In 2019-20 12% of all loans were digital. However, digital loans are not distributed evenly across stock type: more digital loans were non-fiction than fiction.

Approximately 9 in 10 fiction loans in 2019-20 were physical loans (books or audiobooks) and under one in 10 were digital loans (ebooks and eaudio books). However, one-third of all non-fiction loans in 2019-20 were digital loans (ebooks, eaudio or epress) and under two-third of all non-fiction loans were physical loans. It is important to note that epress is exclusively characterised as non-fiction and this took up half (50%) of all digital loans in 2019-20.

Figure 2: breakdown of fiction/non-fiction loans by physical vs digital



Children’s vs adult stock issues

In that year, children’s loans comprised 19.5 million loans and adult loans comprised 33.4 million loans, which meant children’s loans were 37% and adult loans were 63% of all loans. In 2019-20 children’s loans were dominated by fiction, while adult loans were more evenly spread across fiction and non-fiction. Within children’s loans, 17 million, or 87% were fiction loans and 2.4 million or 13% were non-fiction loans. Within adult loans, 21.6 million or 65% were fiction loans and 11.8 million or 35% were non-fiction loans.

Figure 3: number of fiction/non-fiction loans among children’s and adult stock in 2019-20

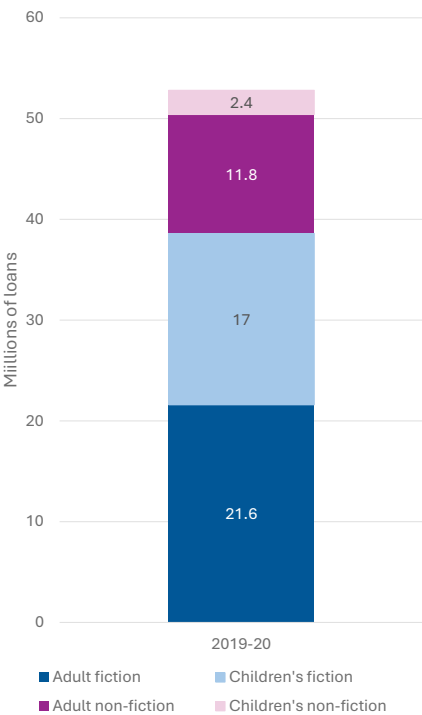
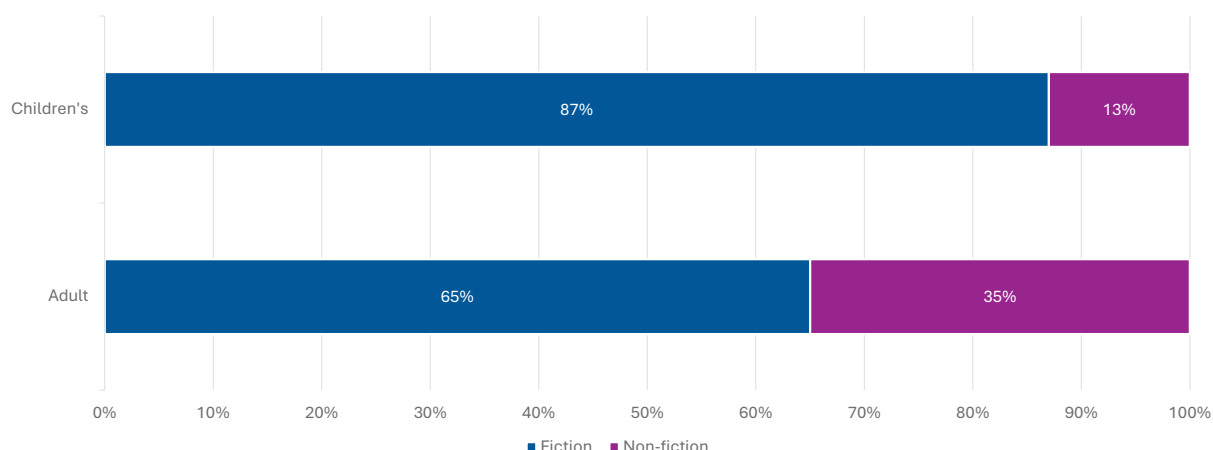


Figure 4: percentage of fiction/non-fiction among children's and adult loans in 2019-20



Active borrowers and library visits in 2019-20

In 2019-20 the participating library services recorded a total of 1.6 million active borrowers. This figure is based on 33 library services' data as some of those participating in the study do not record active borrowers, they use 'active users' which is a different type of activity and can include other library activities as well as borrowing.

Library services also recorded 49.1 million visits. Again, this data is based on only 28 library services as three services do not record visits.

The rest of this report will explore trends in borrowing in relation to these baseline figures.

4.2 OVERALL TRENDS IN LIBRARY BORROWING SINCE 2019-20

Overall, library loans combining all formats among the 34 participating library services reduced from 52.8 million in 2019-20 to 27.2 million in 2020-21, which represents a 49% reduction in loans at the time of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. They recovered in the following two financial years, returning to pre-pandemic levels by 2022-23. They rose to 60.2 million loans in 2023-24 and maintained 60.3 million loans in 2024-25.

At the end of the 2024-25 financial year, total loans had increased by 14% vs the baseline year of 2019-20.

Figure 5: Total numbers of loans over time

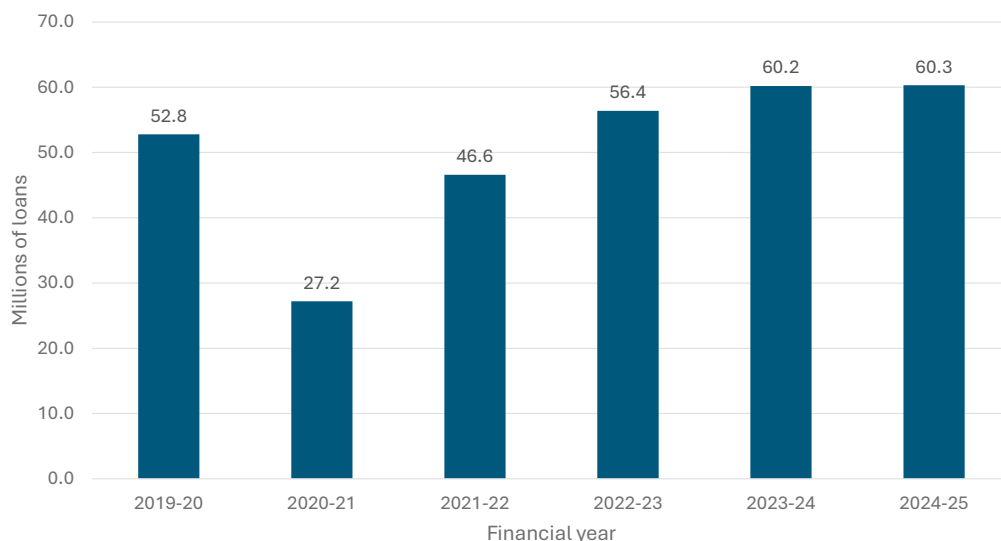
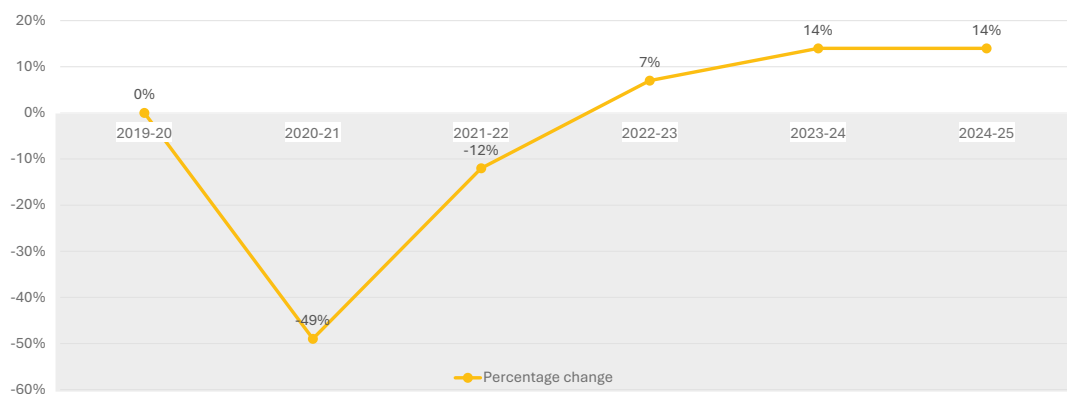


Figure 6: Trend in loans over time



NB: greyed out area represents values below the level of 2019-20

However, the macro picture masks significant variation across the sample in rates of recovery in borrowing across library services since the pandemic. All library services in the study experienced similar drops in loans and visits during 2020-21. As services begin to recover from the pandemic, the picture becomes more varied and these variations continue to grow until 2024-25. This could suggest that a wide range of individual and external local factors may be impacting on library services' loans figures, with some services seeing exponential growth in loans while others have still not recovered from the pandemic.

For a more detailed discussion of these variations and statistical analysis of the growing differences between those library services with greatest growth/contraction in loans, please see the Appendix.

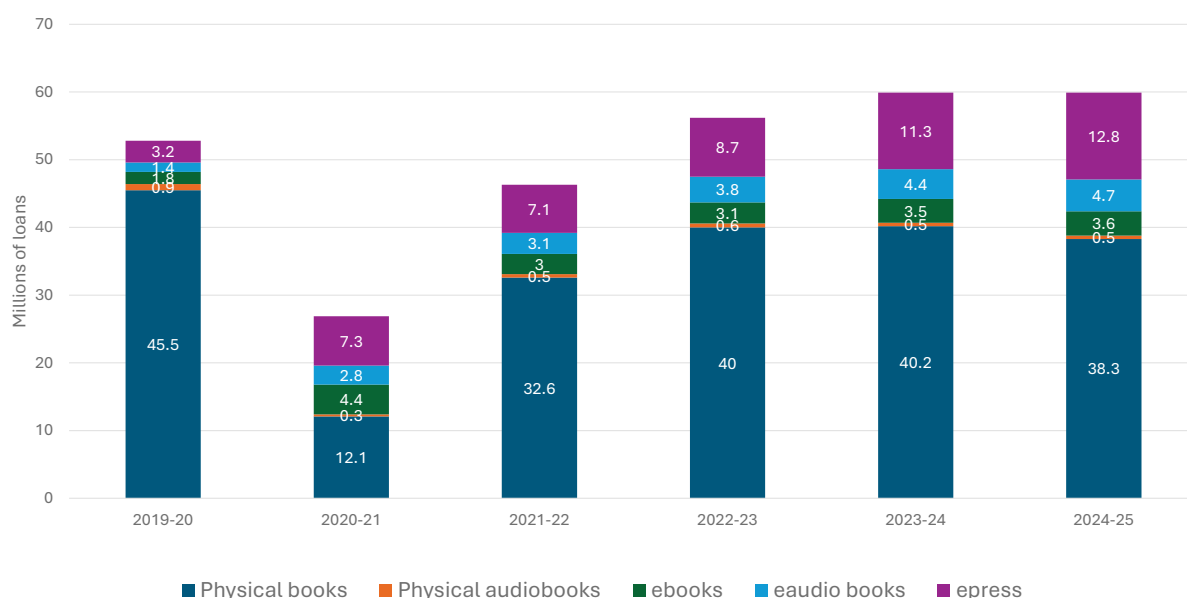
4.3 TRENDS IN FORMAT OF LIBRARY BORROWING SINCE 2019-20

The data shows that there has been significant change in library loans across formats since 2019-20. While the overall trend shows growth in the total number of loans, analysis of loans by format shows that this growth is primarily driven by digital types.

The greatest move from physical to digital borrowing was, as might be expected, in 2020-21, which was the year affected by COVID-19 restrictions and two lockdowns. Physical book borrowing dropped from 45.5 million to just 12.1 million loans, and audiobook borrowing dropped from c. 900,000 to c. 300,000 loans. During the same time period, ebook borrowing more than doubled from 1.8 million loans to 4.4 million, while eaudio book borrowing increased from 1.4 million to 2.8 million loans and epress increased from 3.2 million to 7.3 million loans.

In 2021-22 the number of ebook loans dropped, from 4.4 million to 3 million, as physical book borrowing began to recover. However, neither eaudio book nor epress borrowing figures experienced similar drops. From 2022-23 onwards, ebook loans have increased but not to pandemic levels, while eaudio and epress borrowing has continued to grow.

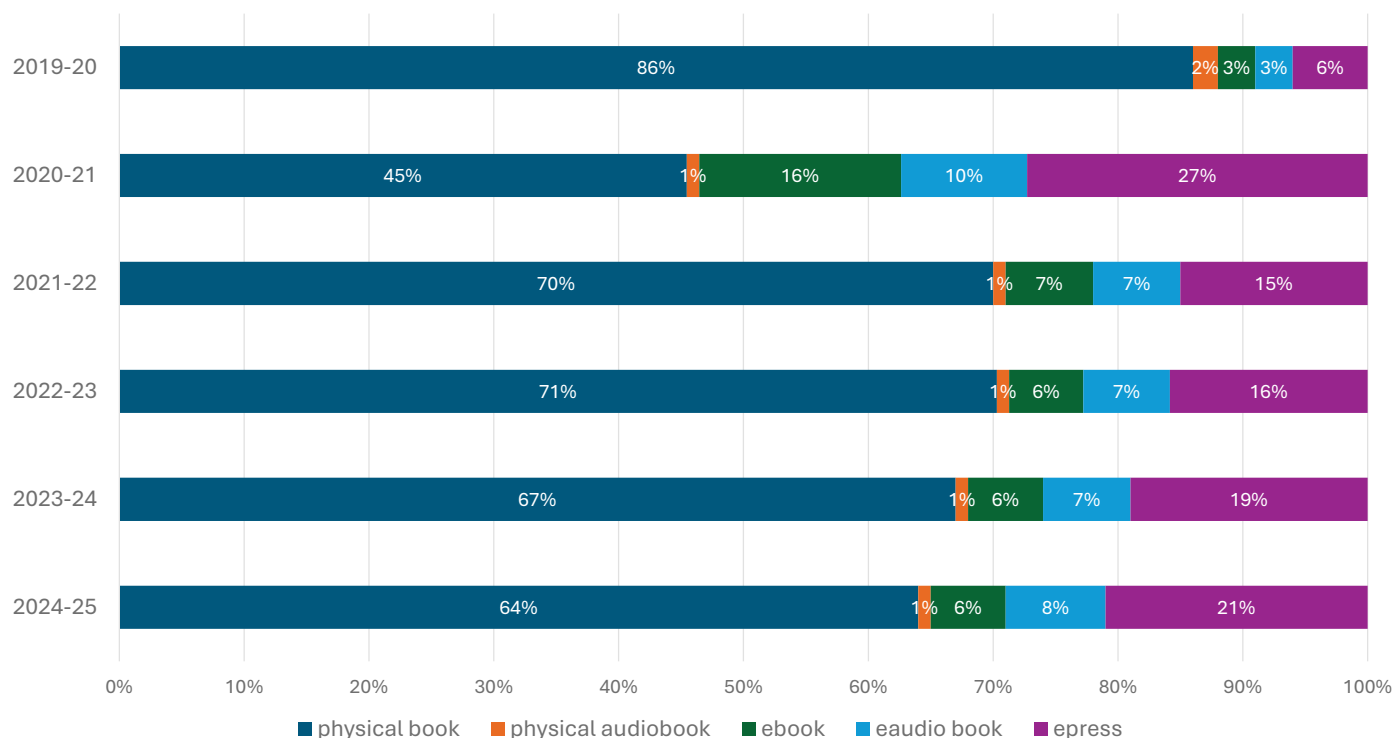
Figure 7: change in number of loans by format type since 2019-20



These changes mean that, proportionally, digital formats now make up a much more important part of the library borrowing offer. In 2019-20 physical formats made up nearly nine in 10 loans (88%), but by 2024-25 they made up just over two thirds of loans (65%).

All digital formats increased markedly during the pandemic but there were variations in their post-pandemic borrowing levels. ebook borrowing grew from 3% of all loans in 2019-20 to 16% of loans in 2020-21 but then dropped back to 7% and has remained relatively static at 6% in 2024-25. eaudio book borrowing grew from 3% to 10% of all loans in 2020-21 and then has maintained a 7-8% borrowing rate following the pandemic. epress borrowing increased from 6% to 27% during 2020-21, then dropped to 15% in 2021-22 but has been steadily increasing since then and made up two in ten (21%) of all library loans in 2024-25.

Figure 8: changes in the proportion of library loans by format over time

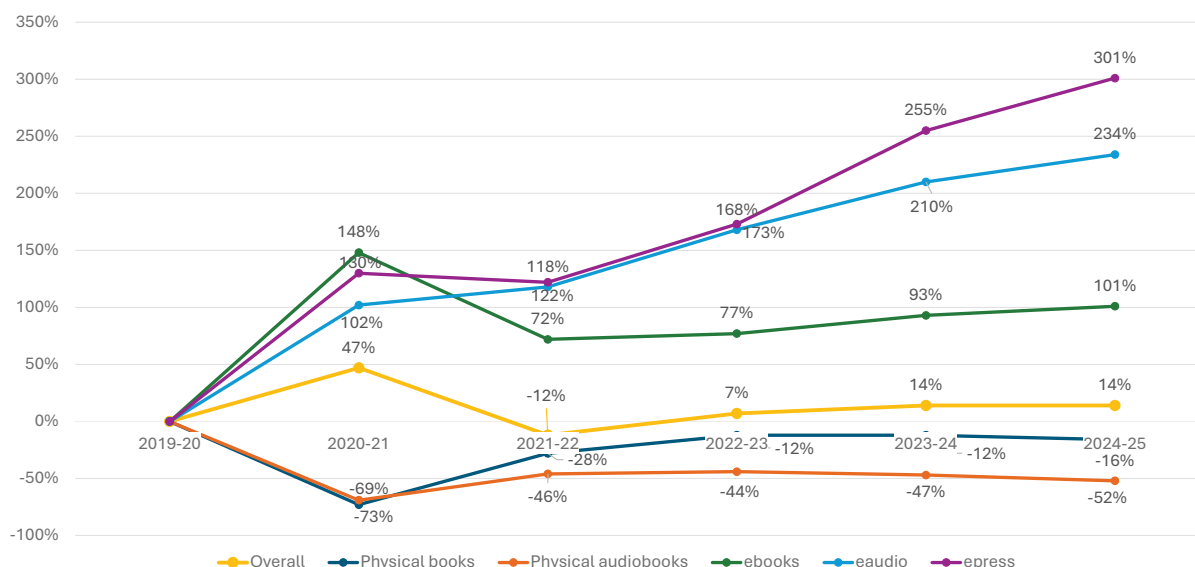


Another way of showing this change is to look at percentage growth or decline in library loans by format.

As mentioned, borrowing of physical formats has declined, while borrowing of digital types has greatly increased, especially epress (301% growth) and eaudiobooks (233% growth). Physical audiobook borrowing has reduced by half (-52%), compared with pre-pandemic levels, while physical book borrowing has reduced by 16%.³

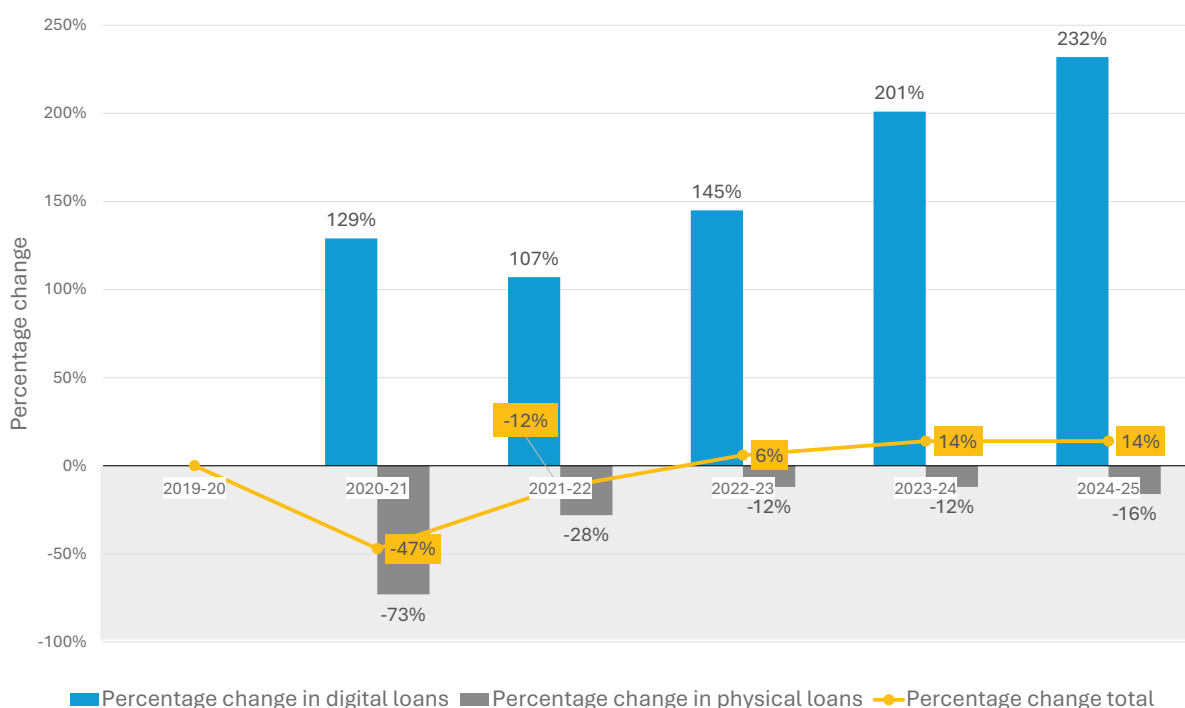
³ It is worth noting here, that emergent formats are likely to see much greater percentage change in their growth, as they are starting from a low base (e.g. only 1.4 million eaudio book loans in 2019-20). Those more established formats, such as physical books, are much less likely to show high levels of growth, because the total number of loans required to show that growth is much greater than for less commonly loaned formats.

Figure 9: trends in borrowing by format relative to 2019-20



Comparing the growth rates of all physical vs all digital formats shows that physical loans continued to recover until the year of 2024-25 when they declined by 4%. By contrast, digital formats have maintained a strong rate of growth.

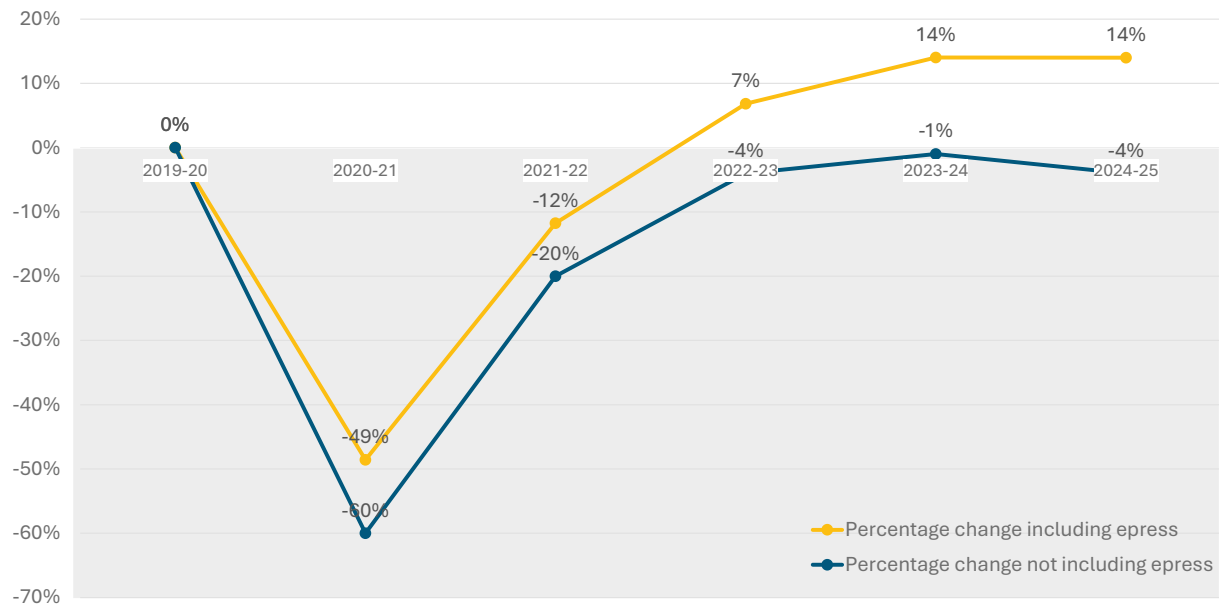
Figure 10: trends in percentage change in library loans by physical vs digital formats relative to 2019-20



The importance of epress in maintaining positive growth in library loans over time cannot be overstated. Due to the decline in physical loans, library loans would not currently be at higher levels than before the pandemic without the growth in epress loans.

The chart below shows the overall percentage change of library loans since the pandemic with epress loans included in the total figures and with epress loans removed. This demonstrates that without epress, library loans would be 4% lower in 2024-25 than they were in 2019-20.

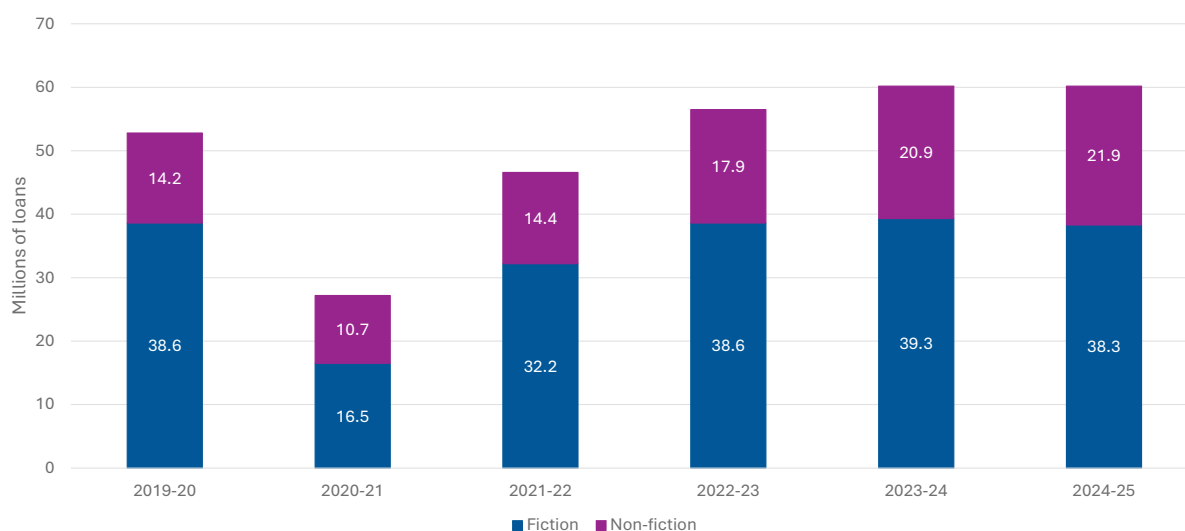
Figure 11: impact of epress on overall trend in library loans



4.4 TRENDS IN FICTION AND NON-FICTION LIBRARY BORROWING SINCE 2019-20

In 2019-20 there were 38.6 million fiction loans and 14.2 non-fiction loans among the 34 library services who form the sample for this study. Although total loans dropped across both fiction and non-fiction in the pandemic year of 2020-21, fiction loans dropped by more than half, to 16.5 million, while non-fiction loans dropped by only one-third. In the aftermath of the pandemic, non-fiction loans recovered immediately to pre-pandemic levels, while it took an extra year for fiction loans to recover. In 2023-24 both fiction and non-fiction were lending at higher levels than before the pandemic. However, in 2024-25 fiction loans showed a small decline while non-fiction loans continued to grow.

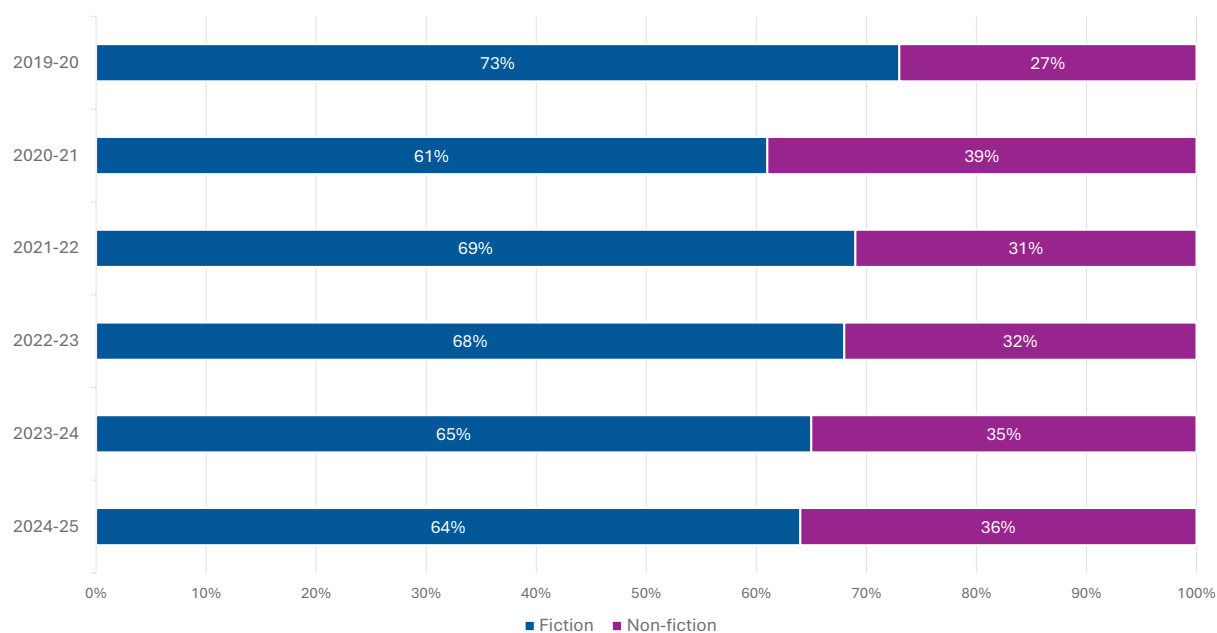
Figure 12: number of fiction and non-fiction loans over time



In 2019-20, around three quarters (73%) were fiction and just over one quarter (27%) were non-fiction. By 2024-25 just under two thirds were fiction (64%) while over one third (36%) were non-fiction.

This change over time is linked with the rise of digital formats (e.g. epress is only classified as non-fiction), but not exclusively. In 2020-21, when digital borrowing was at an all-time high, there was an abrupt change in the ratio of fiction to non-fiction borrowing, from 73%/27% to 61%/39%. This also coincided with a 73% decline in physical loans. In 2021-22 and 2022-23 fiction and non-fiction borrowing looked as if it was moving back towards the pre-pandemic ratio, as physical borrowing rates recovered. However, in 2024-25 the ratio of borrowing returned to a similar level to the pandemic, despite physical book borrowing being much higher than during the pandemic.

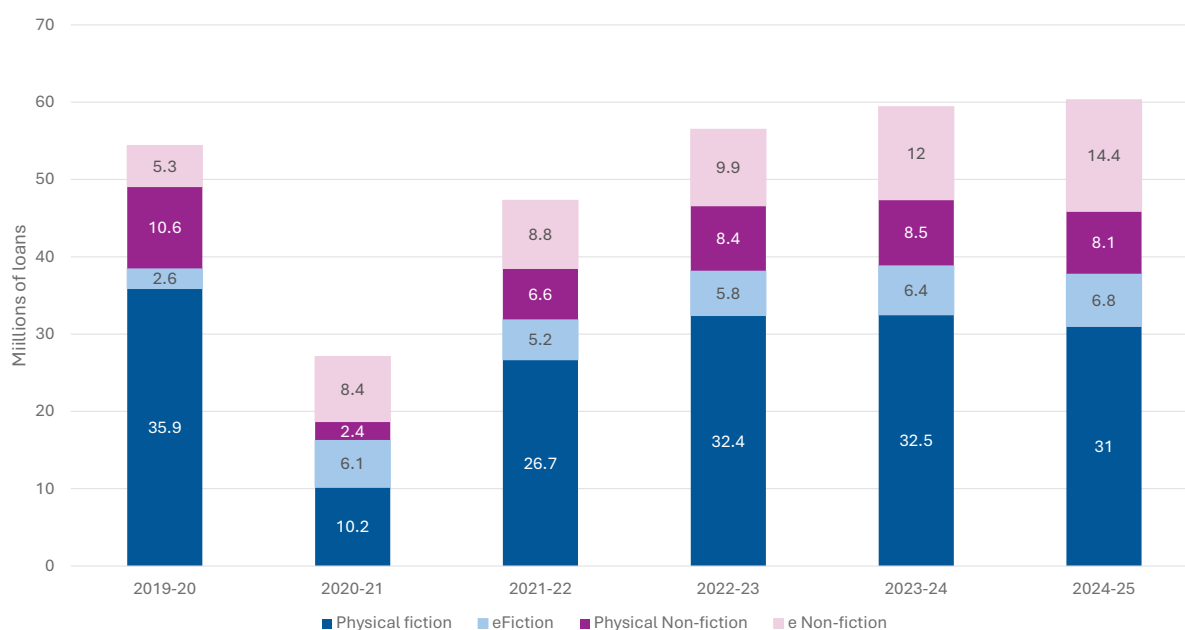
Figure 13: trends in borrowing by fiction/non-fiction



A deep dive on fiction loans by format shows that physical loans of both fiction and non-fiction remain lower than the baseline year of 2019-20 throughout the following years included in the study, despite the fact that they continued to show growth until 2024-25, when physical loans of both fiction and non-fiction showed a small decline.

In non-fiction, loans in digital format jumped up from 5.3 million to 8.4 million in the pandemic year of 2020-21, when many libraries were closed. They continued to grow steadily and strongly in following years. Digital fiction formats saw similar growth to non-fiction in 2020-21 but then dropped by just under 1 million in 2021-22 before showing more moderate growth in following years. This could be attributed to the fact that ebook formats have seen less enthusiastic adoption among library borrowers than epress, and fiction loans are concentrated in ebook and eaudio while digital non-fiction is dominated by epress formats.

Figure 14: number of loans by fiction/non fiction and physical/digital formats

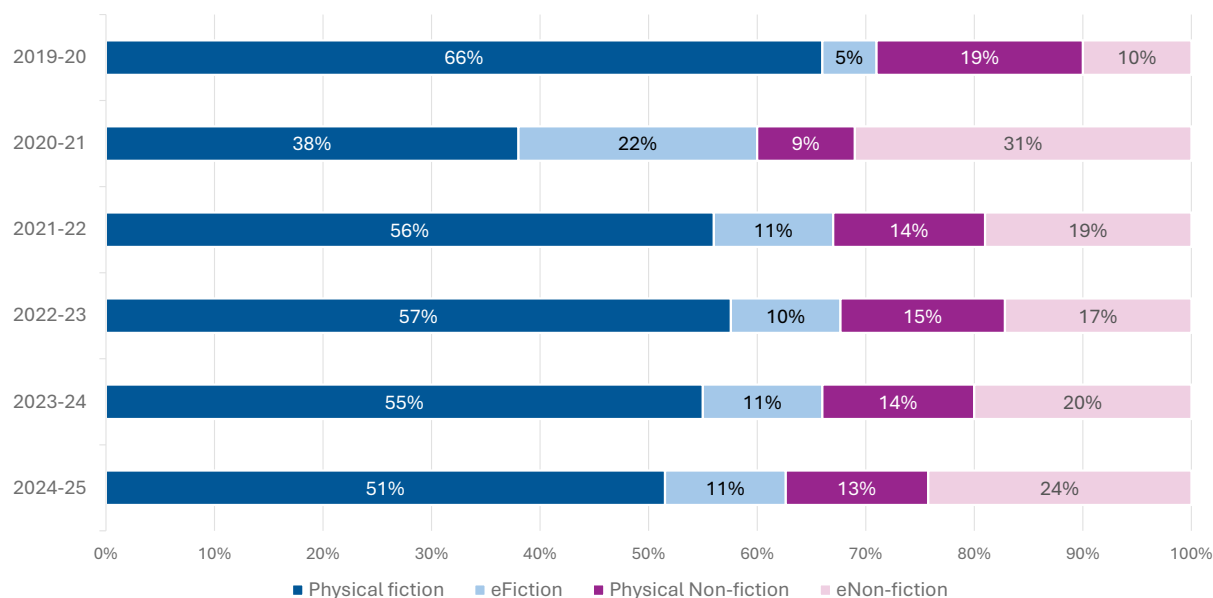


In 2019-20, physical fiction loans formed 68% or just over two-thirds of all loans, while physical non-fiction loans were just under two in 10 of all loans (19%). By 2024-25 physical fiction loans had reduced to just over half (51%) of all loans, while physical non-fiction loans had reduced to just 13% of all loans.

In 2019-20 digital fiction loans were only 5% of all loans, but this proportion had more than doubled to 11% of all loans in 2024-25. Digital non-fiction loans were 10% of all loans in 2019-20 but this had increased to just under one-quarter of all loans (24%).

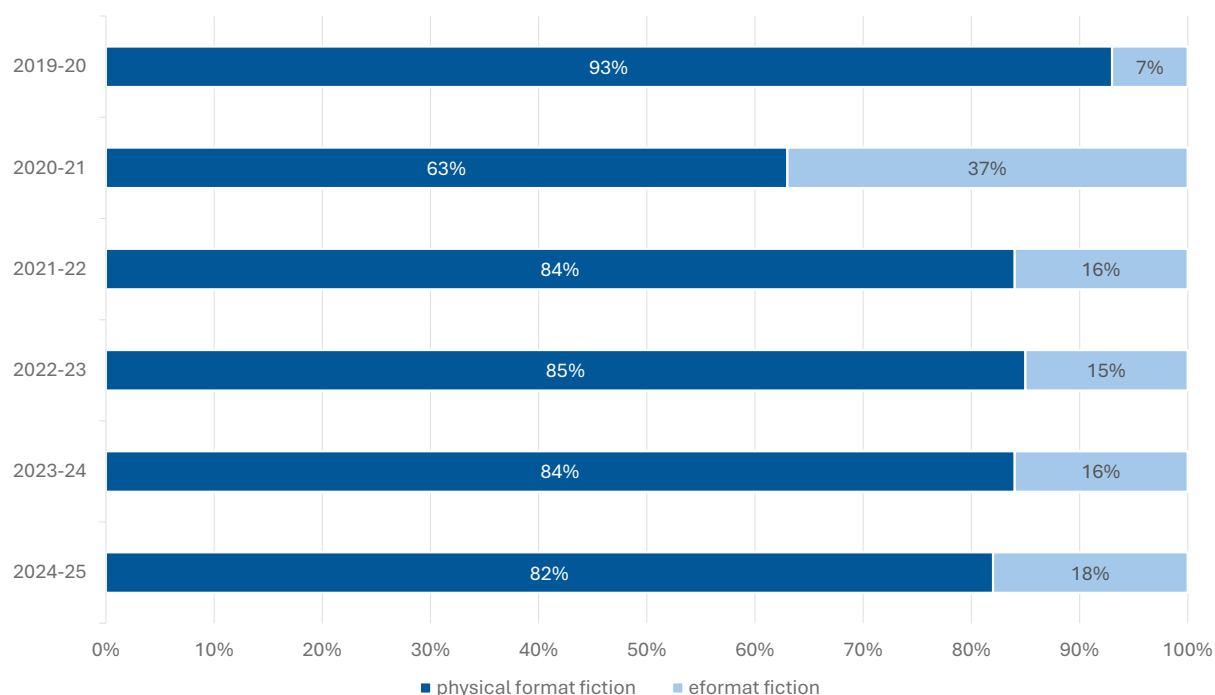
This shows that both fiction and non-fiction loans in digital formats have increased in significance since 2019-20 and the data suggests that we can expect this trend to continue in future.

Figure 15: Percentage of fiction and non-fiction loans by format over time



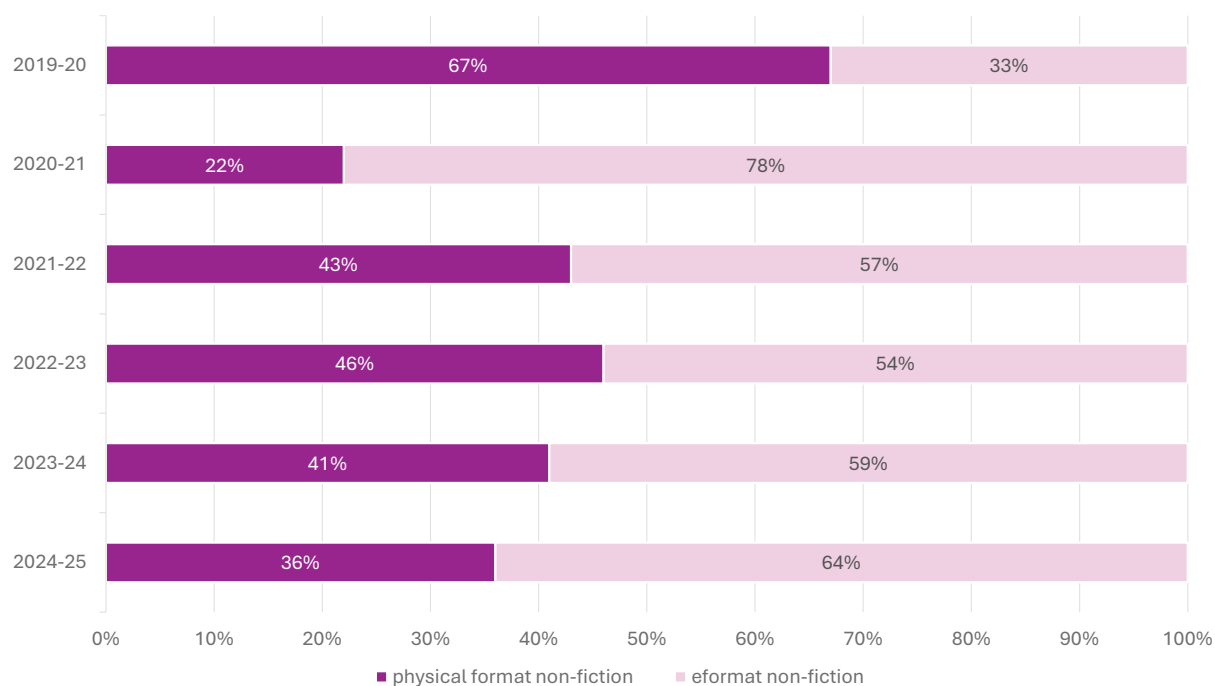
Considering fiction loans only, in 2019-20 93% of fiction loans were in a physical format, with only 7% in digital formats. By 2024-25 only 82% of fiction loans were in physical formats while just under two in 10 (18%) were in digital formats.

Figure 16: fiction loans by format



The change in format ratio for non-fiction is even more dramatic than for fiction. In 2019/20 two-thirds (67%) of all non-fiction loans were in physical format. By 2024-25 only around one-third (36%) of non-fiction loans were in physical format, while just under two-thirds (64%) were e-formats.

Figure 17: non-fiction loans by format



4.5 TRENDS BY ADULTS/CHILDREN'S STOCK ISSUES SINCE 2019-20

In 2019/20 33.4 million loans from the library services participating in the study were adult stock, while 19.5 million loans were children's stock. In the pandemic, children's stock loans reduced by three-quarters while adult stock loans only reduced by one-third. After the pandemic, both children's and adult loans increased rapidly and by 2022-23 they were already higher than before the pandemic.

However, while adult stock issues continued to grow over the time period of the study, rising to 40.7 million by 2024-25, children's stock initially surpassed issues in 2019-20 but then dropped slightly to 19.4 million in 2024-25.

Figure 18: number of loans by adult/children's stock over time



In 2019/20 63% of loans were adult stock while 37% of loans were children's stock. During 2020-21, when lockdown restrictions were in place, children's stock declined as a proportion of overall loans. In subsequent years, the ratio of adult/children's stock returned to pre-pandemic levels. However, since 2023-24 children's stock has started to reduce as a proportion of total loans.

Figure 19: children's and adult stock as a proportion of total loans over time

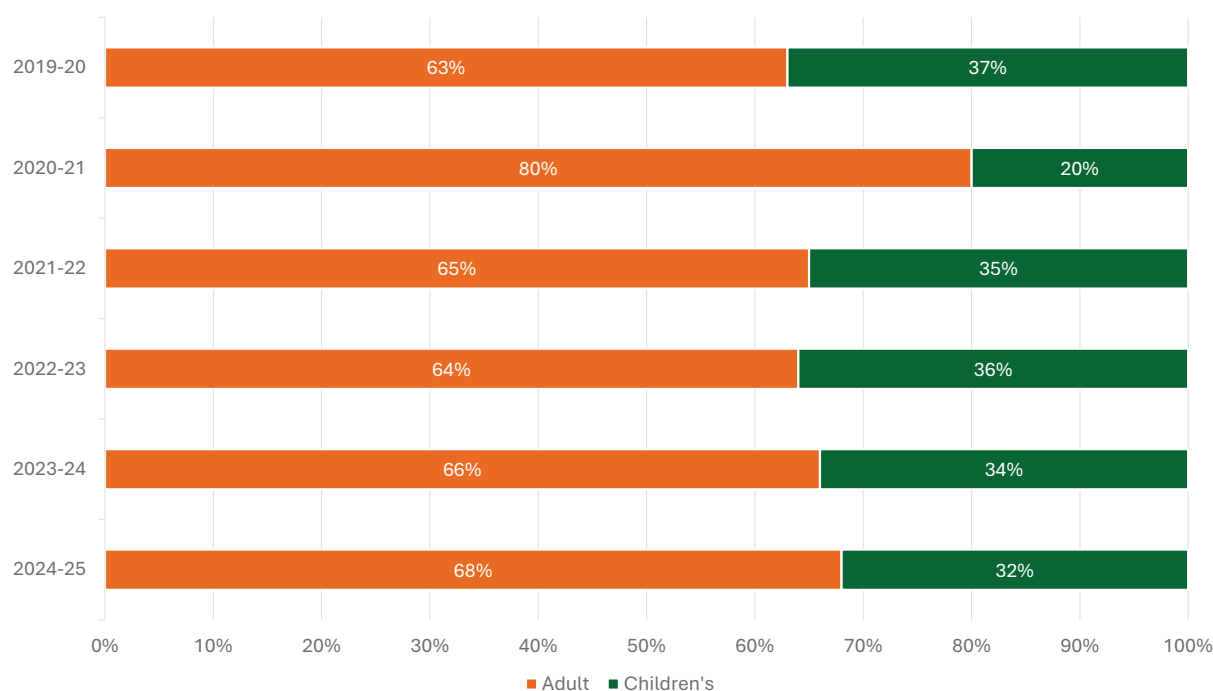
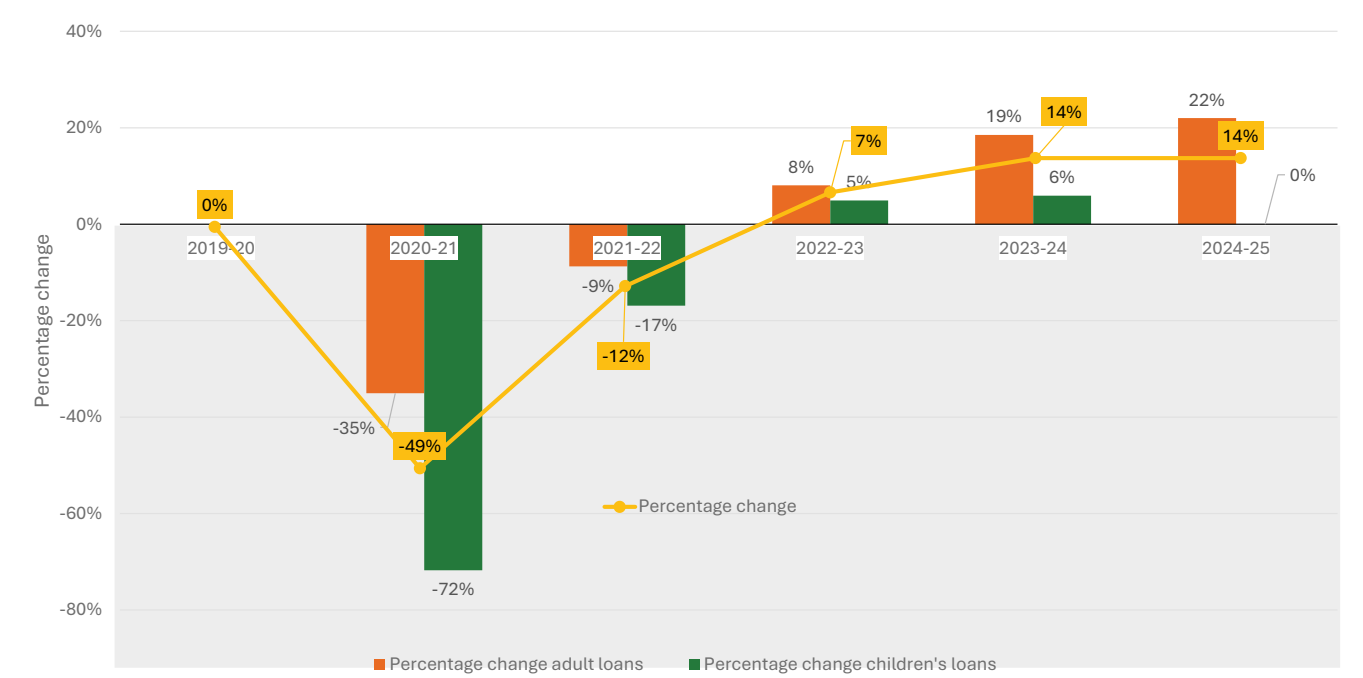


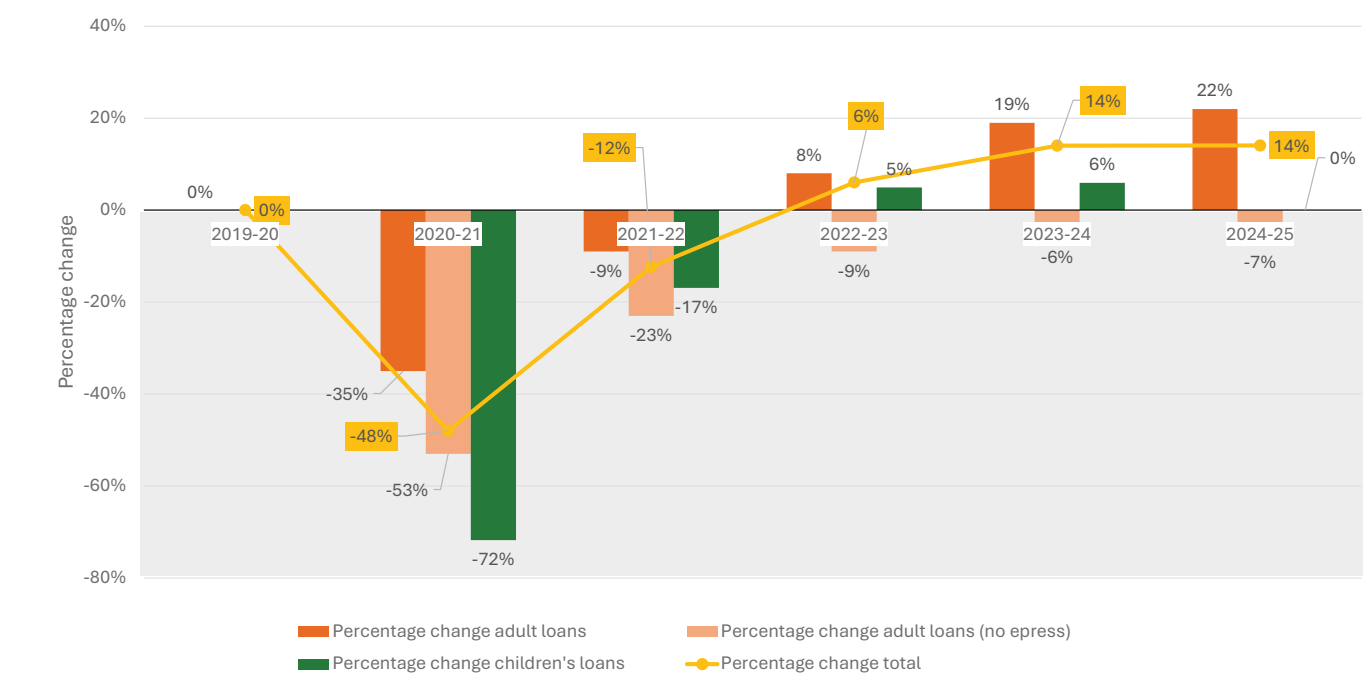
Figure 20 shows the percentage growth/decline in borrowing of adults' and children's stock issues over time. This chart shows that while children's loans had recovered from the pandemic by 2022-23, and were 6% higher than before the pandemic by 2023-24, they then suffered a 6% drop in 2024-25.

Figure 20: percentage change in adult and children's stock issues over time relative to 2019-20



However, if epress is removed from adult loans, a different picture appears. Adult book lending has not recovered back to pre-pandemic levels. Adult lending not including epress reduced by 53% during the 'pandemic year' of 2020-21 and has since recovered but remained 7% lower than 2019-20 by the end of the study.

Figure 21: percentage change in adult and children's stock issues over time comparing adult loans including epress and without epress relative to 2019-20



The data in this study shows very different borrowing habits between adults and children in relation to fiction/non-fiction loans. As noted on page 18, fiction made up 73% of all loans in 2019-20 and non-fiction made up 27% of all loans. However, splitting out issues by adult and children's stock types shows that fiction only made up two-thirds (65%) of all adult issues, while it made up 88% of children's issues.

There was a notable change in adult stock borrowing behaviour over the time period in this study among participating library services. The proportion of adult fiction loans being borrowed reduced over time and by 2024-25 adult fiction and non-fiction was being issued at similar rates: 52% of all adult stock issues were fiction, while 48% were non-fiction. Children's stock issues remained proportionately the same as in 2019-20 over the course of this study, with only a slight increase in non-fiction loans during the pandemic year of 2020-21. This returned to pre-pandemic levels in the following year.

Figure 22: Fiction/non-fiction borrowing trends in adult loans

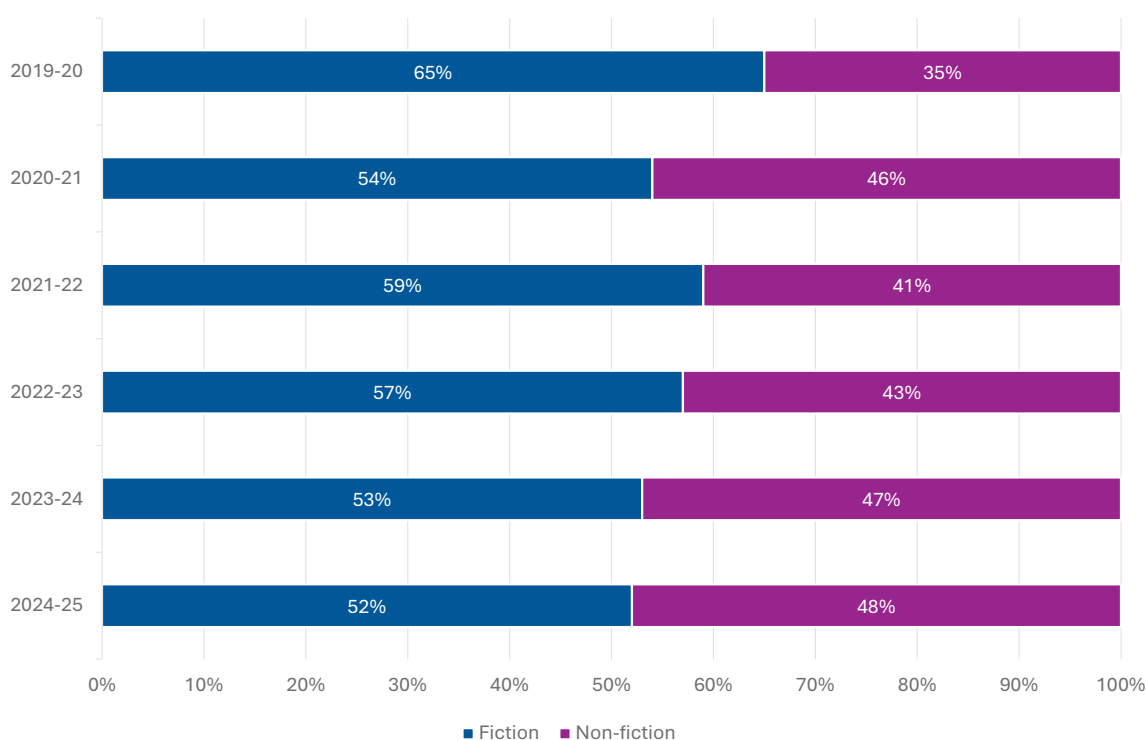
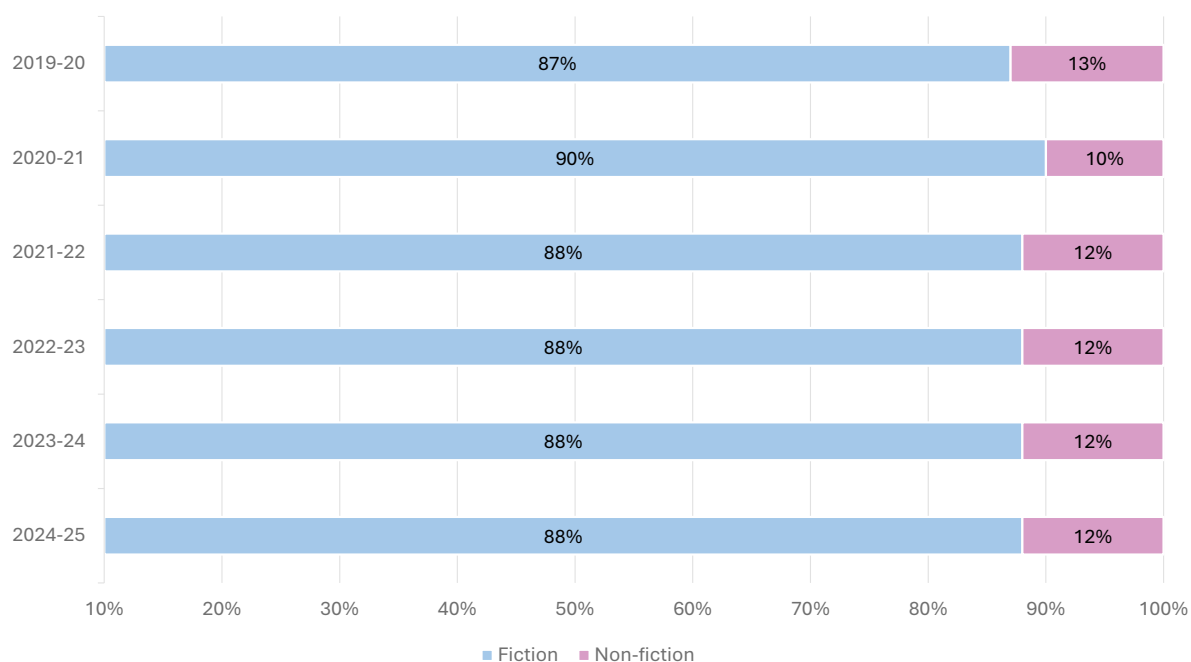


Figure 23: Fiction/non-fiction borrowing trends in children's loans



In 2019-20, despite the fact that children's loans made up only 37% of all loans, the vast majority of these were fiction loans: 17 million children's fiction titles, or nearly one-third (32%) of all loans were borrowed across the sample of 34 library services participating in the study. By 2024-25 children's fiction loans had reduced slightly to 16.7 million loans. Due to the overall increase in number of loans during that period, this meant that children's fiction was closer to one-quarter (28%) of all loans by 2024-25.

Figure 24: number of fiction and non-fiction loans by adult/children's stock over time

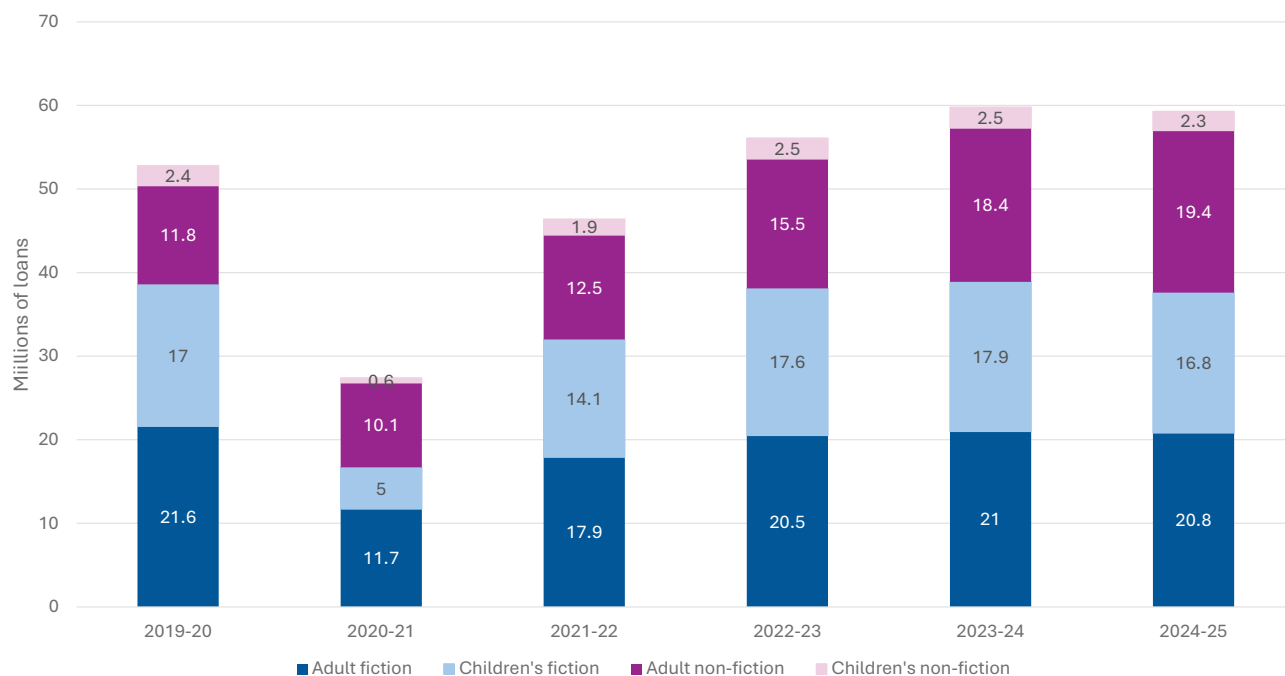
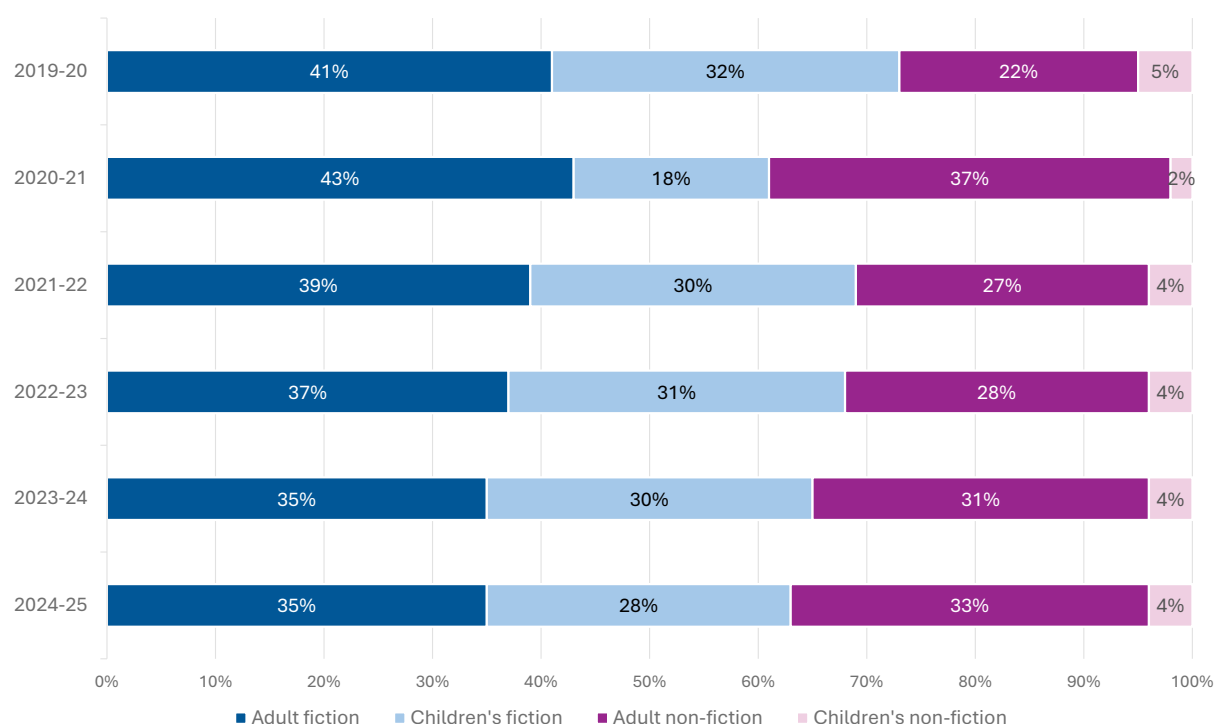


Figure 25: proportion of fiction and non-fiction loans by adult/children's stock over time

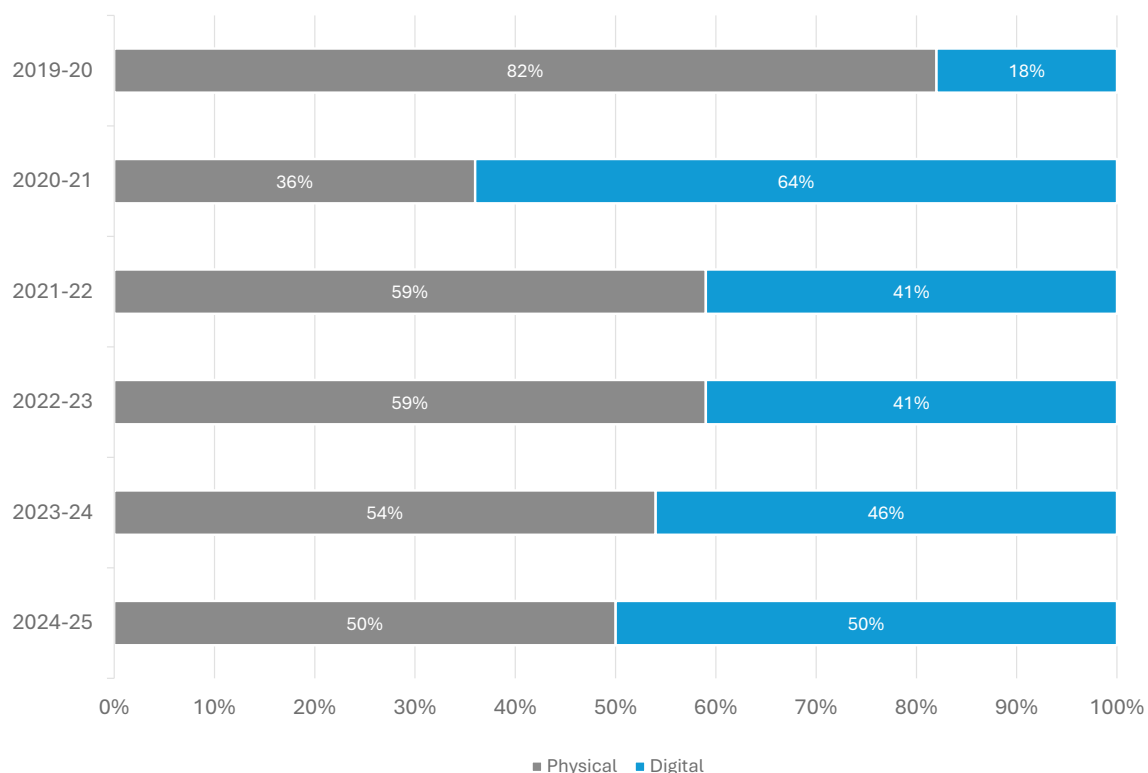


The data about children's digital format usage received for this study is generally high level and less reliable than for physical formats because several library services do not receive data about children's/adult stock in e-formats. However, the ebook lending evaluation report published in 2024 suggests that rates of borrowing ebooks are much lower among children than they are among adults.⁴ In addition, it was possible to analyse differences in borrowing trends among adult and children's stock from the 20 library services who collected data about digital vs physical loans of children's as well as adult lending.

Considering adult stock issues first, in 2019-20 82% of adult stock loans were in physical format while 18% of adult stock loans were in digital format. During the pandemic year of 2021-21, when libraries were closed, digital adult stock issues made up 64% of loans, while only 36% of loans were in physical format. Once library buildings reopened digital issues of adult stock reduced to 41%, however by 2024-25 they had increased every year to 50% of all adult loans.

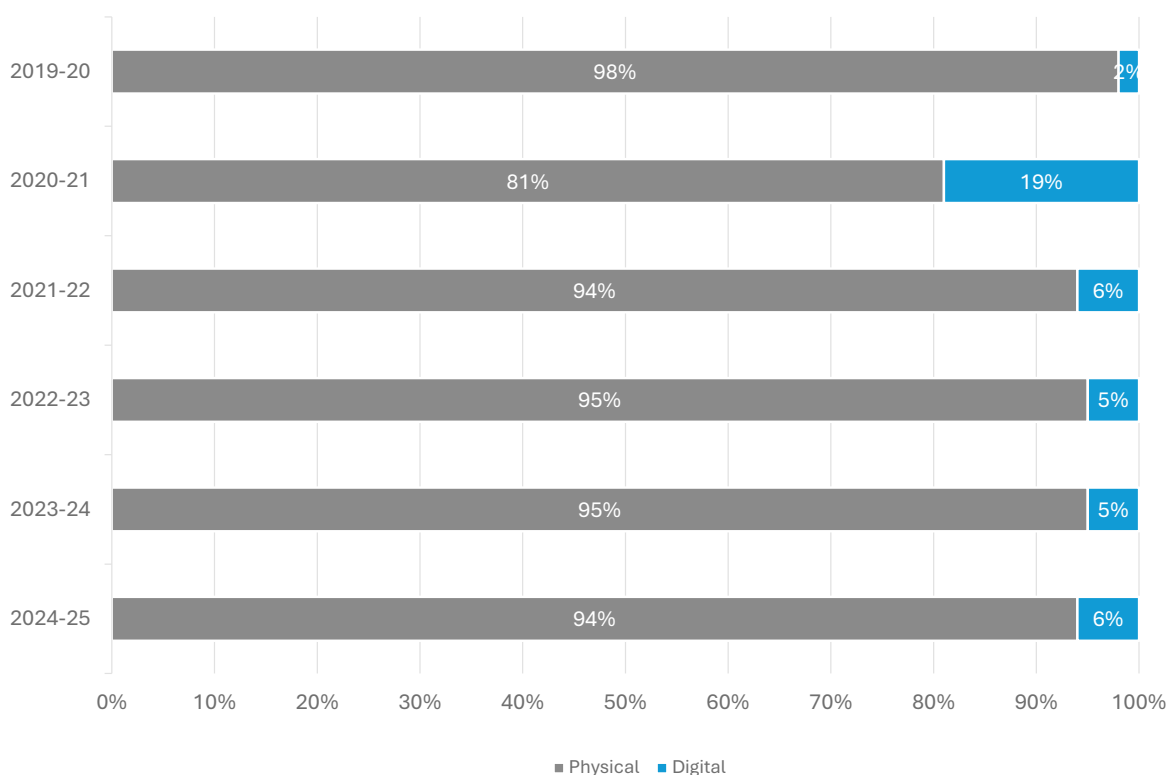
⁴ <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-02/INDEPE~1.PDF>

Figure 26: Adult loans by format over time



By comparison, in 2019-20, nearly all loans of children's stock issues were in physical format. While children's loans in digital formats grew to nearly 2 in 10 during the pandemic year of 2020-21, they remained a much smaller proportion of children's loans than adult stock loans. Once libraries reopened, digital loans reduced to only 6% of children's loans and this proportion did not change in the following years of this study.

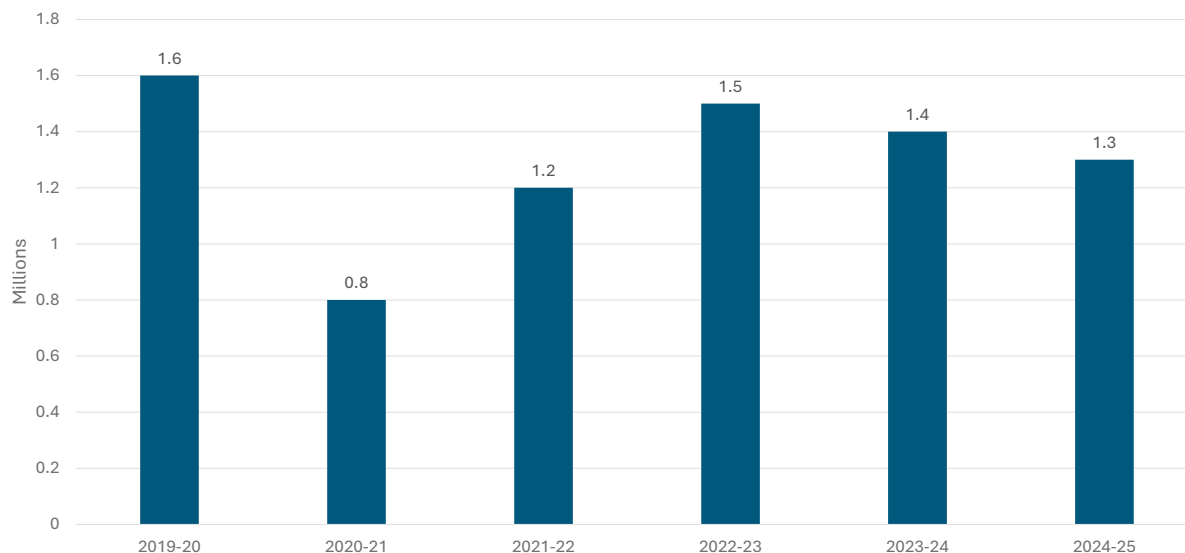
Figure 27: Children's loans by format over time



4.6 TRENDS IN ACTIVE BORROWER NUMBERS

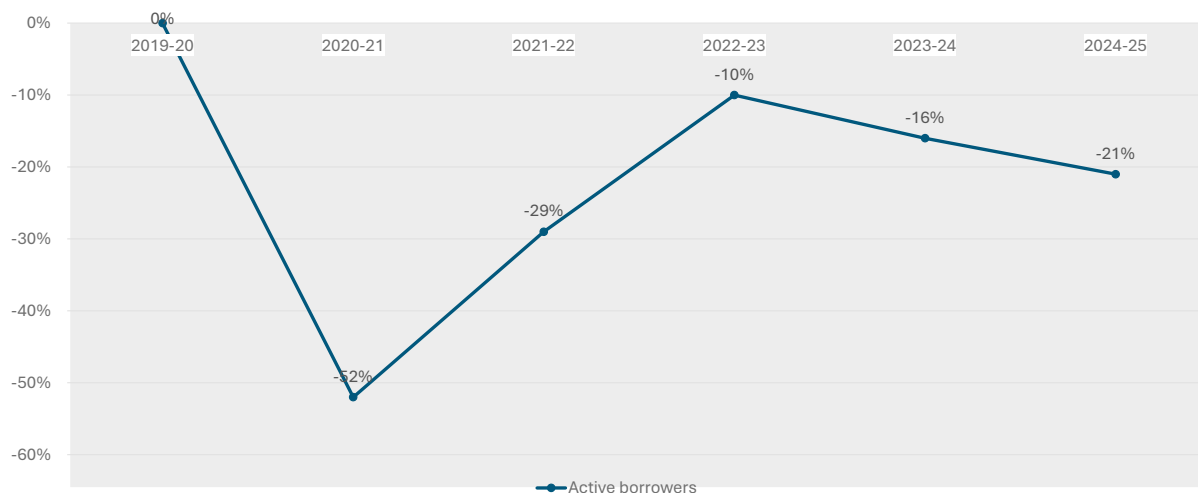
In the baseline year of 2019-20 there were c. 1.6 million active borrowers⁵ recorded across the sample.⁶ This halved to 0.8 million during 2020-21 but grew rapidly in 2021-22 and 2022-23 until they were nearly back at pre-pandemic levels. However, since 2023 active borrower numbers have begun to decline again.

Figure 28: active borrower numbers over time



The trend analysis shows that borrower levels are now 21% lower than before the pandemic, although higher than in 2021-22.

Figure 29: trends in active borrowers since 2019-20



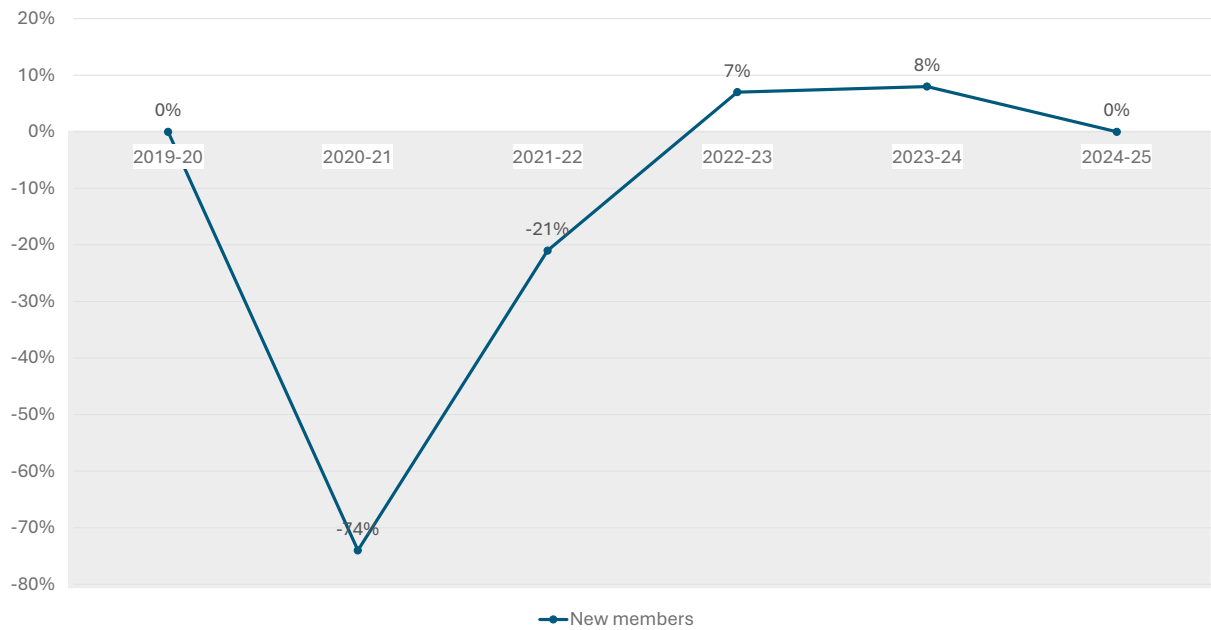
This data, along with the 11% increase in loans in 2024-25 relative to 2019-20, suggests that the existing pool of borrowers is borrowing more.

⁵ Active borrowers are defined as individual library members/cards which have borrowed a physical or digital item from the library catalogue in the calendar year

⁶ Some library services do not record active borrowers, wrapping them into 'active users' so this number is approximate. The same dataset has been used across all 6 years, to allow for accurate trends to be established.

Although the number of active borrowers has declined since 2019-20 across those library services participating in the study, the number of new members signing up recovered rapidly after the pandemic. This was so much so that in 2022-23 and 2023-24 there were more new members than in 2019-2020, although the numbers declined slightly in 2024-25 back to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 30: trends in new members



This data shows that, although the pool of active members has reduced over time, libraries are able to attract new members. It also suggests that the current pool of active members may be changing and evolving over time. This will be explored in greater detail in section 4.9 of the report.

4.7 TRENDS IN LIBRARY VISITS

In 2019-20 there were c. 55.5 million library visits recorded by library services across the sample but, unsurprisingly, this number reduced significantly during the pandemic. After 2020-21 visit numbers initially recovered rapidly, however the rate of increase has now slowed and visit numbers remain 21% below pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 31: number of recorded library visits over time

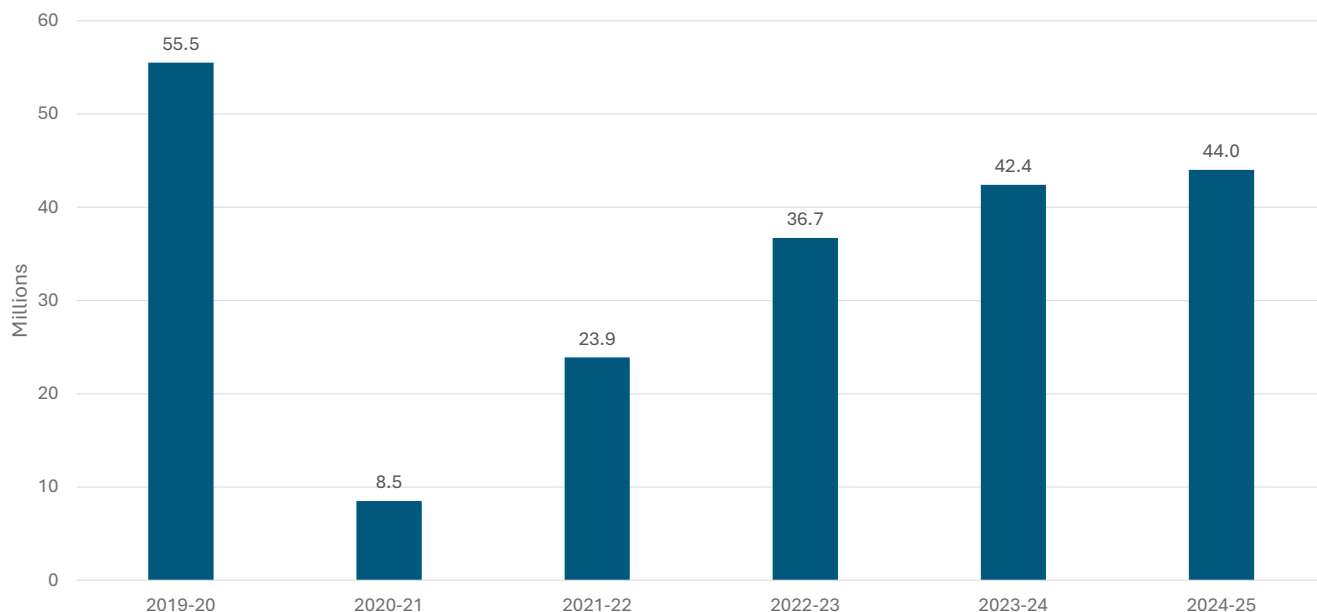
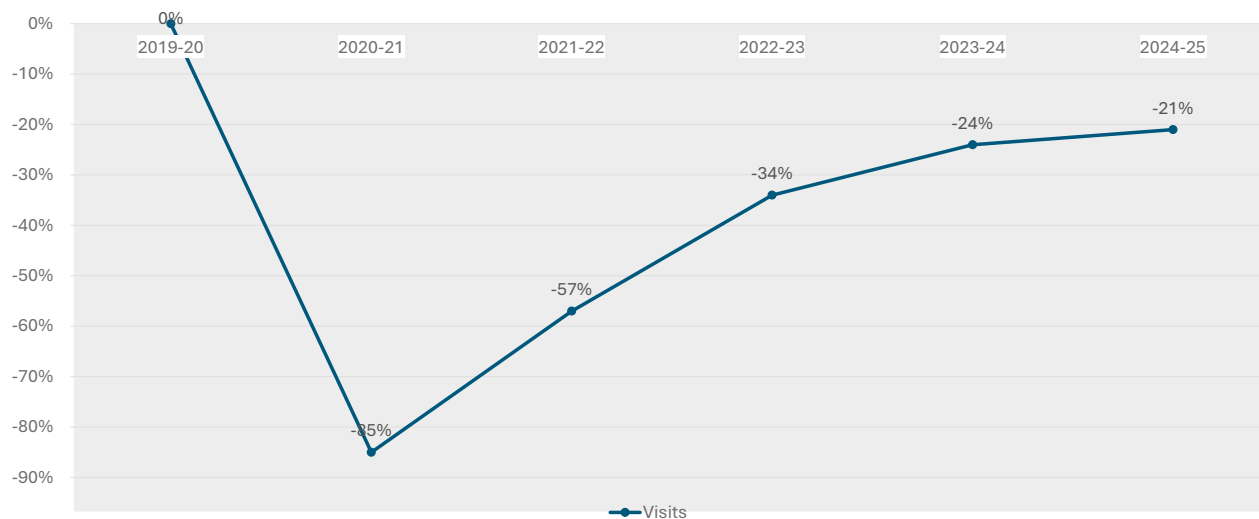
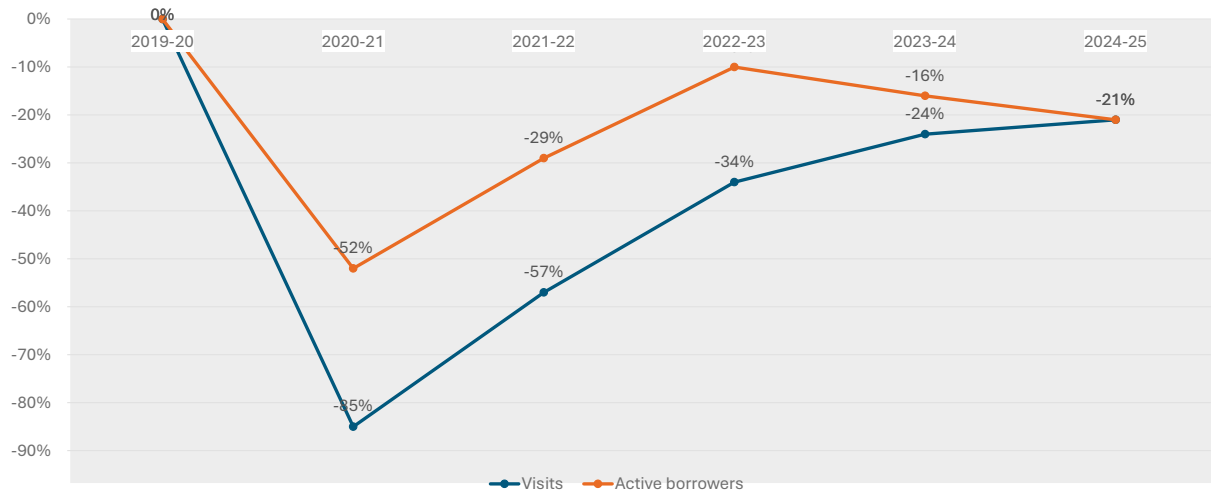


Figure 32: Trends in library visits over time



In addition, active borrowing rates are 21% lower than before the pandemic. However, while library visits are still growing and recovering, active borrower numbers have begun to reduce – see figure 32 below.

Figure 33: comparing trends in active borrowers and visits



4.8 DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF LIBRARY BORROWERS

14 out of 34 library services were able to provide some demographic information about their library members and borrowers. However, as there was little consistency in the data collected, the findings in this chapter are presented in narrative form and are indicative only.

Further research and data gathering on the characteristics of library borrowers and their stock format and type preferences would be beneficial to support targeted engagement and increase borrowing.

Trends in active borrowers by gender

Five library services were able to provide data about their active borrowers by gender across all six financial years covered in this study (2019-20 to 2024-25). However, not all members declared their gender and therefore the figures are indicative rather than conclusive, even for these five library services.

In 2019-20 among those five services which provided data on gender of active members, 52% of active members were female and 48% were male. During the pandemic year this proportion reversed, with 47% of active members being female and 53% being male. This may suggest that male library users were more comfortable with using digital library services than female members at that time.

Proportion of active borrowers by gender

Active borrower type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Female	52%	47%	51%	52%	53%	53%
Male	48%	53%	49%	48%	47%	47%

Overall, among this small sub-sample of library services and data available, there was an overall reduction of active library borrowers of 22% between 2019-20 and 2024-25.

Female active participation in library services reduced by 80% during the pandemic year of 2020-21, a greater reduction than for male library members. Again, this suggests that male library members were more comfortable using online library services to borrow than female members at that time.

Male library members returned to active library use faster than female library members in 2021-22 and 2022-23. However, in 2023-24 the number of male borrowers actively using the service began to reduce, and that trend continued in 2024-25, while the number of female active borrowers continued to grow, alongside the growth of digital issues outlined in section 4.3 of this report. This suggests that over time female borrowers have become more comfortable using digital services to borrow titles and, overall, female library users may now be using libraries in greater numbers than men.

Percentage change in active members from baseline year, overall and split by gender

Active member type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Total⁷	0%	-68%	-33%	-20%	-19%	-22%
Female	0%	-80%	-41%	-21%	-17%	-16%
Male	0%	-65%	-32%	-19%	-20%	-22%

⁷ These figures are different to the figures provided on active members in section 4.8 of this report because the sample is based on only those 5 library services able to provide this data. In order to show accurate trends by gender in relation to total active member trends,

Trends in active borrowers by age

Six library services were able to provide data about their active library borrowers by age, however of those, several services only provided adult or child age distinctions (the definition of 'adult' varied from 16+ to 20+ across services). This data should therefore be treated with particular caution.

In 2019-20 around 37% of active borrowers were defined as 'children' by library services, while 63% were defined as 'adult'. During the pandemic year of 2020-21, the proportion of active child members dropped to 33%. This fits with data (presented in section 4.7 of this report) which showed large drops in children's stock issues during this time. However, from 2021-22 onwards, children comprised a greater proportion of active members than before the pandemic, with a split of 40% children and 60% adult active borrowers.

Proportion of active members by child/adult

Active borrower type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Child	37%	33%	40%	40%	40%	40%
Adult	63%	67%	60%	60%	60%	60%

By 2024-25, active borrowers remained lower than in the baseline year of 2019-20. Children returned to borrowing much faster than adults: following a 65% reduction in 2020-21, child active borrower numbers were only 10% lower by 2022-23 while adult active borrowers were still 21% lower. However, both adult and child active borrowers began to decline from 2023-24 onwards among the sample of library services who were able to provide data.

Percentage change in active members over time, overall and split by age

Active borrower type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Total⁸	0%	-61%	-33%	-20%	-19%	-22%
Child	0%	-65%	-28%	-10%	-11%	-15%
Adult	0%	-59%	-33%	-21%	-22%	-25%

Changes in borrowing habits by age over time - deep dive

Three library services were able to provide breakdowns of physical loans (books and audiobooks) by type (fiction/non-fiction) and by age of borrower.⁹

Each of these library services had different trends in borrowing by age, however two services showed definite reductions in the number of titles issued to older borrowers (age 70+) since the pandemic. By contrast, younger adult borrowers (25-34) were borrowing more physical books across all three library services in 2024-25 than before the pandemic (2019-20).

⁸ These total percentages are different to those by gender because a different group of library services provided this data and to accurately assess trends the breakdowns by age need to be compared with the total trend within the sample provided

⁹ It was not possible to obtain this data for digital loans for this study

For example, in one library service:

- In 2019-20 the number of physical adult fiction books borrowed by adults aged 25-34 was 29,138 while the number of physical adult fiction books borrowed by those aged 70+ was 863,990.
- In 2024-25 the number of physical adult fiction books borrowed by those aged 25-34 rose to 48,652 while the number borrowed by those aged 70+ reduced to 620,889

This represents an overall reduction of more than 200,000 issues per year in older age groups compared to a rise of just under 20,000 issues for the younger age group.

Although this data is indicative rather than conclusive, it suggests that the drop in physical issues among adult stock over time could be, at least in part, due to a reduction in borrowing among older age groups. They may have moved to digital borrowing¹⁰ or they may have stopped using the library service to borrow books altogether.

It is also worth noting that the number of titles borrowed by younger adult borrowers was much smaller than that generally borrowed by older borrowers, which also contributed to an overall reduction in borrowing levels of physical stock.

¹⁰ The Elending pilot evaluation report published in 2024 suggests that older borrowers are moving to eformats

4.9 LIBRARY SERVICES WHICH HAVE MAINTAINED HIGH LEVELS OF LOANS OVER TIME

Across those library services participating in the study 15 services outperformed the average overall or in at least one of these categories where loans were generally trending down:

- Library loans not including epress
- Children's loans
- Physical fiction loans
- Physical non-fiction loans

Funding

Analysis of the data for these 15 library services shows that 7 services experienced small or large **stock budget increases** since 2019-20, 5 experienced reductions and data was not available for 3 services. The case studies which follow show that some library services have been able to supplement reducing stock budgets through capital investment (e.g. Section 106 funding or Libraries Improvement Fund) or through project funding. This suggests that while it is useful to track trends in stock budgets and the case studies show that funding is a crucial element supporting levels of library loans, these may not show the whole picture.

Visits

Four of those services with higher loans than average experienced **higher than average increases in visitor numbers** (although none had returned to pre-pandemic levels). However, this may not be a useful measure for some services outperforming the average because they may be conducting outreach work (see St Helens case study). In addition, some services not performing better than average were experiencing similar or higher percentage increases visits as those loaning more stock than average, so higher visitor numbers does not necessarily have a strong impact on loans.

Digital offer

Some of those services which had increased their loans by more than average over time had been particularly successful in increasing their **digital lending**. This was particularly true for services which may have had little or no uptake of their digital offer before the pandemic – many of these services saw huge increases in digital issues over time. For example, three library services saw an increase in their digital borrowing of 1000% or more since 2019. These services were generally starting from a very low base, where digital borrowing was a negligible part of overall issues in 2019. By 2024-25 they had generally caught up with their peers and digital lending was an important part of their offer.

4.10 CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

The Case Study document that sits alongside this report includes case studies from seven library services who have been successful in increasing loans, visits and library membership either across the board or in specific locations. These case studies identify some specific initiatives in supporting library loans over time:

Investment

- The importance of maintaining a healthy stock budget and investing in new stock
- The role of staff expertise and training, understanding of library user reading preferences in different locations and community engagement in successful stock selection which maximises loans
- The important role played by grant funding to support stock budgets, test new methods of community engagement and modernise library service offers and spaces in times of reducing core budgets

Community engagement, partnerships and outreach

- Effective community engagement to offer, and in some cases co-design and deliver, services and support that communities want and need – this involves:
 - getting out into communities and not just relying on them to visit libraries
 - working in close partnership with them to ensure the stock and services provided meet their needs
- Providing books by stealth – e.g. offering non-reading related services such as wearable health devices, and promoting books alongside these services
- Improving digital outreach and service delivery, including more engaging websites
- Working in partnership with other agencies to reach wider audiences

Removing barriers to using the library service

- Removing fines and reservation fees
- Ensuring libraries are in the best location to attract footfall, maintain opening hours and are regularly refurbished (including new stock)

Evidence-based service development

- Using a data-driven approach to improve loans figures
- Setting loans targets and supporting branch library staff to deliver against targets

Evolving the service offer

- Understanding that the library service is now a truly multi-channel service in terms of both loans and activities and building the offer across face-to-face and digital platforms with this in mind
- Testing ways in which new technologies can support the core library mission (e.g. immersive VR story times) and ensuring that new offers are in line with the mission (i.e. not providing tablets in the children's library where this actively discourages reading between parents and children)
- Ensuring staff are trained and equipped to deliver the new service offer e.g. where more active community engagement is required, working in outreach locations etc.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

- This study shows that among the 34 library services who were able to provide full data for this study, **library loans have recovered and are now at higher levels than before the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- However, the **COVID-19 pandemic was a transformational event for the way that people use library services.** Loans dropped by around half over this time and children's borrowing was particularly impacted by the lockdowns when libraries were closed and the restricted physical access to libraries over 2020 and in the first quarter of 2021.
- Adult borrowers discovered and adopted digital borrowing during the time when libraries were closed and access was restricted, and this has transformed borrowing patterns beyond the pandemic. For adult borrowing, **public libraries are now a truly multi-channel service**, with digital items increasing year-on-year since 2021-22. In the final year of this study, digital stock was being loaned at the same rate as physical books.
- The move to digital borrowing for adult stock has occurred at the same time as an **increase in non-fiction borrowing.** The rapid increase in epress borrowing may account for some of this increase, as this accounted for 25% (1/4) of all loans in 2024-25 and is always classified as non-fiction. The increase in non-fiction borrowing may also reflect the importance of libraries as sources of impartial digital information and the sustained interest in hobbies and recreational skills and learning which people adopted during the pandemic¹¹.
- The **substantial year-on-year rise in epress borrowing is another major finding** from this report, which aligns with other research suggesting that short-form reading is becoming more popular among adults and children¹². The epress offer has not traditionally received much attention in terms of audience development and marketing the offer, but this research suggests that online magazines and newspapers may have the potential to appeal to a wider audience and grow library usage further in future.
- However, while digital borrowing has increased to nearly one-third of all loans, there is still interest in borrowing physical stock. For example, while physical audiobook loans decreased by two-thirds during the pandemic years of 2020-21, from 0.9% of all loans to 0.3%, they recovered to approximately 0.5% in 2021-22 and have maintained this proportion in the following years. This suggests that although physical book borrowing may continue to decline slowly, **readers will continue to want to borrow books across a wider range of formats in the years to come** and libraries will need to maintain stock across all formats for the foreseeable future.
- In addition, the borrowing of **children's stock has not seen the same transformational change** in format preferences and remains heavily weighted towards physical stock as well as towards fiction.
- While adult borrowing continues to grow, **children's stock issues have started to decline.** Although the decline is relatively small (11%), it is of concern, particularly in the context of recent research by the National Literacy Trust showing declines in reading for pleasure among children and young people¹³.
- The lack of take-up of digital formats in children's stock may be contributing to the reduction in children's loans, as reading habits change over time and people older and younger are more reliant on phones and tablets for reading. It may be possible to address this decline by developing more varied children's digital fiction and non-fiction offers and promoting these offers to children and parents.

¹¹ Morse KF, Fine PA, Friedlander KJ. Creativity and Leisure During COVID-19: Examining the Relationship Between Leisure Activities, Motivations, and Psychological Well-Being. *Front Psychol.* 2021 Jul 5;12:609967. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.609967. PMID: 34290635; PMCID: PMC8288551.

¹² Hakemulder, F. and Mangen, A. (2024), Literary Reading on Paper and Screens: Associations Between Reading Habits and Preferences and Experiencing Meaningfulness. *Read Res Q*, 59: 57-78. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.527>

¹³ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2025/>

- Although borrowing was higher in 2024-25 than in the baseline year of 2019-20, some of the most recent years (2023-24 and 2024-25) show **some concerning changes** which may suggest that was a growth and recovery cycle following on from the pandemic may be changing, this includes:
 - Declines in physical stock issues – they never recovered to the same level as the baseline year after the COVID-19 pandemic and have now begun to decline again
 - Declines in children’s stock issues (as mentioned above)
 - Declines in active borrower numbers – as for physical stock issues, these were recovering until 2023-24 but since that year they appear to be gradually declining again.
 - Library visits not having returned to pre-pandemic levels, despite maintaining gradual growth since 2021-22.
 - Indicative data suggesting that men and those aged 70+ have not returned to active borrowing in the same numbers as women and younger adults.
- The data shows increasing disparity in loans figures among different library services since the common experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduction in loans this caused. This means that some library services have seen rapid growth in loans coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, even in areas that tend to decline across the board, while others have struggled to increase their loans and active borrowers.
- There are no easy answers in the data for why certain services have seen substantial increase in borrower numbers while others have struggled, however common themes from the case studies include:
 - **Investment** in stock, refurbishment, opening hours, expert stock librarians and staff training and ensuring libraries are situated in places with high footfall. The role of grant funding was emphasised, including DCMS’ Know Your Neighbourhood and Libraries Improvement Fund, Arts Council England’s National Portfolio Organisation investment and Project Grant funding. Local funding sources such as Section 106 were also important, where available, as stock qualifies as capital investment.
 - **Community outreach and engagement** – not relying on communities to come to the library, but bringing the library to them, providing ‘reading by stealth’ by offering non-reading related services in partnership with other agencies and promoting books and reading alongside this, building strong local partnerships
 - **Adapting the service to reflect current needs** – developing a truly multi-channel service including both borrowing and the wider service offer, integrating new technologies into the service offer where these support the library’s core mission, trying and testing new ways of engaging target audiences.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study present some implications for the Reading Offer Group, Libraries Connected and other interested agencies to consider, including:

- **Continue to monitor library borrowing**, particularly children's stock borrowing, over the next 2-3 years using the same metrics as those developed for this study, to understand trends in borrowing, provide evidence for library services to develop their offer and potentially combat decreases in borrowing and active borrower numbers.
- You may also wish to explore the opportunity to develop a national working group/peer support group among library services to adopt data-driven approaches to boosting library loans – following the examples of Norfolk and Lewisham outlined in the case studies.
- **Make the case for investment in library stock**, particularly the importance of ensuring that there is adequate budget available to provide stock across physical books, ebooks and eaudio books, reflecting the increasingly diverse ways in which people wish to borrow.
- **Work across national agencies and partners to develop funding/interventions to combat and reverse the decline in issues of children's stock** – the National Year of Reading in 2026 will provide a strong platform for this work. Interventions should be data-driven, developed with the engagement of local communities and partners and build on the experience of other library services who have successfully increased children's borrowing.
- Consider further research in the following areas:
 - To understand the reasons why library visits and active borrowing have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. This may be due to changing reading habits, which mean that people prefer to access the digital library offer, or it may be because certain groups (e.g. older people) remain cautious about visiting the library, are unable to visit due to lifestyle or health factors, or have simply got out of the library habit.
 - Monitor the decline in physical borrowing in 2024-25, as it may present a new trend which is not linked to the impact of the pandemic but may have other, independent causes.
 - Monitor the decline in fiction borrowing in future years to establish whether or not the decline is part of a trend
 - Explore the growth in non-fiction borrowing and the potential for other research, such as The Reading Agency's research into adult reading¹⁴, to help the library sector understand the drivers for non-fiction borrowing better.
 - To understand why children's loans are decreasing and understand if this is part of a wider trend
 - To further explore the indicative findings of potentially reduced borrowing among over 70s and men since the pandemic
 - To collect better information generally about who is using library services and in which ways
 - To understand the contextual local factors influencing the wide differences/variations in library loans trends across the sector which were observed in this study.

¹⁴ <https://readingagency.org.uk/the-state-of-the-nations-adult-reading-2025-report/>

APPENDIX

1. CASE STUDIES



A strategic approach to developing reading

THE BACKGROUND

Wiltshire Libraries has 30 branch libraries and three mobile libraries. They have created a library strategy and worked with The Reading Agency to develop a reading strategy for Wiltshire, both of which were recently published. Wiltshire Libraries' vision is for libraries to be trusted spaces at the centre of their local community, with a clear purpose to promote reading for pleasure to deliver better health outcomes, enable people to meet, access books, information and culture, use digital services, and develop their skills to improve social mobility.

THE APPROACH

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND POSITIONING

Wiltshire Libraries used the process of developing both the library and reading strategies as an opportunity to build partnerships with other agencies and promote the strategic value of the library service.

"we see a direct correlation with the level of stock fund and issues achieved. If one is increased the other follows."

FUNDING

Wiltshire libraries have seen a 36% increase in the stock budget since 2019-20, although the budget is still lower than in 2010.

They received funding from **Multiply** to invest in stock to support maths literacy. They received **£30,000 project grant funding in 2023-24 from Arts Council England** to support 'reading roadshows' which encouraged non-readers and non-library users to read and visit the library.

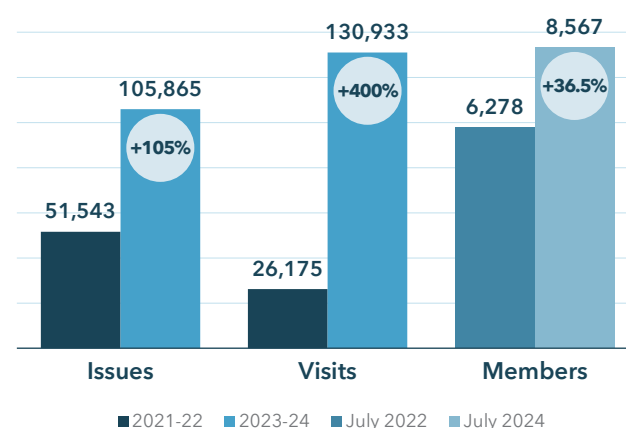
They have **used increased stock budgets to invest in collections** that they know will be popular with residents, which cycle through the branch libraries on a rolling basis. These include e.g. fantasy and sci-fi, manga, non-fiction collections relating to cooking and crafts/hobbies. Stock is selected by qualified librarians based on their community knowledge, alongside supplier selection.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND MEETING THE NEEDS OF USERS

Infrastructure, access and service offer

Two libraries, which are based in leisure centres, are **open seven days a week** from 7.30am – 10pm (some self-service hours). They ensure that **all residents have access to a library service** (building or mobile) within three miles of their house. The service has invested in **two new mobile libraries** and they hosted celebratory musical events at the mobile library in the places where they visit to raise the profile of the service.

Melksham library statistics since opening



Melksham library reopened in 2022. It is based in a leisure centre and offers seven-day-a-week service and is out-performing other similar libraries in terms of visits and issues.



Image: Melksham library refurbishment – children's corner

They have also:

- maintained **late-night opening** in all of their libraries (until 7pm)
- removed fines for children's stock**
- removed reservation fees for physical audiobooks** as they know they are serving a smaller readership and they only have a limited amount of stock
- introduced **wifi printing** in larger libraries, which has proven popular especially with traveller and boater communities.

"[with the mobile libraries] you're putting on events and activities in villages and communities that wouldn't normally see things."

Events and activities

Wiltshire libraries maintained a **strong offer through the pandemic**, including online rhyme-times and click-and-collect services which raised the profile of the service and maintained positive relationships with the customer base.

They offer **eight children's and young people's reading groups** in libraries across the county as well as c. 370 adult reading groups supported by the library service. The adult reading groups receive direct marketing and promotions for activities and events.

They have introduced '**Story Sharers**' which is an initiative to get parents reading with children aged 0-4 at the same time as their older children do the Summer Reading Challenge.

The Arts Council England funding for '**Reading Roadshows**' led to many successful author and community events in the library, including:

- two crime writers panel discussion sessions
- high profile and well-known authors including Kate Rhodes, Libby Page, Tammye Huf and Louise Doughty
- 600+ attendance at events, hosted 18 author events, 1,600+ downloads of eBook and eAudio books by Roadshow authors
- hosted three Reading Group days and created six new groups, which received the following feedback: "Being 80, with Parkinson's I find it's hard to know what to say, to find the right works. I've struggled with reading but to join a group and to be able to share my thoughts, with people listening not cutting in has been new for me. A big thing in my life."

Try something new



THE IMPACT

The library service has bucked the trend of declining issues overall when epress is not considered – seeing a 2% increase in loans, compared with a 19% reduction across the sample. Children's loans have actually **increased by 21%** since the baseline year of 2019-20.

The Reading Roadshow event evaluation found that 69% attendees were motivated to read more while 38% reported and improvement in their wellbeing. Data shows that new audiences were attracted to use the library service through these events.



Investment in libraries grows library loans

THE BACKGROUND

Gloucestershire Libraries are an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. They have 32 branch libraries across the county. Although the stock budget has reduced by 18% since 2019-20, the library service has sourced other funding to ensure they are able to invest in new stock and capital development.

THE APPROACH

USING SECTION 106 FUNDING TO REFURBISH LIBRARIES AND REPLENISH STOCK

In Gloucestershire, Section 106 funding is allocated to libraries on an annual basis. This results in regular refurbishments of libraries, which always includes an allocation for new book stock. In the past year five library spaces have been renovated/refurbished.

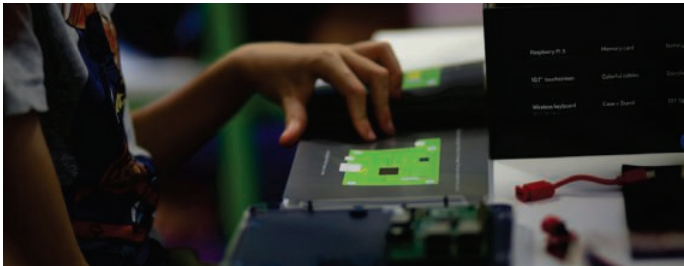
“Any time and we have s106 money, we use some of that to enhance the stock and the children's stock.”

RELOCATING AND OPENING NEW KINDS OF LIBRARY SPACES TO INCREASE VISITS

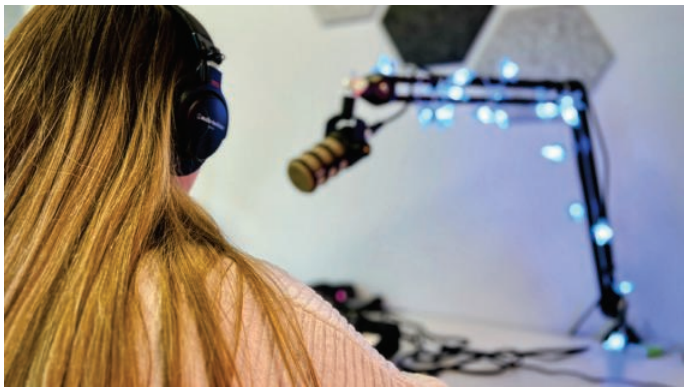
Stroud library has moved from an older, out-of-centre location to a shopping centre in the middle of the town as part of a Local Authority properties project. This new library has increased both visits and loans:

- footfall went up by 100% from the first week and it has stayed at that level
- issues have increased and that increase has been maintained. Annual total in 2023-2024 was 71,327 issues and in 2024-2025 was 108,252

Using Libraries Improvement Fund investment of £250,000, the library service has opened a new library called The Oakley Centre which includes an immersive Virtual Reality lab. This space is well used by schools and library staff who offer e.g. immersive story times for pre-school children.

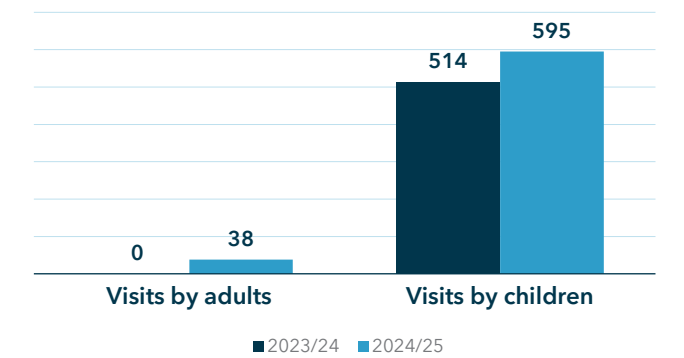


The Oakley Centre



The Oakley Centre

The Oakley Centre events engagement between 2023-25



The library service has six maker-labs across the county which include 3-D printing, fabrication tools and business support which has helped to drive footfall in the library and attract new users to their spaces.



Entrance to Stroud library

The library service has also used its investment in stock to create new themed areas based on different reading genres that appeal to its audiences. For example, Gloucester Library is currently being refurbished and will have a “cosy crime” section with comfortable seating.

“Having all of the different activities - they're hard work, but they're worth it because then you've got that you're getting people through the doors”

USING NPO FUNDING TO TEST AND DEVELOP NEW APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT

Since 2022, Gloucestershire Libraries have received £50,000 per annum as part of their Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funding. This funding has supported a range of outreach and engagement activities across Gloucestershire, including:

“Library Littlies” an activity programme with children aged 0-5 that moves beyond bounce and rhyme (which they have also maintained) into other creative activities. 2024-2025 - 1,044 attendees of which 546 were children and 498 were adults:

- a vibrant and well attended programme of author events, building on the large number of authors who live locally
 - average of 15 events annually with 15 people attending on average per event
- three choirs for over-60s in the library, some of which are in areas with traditionally low library engagement, with more choirs in development
 - Longlevens - weekly attendance on average: 30
 - Coleford - weekly attendance on average: 27
 - Tuffley - weekly attendance on average: 22
- a new, independent library website which has increased annual website engagement by 160% since launch
- investment in staff training in creative activities with children from expert practitioners



Lydney library children's area and PNPC desk

“I think the new stock coming in and having the new libraries isn't just about the money coming in, it invigorates the staff and enthuses the staff.”



Tetbury library children's area after refurbishment

THE IMPACT

The library service has managed to increase loans overall by 64% since 2019-20 compared with a 14% increase across the sample.

This includes an increase in loans of physical stock by 16%, compared with a 19% reduction across the sample.

Loans of physical fiction stock have grown by 30%, compared with an overall decline of 17% across the sample.



Adopting new approaches post COVID-19

THE BACKGROUND

Norfolk Library Service consists of 47 libraries, including the flagship Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library, and five mobile libraries. Since the COVID-19 pandemic the library service has worked hard to rebuild services and recover book issue levels.

Key factors driving borrowing and visits include:

- a strategic and comprehensive approach to Under 5's engagement
- multi-channel approaches to reader engagement (online and in the library)
- community and data-driven stock selection and management
- library relocation, refreshed stock display and refurbishment



"The new library at The Place in Great Yarmouth has seen a dramatic change in the usage of the library since moving to the high street. The figures really do speak for themselves. Since we opened on 6 May 2025 we have joined 1,372 new customers, issued 17,522 books and seen a footfall of 51,893."

Libby Morgan
Stock and Reader Development Manager

THE APPROACH

UNDER 5'S ENGAGEMENT



Bounce and Rhyme at Great Yarmouth Library

"Although many people turned to online services during the pandemic - and some digital activities continue, especially for older and adult audiences - our physical library spaces remain at the heart of our community offer."

Alison Thorne
Community Librarian

A particular focus has been on re-engaging families with children under 5. Each library offers a core programme of activities, which continues throughout the school holidays, providing a reliable and free service for families. Libraries have developed additional facilities and services, including:

- 'Stay and Chat' sessions, after 'Bounce and Rhyme' time, with refreshments
- the introduction of 'Reading Well and Parenting' collections
- enhanced spaces to read, relax, and engage
- the development of 'Getting Ready for School' bags
- birth registration services, where starter book packs are offered to parents registering a birth, and babies are signed up to the library service
- 'Story Explorers Reading Club': This scheme, which launched post-COVID has about 6,000 children currently signed up to it. It's a reading club for children 0 to 5 years old with the target of reading 1,000 books before they start school

MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACHES TO READER ENGAGEMENT

The service supports reading through county-wide initiatives such as an annual countywide 'Big Norfolk Read', non-fiction circulating collections, and reading group offers, all of which continue to be well used. In addition, each library is encouraged to run at least one regular adult reading activity, helping to attract users back into library spaces.

Collaborations with the Reading Agency, particularly through the Reading Friends programme, have played a key role in increasing adult engagement. What began as a single session has expanded to three, due to high demand. These sessions are offered via phone and Zoom have helped build digital confidence, which is especially valuable in rural areas where physical access can be a barrier. Feedback from a Reading Agency survey highlighted positive mental health impacts, particularly in communities targeted by the initiative.

"The Zoom book club has changed my borrowing habits a fair bit. Yes, I do borrow more books and renew more books too. The book club reading list encourages me to try, and borrow, from new authors."

Vicky

In addition, the library service offers a thriving monthly Zoom book club. Offering titles in both digital and print formats, the sessions have encouraged participants to explore books beyond their usual preferences.

COMMUNITY AND DATA-DRIVEN STOCK SELECTION AND MANAGEMENT

The service selects its own stock, with staff responsible for purchasing adult fiction and non-fiction books, and a team of children's book buyers:

- Staff go out to meet with students and young readers to talk about stock selection—ensuring decisions are grounded in real community needs. This customised approach allows the team to respond quickly to trends, seasonal themes, and local events
- The Reading Group collection gives reading groups easy access to quality reads and enables the library service to repurpose popular stock once demand reduces

"I've taken out four titles since joining, previously not being a library user!"

Janaka, Reading Friends participant

LIBRARY RELOCATION, REFURBISHMENT AND STOCK DISPLAY

Great Yarmouth Library has seen a significant spike in visitors and issues thanks to its brand new, improved facility, which opened in May 2025.

In addition to targeted engagement activity a focused effort has been made to refresh library layouts and improve stock management, ensuring that services remain responsive to community needs. For example, on the ground floor at the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library, marketplace-style book displays are constantly refreshed with new stock, and issue figures have steadily increased over recent years.

THE IMPACT

As a result of these initiatives:

- Junior book borrowing has returned to pre-COVID levels
- Picture book borrowing is particularly strong
- The service is also seeing people returning to libraries and staying longer
- The service has increased investment in adult non-fiction stock, which is still seeing issues increasing year on year since the COVID pandemic
- Performance data and issue figures help guide decisions about what to purchase, display and promote. Each library is now given a loans target based on the previous year's borrowing data, encouraging staff to think more mindfully about stock use, selection, and displays



Libraries as gateways to reading and more

THE BACKGROUND

Staffordshire Libraries noticed a significant growth in library visits and loans at three of their libraries due to their participation in the 'Know Your Neighbourhood' (KYN) project, funded by the Department for Communities, Media and Sport (DCMS) between 2022-25. These activities offset a reduction in footfall in a large town centre library due to construction projects in the area and supported service development and strong growth in visits and loans in community managed libraries.



'Know Your Neighbourhood' library decorations



THE APPROACH

KYN activities ran in three libraries across the authority:

- Brereton and Heath Hayes (community-managed libraries)
- Cannock Library - a District Library which sits in the town centre. At the time of the project, work had commenced on major construction projects in the area and this had resulted in a significant decrease in footfall in the town

KYN targeted individuals who were chronically lonely or disengaged from library services, aiming to encourage use of community spaces. Activities in Staffordshire libraries were co-designed with communities following a programme of 'taster' sessions. They included:

- a Dementia Café in partnership with local care homes. Those who took part in sessions were gradually introduced to other library services such as Reading Friends for dementia.
- Cinema Club (e.g. Peter Rabbit, Willy Wonka)
- jigsaw afternoons
- baby sensory sessions
- Brereton Library opened the library at specific times for a Home School group
- Heath Hayes reinstated baby bounce sessions, and 'Summer Reading Challenge' and started a new art group

WHAT MADE THIS WORK?

- listening to the community, asking them what they want and being responsive was vital –especially in recruiting volunteers who felt invested
- building relationships through repeated engagement led to eventual increases in book borrowing, even among audiences initially disengaged with reading
- well-resourced activities, including:
 - a project co-ordinator role operating across all participating libraries
 - a cohort of volunteers who played a crucial role in the delivery of activities
 - training to staff and volunteers which built their confidence to try new things
- long-term sustainability of the project was a core consideration of the project, ensuring that new relationships developed would be maintained beyond the funded period

WHAT HAPPENED?

In total, 837 people were directly involved in events and sessions, this does not include those attending the cinema clubs and other unregistered activities. 28 volunteers were recruited through the project, with some forming a 'Friends Group' to support ongoing activities and marketing. Significant impacts were observed across all three participating libraries.



History Hunters at Cannock library

"We wanted to spend the least amount of money on activities as we wanted it to be sustainable"

Kerry Hutchings
Library Development Manager, Staffordshire Libraries

Cannock

- the library service had predicted a drop of 18% in visits as a result of development work in the town. As a result of KYN activities the library saw only a 2% decrease in visits and a 5.3% decrease in book issues
- a 'Friends Group' was formed which supports ongoing activities and marketing, they now act as a voice in the community

Heath Hayes

- 70% increase in visits (approx. 10,000)
- 'Book pillow' initiative resulted in a 19.5% increase in book issues

Brereton

- visits increased by 36.2%; issues rose by 13.7%

THE IMPACT

The project fostered closer collaboration between county-managed and community-managed libraries. The co-ordinator acted as a bridge between staff, volunteers, and library users. Staff became more innovative, and library teams developed a clearer sense of shared purpose. The work is continuing beyond the initial funding, with additional funding secured for continued activity in the three libraries.



Outreach and engagement

THE BACKGROUND

St Helens Libraries has reframed its operations to focus on outreach and engagement following a major restructure which saw the service reduce from 13 branches to seven.

THE APPROACH

Through innovation, partnership building, and targeted community work the service has been successful in maintaining strong library use and increasing book loans. In 2024-25 St Helens saw total loans rise by 27%. adult stock loans rise by 45% and children's loans rise by 6% compared with the baseline year of 2019-20. All of these statistics are better than the average for this study. In addition, active borrower numbers in 2024-25 had increased by 74% compared with the baseline year.

Following a restructure some communities around St Helens were left without a physical library branch. This created risks of disengagement and loss of trust. At the same time, COVID-19 had significantly disrupted usage patterns, particularly among children and families who had previously used libraries heavily after school.

The key challenges facing the service included:

- maintaining and growing loans despite reduced library sites
- engaging communities who were unhappy about branch closures
- addressing budget pressures while protecting investment in stock
- bridging the digital divide while meeting growing demand for online access and eBooks
- reconnecting with young people and adapting to their changing habits



VE celebration in a community cafe

OUTREACH TEAM

Three key roles oversaw the implementation of the new way of working:

- Library Support Manager – responsible for home delivery, school library service, the digital catalogue and infrastructure
- Libraries Operations and Archives Manager – responsible for the outreach team, front of house staff, archives and heritage and the operational running of the library service
- Senior Outreach Officer – responsible for four outreach officers, operational delivery, and engagement in communities, family hubs and reading groups

Former library officers were appointed into the roles of outreach officers. Their mission was to maintain visibility in communities without branches and to extend the library's reach to new groups. They focused on engaging families, children and young people and older adults.



Family Hub fun day event

In practice this included having a community presence through the running of regular activities in family hubs, schools and community centres. There was an expansion of the home delivery service to families with children with SEND and adults with mobility challenges. Digital services were promoted more, highlighting the range of eBooks, audiobooks and e-magazines on offer. The team also worked in collaboration with ESOL groups, adult wellbeing programmes and spearheaded local reading initiatives such as the 'Book Awards St Helens' (BASH), which encourages children to read for pleasure and is one of the few book awards in which children choose the winning book.

St Helens Libraries have also introduced a Community Library Grant Scheme which aims to support groups to establish a library offer within their community.

The library service has also been supporting the delivery of the 'Arts in Library Project', one of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations (NPO). The project which aims to bring culture to all delivers a range of events including exhibitions, music, drama, workshops, and family events across the borough. It has received funding to deliver the work over three years from 2023 to 2026.

"The children who attended the event really enjoyed the experience and parents were overjoyed that the children got to experience this alongside their nursery session. We also had a child with additional needs who will be attending a mainstream school in September and the event provided him with opportunities to be with other children of his own age and also to be in a group event... which was an important part for his own school readiness."

Nursery Manager

STOCK DEVELOPMENT

St. Helens are part of a North West consortium for physical stock and the Greater Manchester consortium for digital stock, with support from suppliers and Collection HQ for data-driven collection management. The team take a data-driven approach to collection management and stock promotion, which is led by what communities want.

Their focus is on dynamic stock development, diversity and accessibility (e.g. dyslexia-friendly collections). A strong social media presence is used to promote new titles and trends (e.g. BookTok-driven demand).

COLLABORATION

Having a dedicated outreach team with a clear brief to serve communities has been a significant shift for the service. Through cross sector training and collaboration, the library service has successfully extended its offer. This has included working with family hubs and taking part in joint training in areas including speech and language, oral health and sexual health. This means the teams are better placed to support families. They have also worked with local nurseries to deliver events which support school readiness.

The service has received partnership funding from Libraries Connected and Right to Succeed to support local programmes such as 'Cradle to Career'.

FUTURE PLANS

St Helens Libraries are exploring further development of outreach programmes, strengthening accessible collections, and continuing to evolve digital services. Plans are also in place to locate the town centre library back into a civic town centre building, ensuring visibility and centrality for the service.



Family activity delivered by library staff

THE IMPACT

In addition to the increase in loans per person the service has seen the following trends across the service:

- **Digital growth:** The service identified an increase in demand for e-books and e-press. They transitioned to Borrow Box as the sole e-platform which has simplified access and boosted digital borrowing.
- **Community trust:** Strong public backing during the restructure and a commitment via outreach and engagement reinforced the perception of libraries as trusted and essential.
- **Behavioural change:** The service noticed that anti-social behaviour reduced after COVID, with libraries becoming more family orientated.
- **Visibility and access:** Outreach activity ensured that residents in areas without branches continued to access library services.



Data-driven interventions

THE BACKGROUND

Lewisham Libraries operate a network of 12 libraries, including eight community-run sites and four council-managed branches, alongside a home library service. Despite the temporary closure of Lewisham Central Library for refurbishment, the service has achieved significant growth in lending.

Since 2021, Lewisham has adopted a data-driven approach to stock management, programming, and community engagement.



"Deptford Library is hands down my favourite library in London - as a supporter of independent publishing, I'm always glad to see presses like Prototype, strangers press, Another Gaze Editions, etc... prominently featured in your curation."

THE APPROACH

DATA-DRIVEN STOCK MANAGEMENT

The Stock Manager who was appointed in 2023 brought about a change in the way in which data was being used, from passive reporting to a proactive analysis of lending data. They started to analyse trends in lending and identify where there were opportunities to increase loans. Data insights are used to diversify stock and bring in a more representative collection. There has also been an introduction of demand-led acquisitions and frontline staff have an active role in influencing purchasing.

"It was great to connect with the local community and felt like a genuine sharing of a love of poetry."

Insights from the data on lending trends are shared with staff through regular INSET days. This increases morale and a sense of ownership. Feedback from library users highlights the value they place on having a wide range of varied books on offer.



LGBTQ+ book display

REMOVING BARRIERS

In 2021, auto-renewals were introduced as well as stopping taking fines. This created a safety net for all residents. Further, holds are now free of charge. In addition, families now benefit from increased borrowing allowances, with children able to borrow up to 20 books at a time.

TARGETED EVENTS AND OUTREACH



Event at Deptford Library

A varied and rich programme of literary and cultural events are offered by the service. This includes poetry evenings, author talks, independent publisher forums and the Arts Council England funded 'Imagined Worlds', a month-long celebration of sci-fi and fantasy, which ran in 2025 and will run again in 2026. The series of events which included music performances attracted new readers into the library and boosted membership by 42%.

Children's programming has been extended from weekly craft activities and story times to sensory Storytime for SEND families. There has been a 32% increase in 'Summer Reading Challenge' participation through strong school partnerships, reaching 60% of local schools.

Increased visibility at community festivals, fun days and parks has ensured the library remains central to community life.

LESSONS LEARNED

One of the key lessons was that 'it is not enough to just look at a spreadsheet'. Data needs to be interpreted, shared and acted upon to make a real impact. Staff engagement has proved to be essential with regular communication, transparency, and the involvement of frontline staff in decisions which has helped to build commitment.

Removing fines played an important role in reducing barriers and ensuring libraries remained inclusive, especially in deprived areas. Combining stock insights with targeted events further maximized impact, keeping collections relevant and well-used.

"Really good event and it did bring me back to library after many years of not coming at all."

"Really interesting music and great to learn more about the Middle Ages too! It was amazing, please do more things like this, it was so cool."

THE IMPACT

Since adopting a data-led approach, digital and physical loans across the service have increased by 63% with a 30% increase in physical loans by 2024-25 compared with the baseline year of 2019-20. Children's borrowing has shown the strongest growth, with audio formats expanding rapidly. Adult non-fiction lending has also significantly risen and has been supported by curated stock as well as events.

This growth in engagement can be linked to strengthened relationships with schools, families and under-represented communities. In recognition of these achievements, Lewisham Libraries were named Library of the Year for London which raised their profile and boosted staff morale.



Joined-up services and community- focused engagement

THE BACKGROUND

The development of a new Central Library in a shared cultural space with Doncaster Museum & Art Gallery, Archives and Local Studies and a Rail Heritage Centre provided a unique opportunity for Doncaster Libraries to enhance and expand its offer to local communities.

Doncaster Library Service operates three branch libraries and twenty community libraries, which are supported by around 400 volunteers. The Central Library is housed in the Danum Gallery, Library and Museum (DGLAM), a landmark cultural building in the Civic and Cultural Quarter of Doncaster. Danum, which opened to the public in May 2021. The building brings together the Central Library, Museum and Art Gallery, Archives and Local Studies and Rail Heritage Centre.



Black History Month display at DGLAM

*"We have books in every place,
everywhere across DGLAM."*

THE APPROACH

SPACE FOR ALL

Within the new Central Library, separate spaces were created for children and young adults. It was identified in the process of developing the new library that having designated spaces which are designed to be age-appropriate was essential to meeting the different needs of these groups.

Being within a shared space with other cultural providers where there is also a museum café means that families can spend a full day at DGLAM. It makes it a destination. The children's library has a fully accessible changing space and the spaces offer ways for people to connect.



Enchanted forest rhyme times at Mexborough Library

In addition to the new Central Library the library at Mexborough was transformed into an enchanted forest with funding support from Arts Council England through the library improvement fund, Libraries Connected and matched Levelling Up funds. Siobhan Murphy of interior curve designed the space to be joyful and engaging, a space dedicated to young readers.

STOCK MANAGEMENT

The management of stock is done through supply and selection via Askews and a pot of money is set aside for specific requests from the learning team. The learning team work across DGLAM and engage in activities which provide opportunities for children to read for pleasure. This has included the placement of books throughout gallery and exhibition spaces which tie in with displays.

While they do have classic books and a core collection in the last few years the team have worked to diversify the stock. They work to ensure there is wide representation of their communities within the collection and a range of different language books on offer. They want their local communities to see themselves reflected in the books they hold. Every new book on offer goes to DANEM Library, which is open every day.

Staff who work in the children's section of the Central Library read the children's and young adult's books that come in so they can respond to questions about them and make informed recommendations. There are no longer fines issued on loans and children can borrow up to 12 books.

E-books have been a big success for the service. They have reduced what they spend on physical books and increased spend on digital books.

EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

The service started seeing a decline in loans and to address this they focused on developing their engagement work. Starting with interventions which aimed to help young people engage in libraries. This included library familiarisation sessions which highlight what a library is and what you can expect from a library service. In addition, library card registration is encouraged during school visits and craft activities are themed to books, such as *The Gruffalo* and *Oi Frog!*. There are also themed displays throughout the year which link with national topics and trails lined to books.



In addition to children's activities the service has developed literary programme for adults, encouraging them to read for pleasure.

PEOPLE MAKING IT WORK

Within the team there is strong educational expertise among staff. This includes a number of ex-teachers who are keen to engage and know how to best communicate with children and young people. They also know and have strong relationships with the schools.

*"It's a safe and friendly
atmosphere. Everyone
feels wanted and staff
enjoy working in this way."*

A key challenge for the learning team is that they can be a victim of their success. They have waiting lists for activities. They would like to offer these at branch/volunteer libraries, but they are hitting the limit of how many people we can work with.

THE IMPACT

The creation of new spaces and commitment to providing engaging, inclusive and community-focused experiences for children, young adults and families the service has led to a noticeable increase in book loans, including a 14% increase in children's stock loans compared with the baseline year of 2019-20 and an increase in both fiction and non-fiction children's stock issues.

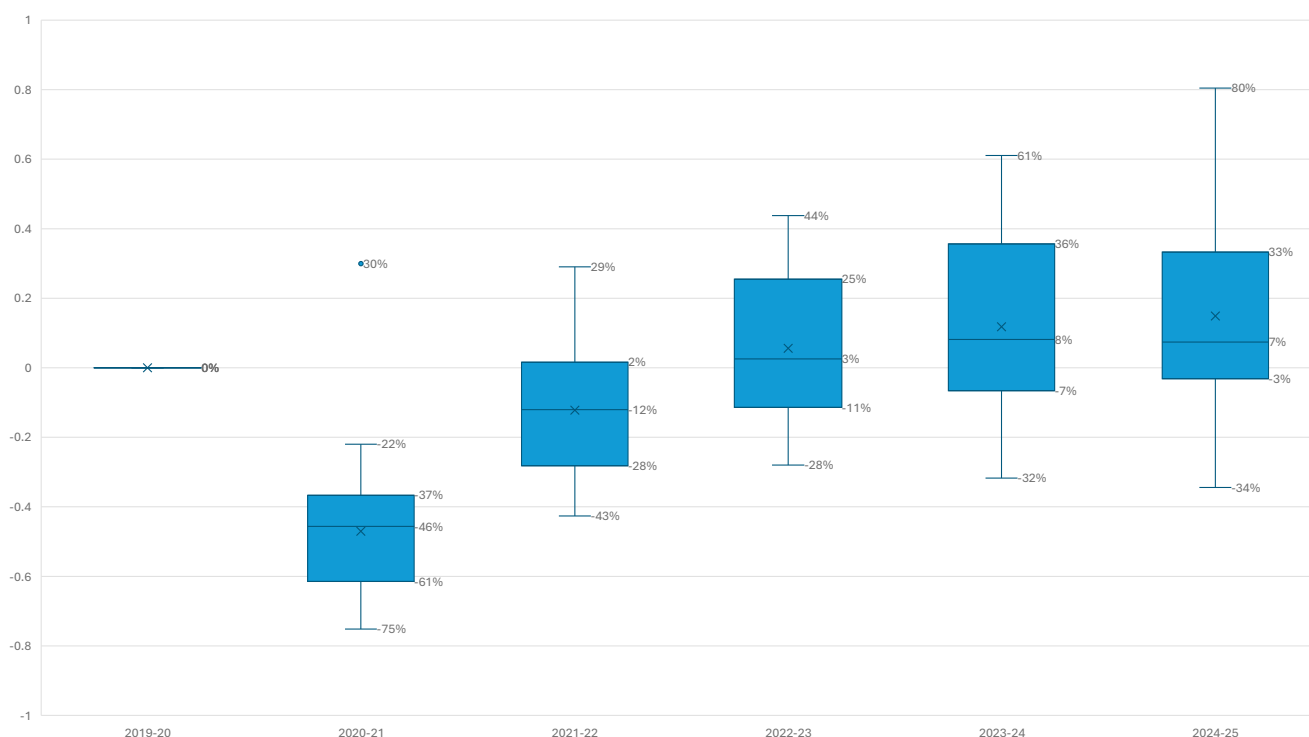
2. ANALYSIS OF VARIATION IN LIBRARY LOANS ACROSS SERVICES PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY, OVER TIME

The chart below is known as a 'bar and whisker' chart. It is used by statisticians to visualise the range of values in a dataset, which can be masked by a simple average.

- Each bar and whisker represents the overall percentage change for one financial year, vs the baseline year of 2019-20
- The top and bottom "whiskers" show the range of the top 25% and bottom 25% of percentage changes in loans across the whole sample.
- The central coloured block shows the middle 50% of percentage changes within the sample.
- The dots at the top are individual outliers.
- There is an 'x' in the middle of each block – this is the average, which is generated by adding all the percentage changes together and dividing by the number of library services participating.
- There is also a line intersecting the central block – this is the median value, which is the middle value of the dataset.

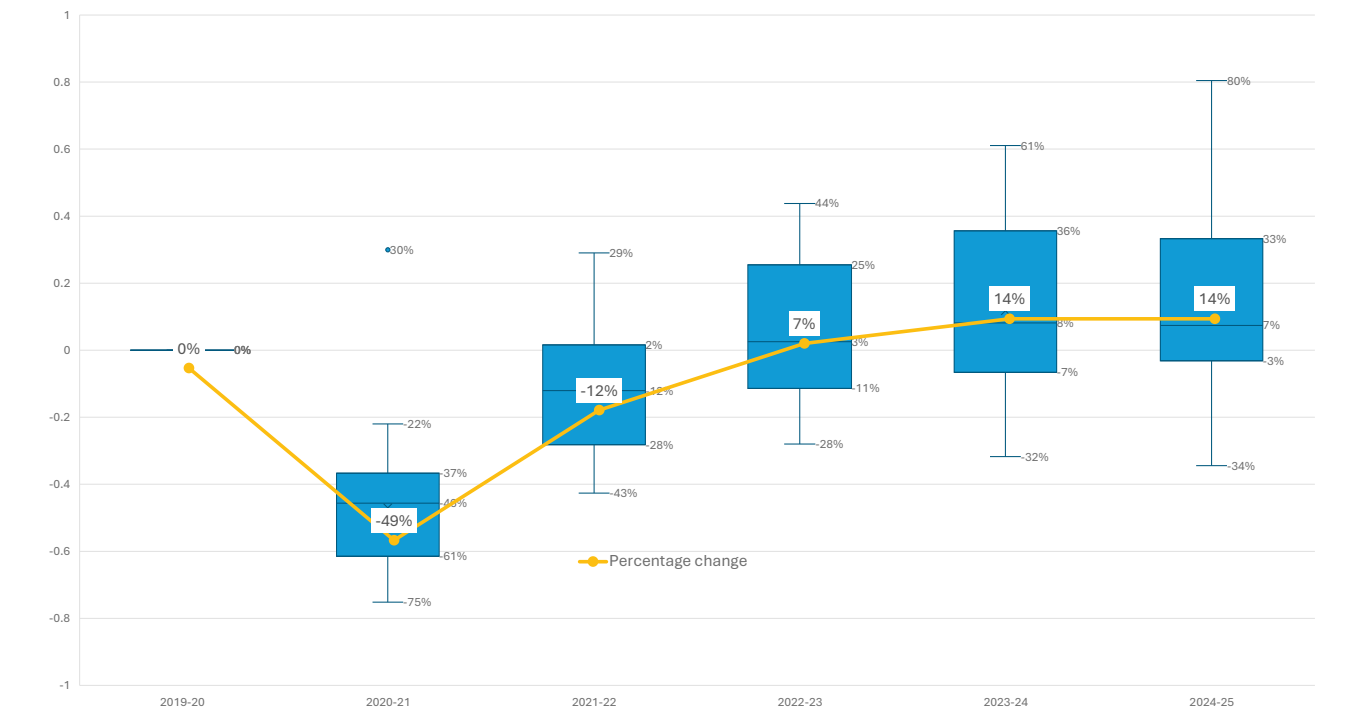
The chart shows that there was least variation in percentage change during 2020-21 – when all library services were affected by similar challenges in relation to lockdown and reductions in library loans. The easiest way to identify variation is to look at the width of the shaded in box. In 2020-21 the box is relatively narrow, but it widens as the years go on.

Figure 34: variation in percentage change of total loans across the sample



For ease of reference, the next chart compares the variations seen across the sample with the overall percentage change trendline outlined in Figure 6.

Figure 35: variation in percentage change across the sample compared with overall trendline



3. LIBRARY LOANS STEERING GROUP MEMBERS

- Laura Gilbert, Libraries Connected
- Katie Gledhill, West Sussex Libraries
- Sarah Hassan, Norfolk Libraries
- Terry Heath, Staffordshire Libraries
- Kate Lister, Leicestershire Libraries
- Sarah Mears, Libraries Connected
- Claire Pickering, Wakefield Libraries
- Simon Savidge, Libraries Connected
- Emma Tennant, Stockton-on-Tees Libraries

4. STOCK MANAGERS WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

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- Justin Burns – West Sussex Libraries
- Roger Fredericks – West Sussex Libraries
- Stu Hennigan – Leeds Libraries
- Kerry Hutchings – Staffordshire Libraries
- Jill Hunt – Manchester Libraries
- Katie Ponting – Manchester Libraries

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