Test and Learn:
a practical approach to workforce development in public libraries

Building confidence and capability through
embedded, collaborative learning

Libraries
Connected

Insights from Innovating in Trusted Spaces to help public library leaders and teams strengthen staff confidence, capability and collaboration through Test and Learn.

Contents

Executive summary

Purpose of this guide

Skilled and committed library teams are at the heart of a thriving public library service, and keeping pace with rapid digital change requires continued learning and development. Staff play a vital role in supporting digital inclusion, helping people navigate emerging technologies and strengthening community connections.

However, traditional training, often delivered through e-learning modules or train-the-trainer approaches, does not always reflect local contexts or the specific needs of individual services. This can limit the relevance and impact of learning.

This guide introduces Test and Learn as an alternative approach that strengthens staff confidence, skills and collaboration by testing innovations within library spaces.

What is Test and Learn?

Test and Learn is a simple, design-led approach that supports learning through experimentation. Library teams come together to explore a challenge or practice area, draw on relevant resources, design and trial activities with users, gather feedback, and refine their approach. It enables staff to build knowledge directly through the work itself, rather than through stand-alone training, making development relevant, practical and immediately useful.

Why it supports workforce development

A Test and Learn approach:

- Creates opportunities for staff to build confidence through hands-on practice
- Supports collaboration across teams and organisations
- Encourages a culture where learning from failure is valued
- Mobilises creativity for service improvement

4 English public library services

24 Staff

↑87% felt more confident

"Confidence is key here, so empowering our staff and seeing that change along the way… has been great!" Middle Manager

What we learned from Innovating in Trusted Spaces

Four English public library services and 24 staff used Test and Learn to support users to engage with AI and digital media literacy. Many staff were comfortable experimenting with digital tools but had not used Test and Learn as a structured development method. Yet despite this readiness, there was still a clear confidence gap: although 92% felt at ease trying digital tools in their own work, 20% did not feel confident demonstrating AI tools to library users. This provided a structured, low-risk way to strengthen confidence with emerging technologies.

By the end of the project:

- 87% of staff felt more confident responding to library users' questions about AI
- Teams reported stronger cross-service collaboration
- Staff felt more able to apply the Test and Learn cycle in practice

What's in this guide

- A definition of Test and Learn
- Case studies from four English public library services
- Lessons from *Innovating in Trusted Spaces*
- Guidance on embedding Test and Learn in workforce development

Introduction

Skilled and committed library teams are essential to the role public libraries play in their communities, and staying responsive amid rapid technological and social change depends on continued learning and development. Staff support digital inclusion, explore new technologies with users and strengthen community connections. To ensure services can continue to meet these needs into the future, staff need ongoing opportunities to develop their skills and capabilities.

Within this context, Test and Learn offers a practical way to support staff development. It creates space for staff to learn together, grow in confidence and adapt their practice through small experiments, quick feedback and shared reflection. This approach also aligns with sector priorities, particularly around digital upskilling, adaptability and collaborative working.

This guide explains how to use Test and Learn for workforce development. It draws on learning from *Innovating in Trusted Spaces*, showing how four library services increased staff confidence and co-created activities to explore Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital media literacy with users.

Public libraries already have many of the strengths that make Test and Learn effective, including a strong community focus, readiness for innovation and a commitment to learning. This guide provides a clear way to build on those strengths and support staff to thrive in a rapidly changing environment.

The workforce development challenge

Public libraries operate in an environment of increasing societal need, growing digital complexity, and persistent resourcing pressures. Within this environment, workforce development is both essential and increasingly difficult to deliver. The evidence points to three interlinked challenges: limited learning opportunities, resource and capacity constraints, and gaps in digital confidence and skills.

Limited and isolated learning opportunities

Research shows that many public library staff have limited, ad hoc and largely self-directed opportunities for professional development. While self-directed learning can be empowering, it does not provide the collaborative, reflective or practice-based development staff need to build confidence and adapt to change. Training is often delivered through e-learning or train-the-trainer models that may not reflect local contexts or service needs, which can leave staff feeling isolated and reduce the impact of learning.

- Asiri & Finlay's (2025) survey of digital competencies in English public libraries found that 85% of staff rely on self-learning to develop digital skills, and many reported that available training does not match the skills required in their roles.
- The CILIP (2024) 'Come Rain or Shine' report argues that public libraries need more agile, adaptive and future-oriented ways of thinking and developing services.

Together, this evidence shows that current training does not consistently provide the structured, collaborative, practice-based learning staff need to respond confidently to a rapidly changing environment.

Why this matters
Without meaningful, shared development opportunities, staff confidence can decline, limiting the capacity of library services to respond effectively to change. A Test and Learn approach strengthens workforce development by embedding learning into everyday practice and enabling teams to build skills together through small-scale experimentation in library spaces.

Resource and capacity constraints

Even when professional development opportunities exist, many staff lack the time or capacity to participate. This challenge has been intensified by a significant reduction in library staffing over the past decade (BBC Shared Data Unit, 2024).

- CILIP Workforce Mapping (2023) identifies a strong relationship between professional development, staff engagement and retention, yet investment in training appears to have fallen across the sector due to financial pressures, even as workloads have increased and staffing levels have declined.
- In *Innovating in Trusted Spaces*, participating library staff identified their three most common barriers to professional development as lack of time (44%), lack of funding (32%), and lack of staff cover (20%).

These pressures mean traditional training often fails to reach staff consistently. Services need development models that work within existing constraints and can be embedded into day-to-day work.

Gaps in digital skills and confidence

As library roles evolve, staff need growing confidence in digital media literacy and use of emerging technologies such as AI. Yet evidence shows that digital confidence is uneven across the workforce.

- Allman, Bank & Wong's (2021) digital inclusion project in Oxfordshire County Libraries identified a need to improve the digital skills of library staff to meet library users' different needs.
- Staff report a strong appetite for upskilling (CILIP, 2024), but limited access to relevant, practical training.
- The CILIP AI Survey (2025) found that 49% of public library staff viewed lack of technical skills as a major barrier to adopting AI tools, alongside cultural concerns among users.
- Baseline findings from *Innovating in Trusted Spaces* reinforce this: 32% of participating staff had never used AI tools (e.g., Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, ChatGPT) before the project began.

Why this matters
Digital skills are essential for frontline roles. Staff help users stay safe online, navigate misinformation and become familiar with new AI tools. As these needs grow, staff need development approaches that build skills through practical experience. Test and Learn supports this by giving staff the chance to try new innovations in library settings and learn from the outcomes and their conversations with users.

Increasing digital complexity

All three challenge areas are intensified by the accelerating pace of digital change. Library services must now respond to:

- Rapid technological advancements including AI, augmented reality and virtual reality.
- Rising disinformation (including deepfakes), declining public trust in mainstream media outlets, dependence on social media and risks amplified by AI mean a pressing need for citizens to develop greater digital media literacy (Zenou & Ivanov, 2025).
- Persistent barriers to digital inclusion, especially for vulnerable communities, including lack of access to devices or sufficient connectivity, and a lack of skills (Good Things Foundation, 2024).

This expanding digital demand places greater expectations on staff capabilities, adaptability, and confidence, reinforcing the need for flexible, embedded approaches to learning.

Staff story: Abbey

···

Library Assistant, Nottingham City Libraries

Abbey joined the project feeling confident about teaching digital skills as her role involves troubleshooting users' digital queries. This project was an opportunity for Abbey to build on her knowledge and high level of digital capability.

"Until this project I had not utilised Generative AI outside of customer interactions at work, where it is integrated into searches. To help prepare I [familiarised myself with] Learn My Way, reviewed AI gateway, engaged with AI tools and read relevant materials on the NHS app. Additionally, we complied a data log of non-standard IT enquiries."

Before	After
Confident, high level of digital capability	Increased knowledge of AI and supporting resources
	Implemented a data log to evaluate customer needs

"I now feel highly confident in providing digital support to customers including assistance with AI and online misinformation."

Universal Library Offers

The Universal Library Offers (ULO) provide a framework for high-quality, consistent services while allowing flexibility to meet local needs. There are currently four ULOs: Culture and Creativity, Health and Wellbeing, Reading and Information and Digital. The aim of the Digital and Information ULO is to:

"Ensure communities can access quality information and digital services, learn new digital skills and be safe online, supported by trained staff and volunteers, by removing barriers and enabling people to participate."

Given the pace of digital change and the need for embedded staff upskilling, we adopted Test and Learn in *Innovating in Trusted Spaces* to support staff and communities to explore AI and digital media literacy.

What is Test and Learn?

Test and Learn is a design-led approach that supports learning through practical experimentation. Used across sectors including technology, product development and project management (Public Digital, 2024), it involves testing small-scale changes with users before deciding whether to adopt them more widely.

Test and Learn is:

- iterative, agile and responsive.
- focused on small experiments that generate quick insights.
- designed to help teams adapt, refine ideas and make incremental improvements.

Library teams work through a simple cycle of testing, learning and refining their projects. The method creates a safe space for staff to try out ideas, because small failures provide valuable learning. These insights help improve services or activities before scaling them up for broader delivery.

A key benefit of Test and Learn is that staff build skills and knowledge as part of their everyday practice, rather than in isolation or through stand-alone training. This makes development more relevant, practical and immediately useful.

Repeat · Test · Refine · Learn
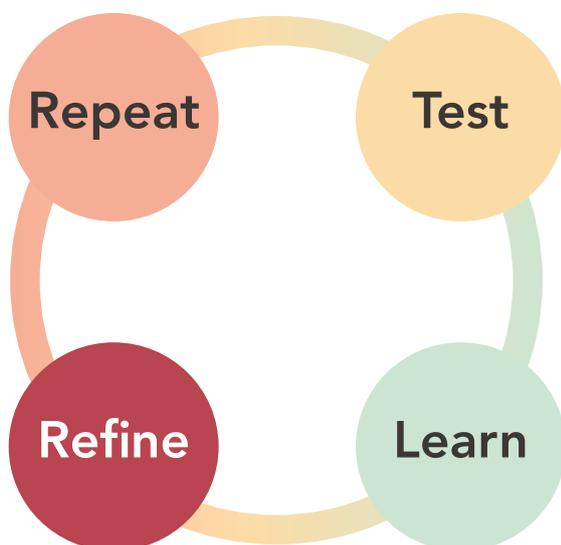
Our project was inspired by the UK Government's Test, Learn and Grow programme, which promotes continuous transformation, user feedback and iterative refinement to improve public services. The aim is to drive improvement not from the centre but through collaboration with users and communities.

Why Test and Learn works within public libraries

Public libraries operate within a societal, technological, and political landscape where change is constant and accelerating. To thrive, services must adapt to complexity, navigate persistent funding constraints, and develop collaborative leadership approaches that empower staff at all levels to lead and respond to emerging community needs.

Staff readiness for this approach was evident at the outset of our project:

- 96% agreed or strongly agreed they were comfortable making incremental changes in their work
- 76% agreed or strongly agreed they were comfortable learning through experimentation rather than formal training

This indicates that there is already significant potential within the workforce to work in more experimental, adaptive ways. Test and Learn aligns well with these strengths. It builds on staff capabilities in user needs assessment, customer service, and community engagement, and provides structured opportunities to put this potential into practice.

Our approach in Innovating in Trusted Spaces

Innovating in Trusted Spaces was a UK government funded project to strengthen digital inclusion for a range of library users. Four English public library services took part:

01   Nottingham City Libraries
02   Inspire: Culture, Learning & Libraries
03   Northumberland Libraries
04   Newcastle Libraries

Working with Libraries Connected, WSA Community and Good Things Foundation, they co-created and tested new approaches for engaging the public with digital media literacy and AI, building staff confidence through iterative, collaborative learning. Test and Learn provided the flexibility needed to accommodate different operating models and demographic contexts across participating services.

As Copper (2024, p.11) notes, "Embracing the power of curiosity and exploring ideas through experimentation positions libraries to adapt to the future."

What our baseline survey told us

At the start of the project, we surveyed the 25 library staff involved to understand their attitudes, confidence, and readiness to engage with Test and Learn, as well as their familiarity with digital media literacy and AI. We repeated the survey at the end of the project, when 24 staff were still involved. (We had 23 responses). The initial survey revealed:

- 46% of staff were unfamiliar with the concept of Test and Learn, yet many were able to describe examples of innovation within their library service.
- 92% felt comfortable experimenting with digital tools in their work, yet 20% were not confident or not at all confident demonstrating AI tools to library users.
- Staff were concerned about the implications of AI for library practice and the potential risk to library users:

  - "There is not sufficient resource to deal with ongoing enquiries and not all staff are knowledgeable about AI." Frontline staff
  - "I don't have confidence in the public's current level of media and digital literacy, and I think AI will do more to exacerbate this issue." Frontline staff

These findings reinforced the importance of using a practical, collaborative learning model that allows staff to explore new technologies safely, build confidence through hands-on experience, and learn from their peers.

Applying Test and Learn in practice

We implemented Test and Learn across two structured sprints. Each sprint was a defined period during which teams focused on developing approaches, testing them in practice and learning from the results. Insights from Sprint 1 (November to December) informed the design and delivery of new or refined interventions in Sprint 2 (January to March). Staff from each of the four library services chose their own approach to testing digital inclusion interventions. For an example of this in practice, see the AI Discovery Kits case study. For a detailed discussion of approaches, see the digital inclusion good practice guide and associated resources.

Before beginning this cycle of activity, staff also took part in a co-creation workshop to shape the approaches they would go on to test. A co-creation workshop is a facilitated session where participants work together to explore challenges and shape solutions. In the first workshop, staff had time to explore two high quality digital inclusion platforms developed by Good Things Foundation, Learn My Way and the AI Gateway, and to learn from the organisation's recent digital inclusion research.
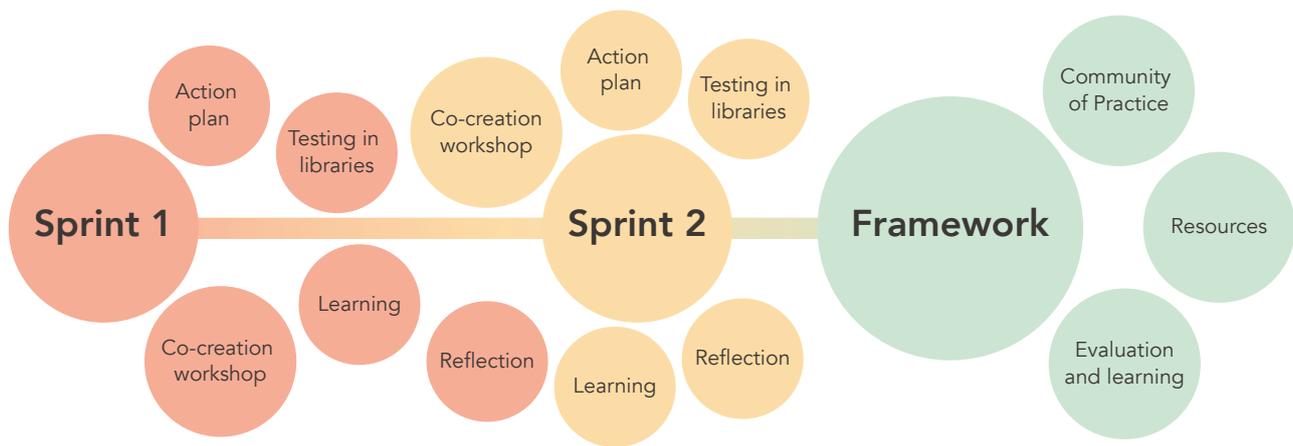
Evidence from our project

The project generated a strong pattern of learning, with clear growth in staff confidence and capability over time.

Familiarity and confidence with Test and Learn

Before the first workshop, 46% of library staff involved in the project were unfamiliar with Test and Learn as a structured approach. After the first co-creation workshop:

- 64% of staff felt confident using Test and Learn to improve users' digital skills and knowledge
- 23% felt neutral
- 14% were not confident or not at all confident

This early shift shows that Test and Learn is easy to grasp and quickly becomes usable when introduced through collaborative, practical activities and informed by expert support and research.

Confidence in responding to AI related queries

By the end of the project:

- 87% of staff reported feeling more confident responding to library users' questions about AI
- 9% felt about the same
- No one reported a decrease in confidence, one person said it did not apply to their role

There was a clear attitudinal shift with library staff now able to see the library's role in supporting users to engage with AI safely:

💬 "My mindset of being a "trusted voice" has been embedded. I do feel it is my place to be a guide for people who have questions." Middle Manager

They understood that they were not required to be an expert but that their existing skills in active listening and guiding to useful resources is relevant here:

💬 "I feel able to say that I am not an expert, but that I am happy to learn together. I feel this puts the learner at ease, knowing I won't be using technical language or confusing them with advanced information. I have more confidence in my ability to help because I have more knowledge..." Middle Manager

There was an evident increase in how library staff can use AI more broadly in their work:

💬 "I've used AI more at work (it's particularly useful for social media - helps with creativity). I've just generally felt more confident with my own digital literacy; able to critique information and it's just generally sparked an interest!" Frontline staff

Staff survey evidence also shows clear growth in staff confidence when supporting digital enquiries, including helping users stay safe online and evaluate information (see Figure 1).

Staff who initially felt uncertain about AI grew more confident after engaging with Good Things Foundation resources and expertise, using AI tools alongside peers and reflecting on their relevance in library settings. The results highlight the value of hands-on experimentation, peer-to-peer learning and structured support when introducing new and unfamiliar concepts.

Staff story: Richard

Customer and Culture Assistant, Newcastle Libraries

Richard felt apprehensive but approached the first co-creation workshop with optimism. In the first Sprint, Richard developed a classroom-style session using the AI Gateway as an introduction for users, with an added activity and quiz. In the second Sprint, Richard developed creative sessions utilising generative AI.

"The AI Gateway was very helpful for me and the public, I [also] learned a lot from trying generative AI websites and programs, which then became a part of the sessions. This proved very useful in delivering an overall introduction to what AI can and cannot do, myth-busting, and gave a reassuring and satisfying outcome to our customers."

Before	After
Inexperienced	Wider understanding of AI
Lack of skill/knowledge	Clearer understanding of role and its value
	Confident and accomplished

"A pleasantly fulfilling experience for the staff and the public."

Workforce development benefits

The findings from *Innovating in Trusted Spaces* show that Test and Learn benefits both library staff and organisations. Staff developed new skills and confidence through hands-on experimentation, while leaders gained a practical, low-risk method for driving improvement and strengthening collaborative cultures.

Benefits for library staff

A Test and Learn approach supports workforce development closely aligned with service need, giving staff opportunities to build skills through experimentation, collaboration and guided reflection. Survey results show that confidence in trying new approaches was already strong at the outset and increased further during the project, with more staff feeling comfortable experimenting, learning through practice and testing new tools (see Figure 3).
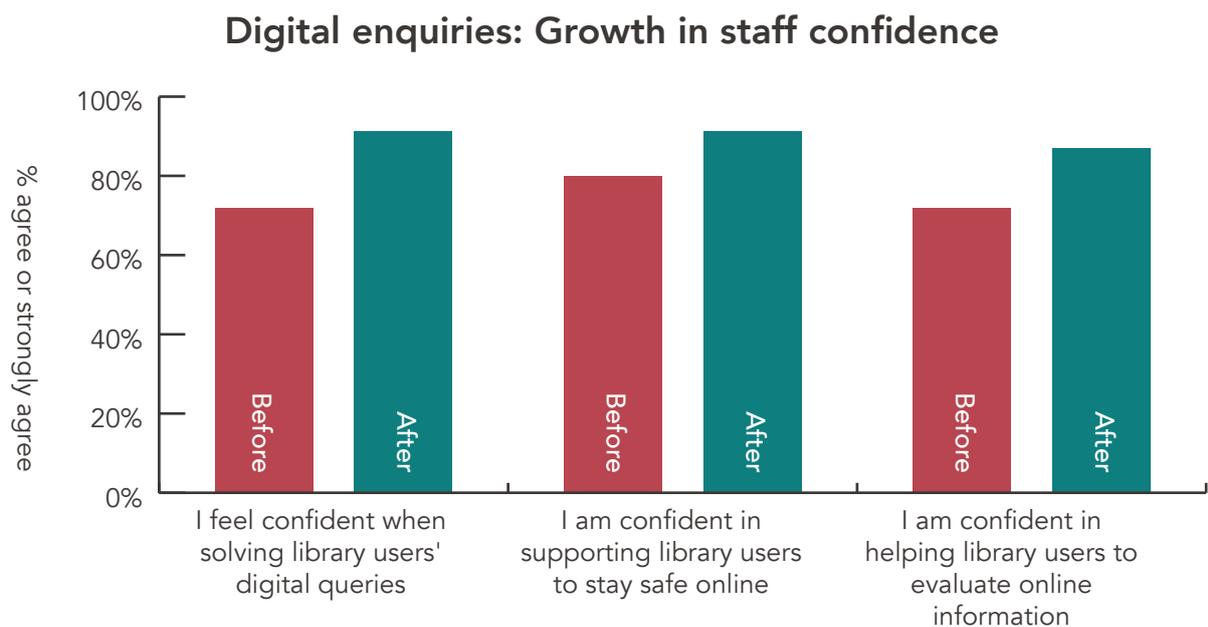
Digital enquiries: Growth in staff confidence

Figure 1: An increase in staff confidence in responding to digital enquiries

"I feel braver and more confident about trying something, without the fear of failure. Reframing 'failure' as a learning opportunity has made a huge shift in how I cope with trying things out." Middle Manager

Through this project, staff were able to:

- Develop new and relevant skills, including digital capabilities, facilitation, negotiation and collaborative working, built through hands-on experimentation and applying learning in practice.
- Increase their confidence by testing new approaches in a safe, supportive environment, where small failures yielded valuable insights.
- Engage in meaningful professional development, helping staff prioritise learning alongside their core responsibilities rather than treating it as an add on.
- Empower staff as leaders, aligning with 21st-century public servant principles and the New Local model of Radical Leadership.
- Strengthen peer learning and collaboration, reducing isolation and building morale. Every participant agreed (36.4%) or strongly agreed (63.6%) that opportunities to share and reflect with others supported their learning and that working collaboratively supported their engagement in the project.

These outcomes reflect the wider pattern across the project: staff felt more confident, more connected, and better equipped to apply new skills in their day-to-day work.

"I think collaboration has been the foundation of this project… Working together as a group to refine our aims, our approaches, sharing resources, feedback and support have all meant I've been able to deliver this project with a lot more confidence than otherwise." Frontline staff
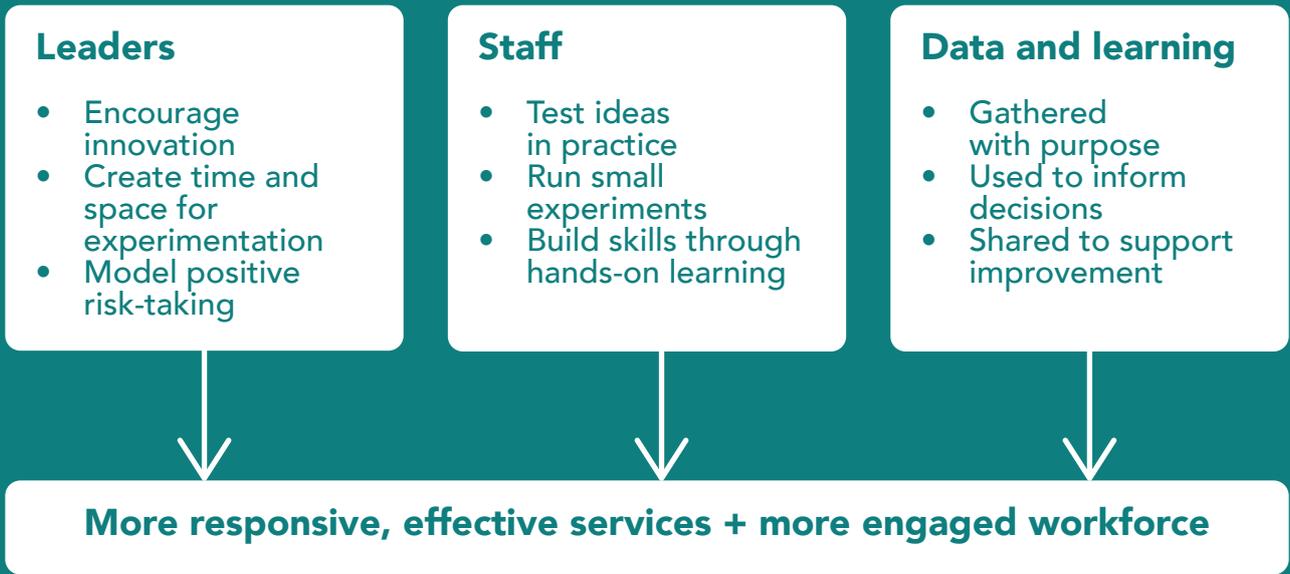
Leaders

- Encourage innovation
- Create time and space for experimentation
- Model positive risk-taking

Staff

- Test ideas in practice
- Run small experiments
- Build skills through hands-on learning

Data and learning

- Gathered with purpose
- Used to inform decisions
- Shared to support improvement

More responsive, effective services + more engaged workforce

Figure 2: Diagram of how Test and Learn contributes to workforce engagement

Staff comfort with innovation and experiment

% agree or strongly agree

I am comfortable making incremental changes in my day-to-day work — Before, After

I am comfortable with learning through experimentation rather than formal training — Before, After

I am comfortable trying new approaches in my work, even if they might fail — Before, After

I feel comfortable experimenting with new digital tools in my work — Before, After

Figure 3: Charts indicating increasing staff comfort with innovation and experimentation

"It is a very different way of learning… it's flexible and creative and great to work with other people and change your views throughout the process." Frontline staff

"I feel more connected to the library services as a whole rather than just the front line." Frontline staff

"I will be more confident in advocating for a 'pilot' approach when there is resistance to introducing something new." Middle Manager

"I have really enjoyed the connection of working with colleagues, both internal to Inspire, as well as other partners. This makes the project a lot more engaging and allowing ideas to be shared and bounced along the way. I feel this enriches ideas and outcomes." Middle Manager

Benefits for library leaders and organisations

For library leaders, Test and Learn provides a practical approach to workforce development that supports organisational resilience and improvement. It enables services to:

- Encourage small, incremental improvements that build momentum without overwhelming capacity.
- Create a safe space for innovation, allowing teams to test new ideas before committing to large-scale delivery or investment.
- Foster a positive culture of learning from failure, where insights from experimentation drive continuous improvement and resilience.
- Support organisational learning and collaboration, strengthening connections across teams and fostering a shared sense of purpose.
- Promote the use of data to inform service design and delivery.
- Empower staff at all levels to lead change, contributing to succession planning and strengthening leadership capability across the organisation.
- Build future readiness, helping library services anticipate emerging needs and adapt proactively to technological and societal shifts.
- Contribute to a more engaged workforce, improving morale and retention, by involving staff in meaningful innovation and recognising their expertise.

How Test and Learn unfolded

Test and Learn followed a clear cycle. This cycle was applied consistently across both sprints.
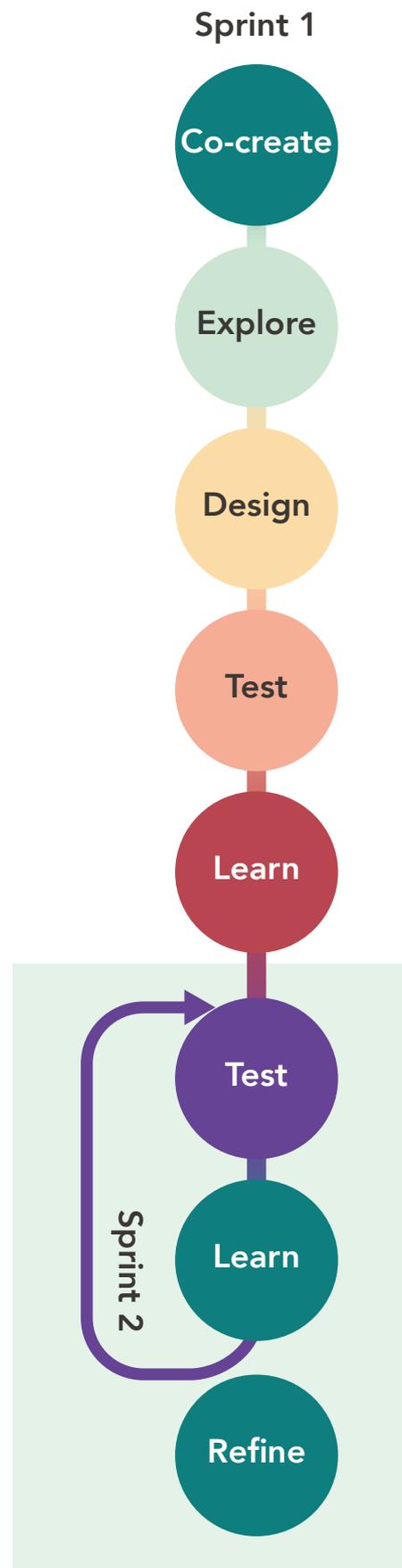
Sprint 1

01   A regional co-creation workshop brought together staff from two library services to explore local digital inclusion challenges and share experiences.

02   Staff familiarised themselves with Good Things Foundation tools (*Learn My Way* and the *AI Gateway)*.

03   Teams co-created activities drawing on the expert support of Good Things and Libraries Connected.

04   Simple action plans were developed.

05   New activities and approaches were trialled with library users.

06   User feedback was collected and fed directly into iterative improvements.

07   Staff captured insights from observations, conversations and data.

08   A reflective workshop created space to discuss what worked, what didn't, and why.

09   Each service shared learning at the outset of Sprint 2, informing the next phase of development.

Sprint 2

Sprint 2 built on the learning from Sprint 1 and continued the Test and Learn cycle with a broader and more confident set of interventions. Staff refined their ideas based on user feedback, explored new AI and digital media literacy activities, and increased the depth and range of community engagement.

Test

- Staff collaborated to generate ideas, explore challenges, and design simple, low-risk interventions.
- Activities were delivered with library users in trusted library spaces.

Sprint 1

Co-create

Explore

Design

Test

Learn

Sprint 2

Test

Learn

Refine

AI Discovery Kits case study – Northumberland Libraries
In the first sprint, the team approached existing groups to introduce
AI tools. Building on what they learned, the second sprint focused on
creating AI Discovery Kits – portable boxes containing a Chromebook,
a printed introduction to AI, and a mouse for fine motor control. After
receiving feedback from a participant with a hearing aid, the team
also purchased a portable induction loop to increase accessibility.
The team promoted the offer on Eventbrite and were delighted when
18 people booked onto the first session. They framed the session
as "a friendly, easy to understand introduction to AI and how to
stay safe online."

Learn

- Staff gathered user insights through conversation, observation
  and data collection.
- Reflection sessions encouraged teams to share learning and examine
  what influenced outcomes.

Refine

- Teams adjusted and improved their approaches for Sprint 2.
- Learning was shared across services, building collective
  confidence and capability.
- Teams focused on developing practical, sustainable approaches
  that could be embedded into routine practice without
  requiring additional resources.

Staff story: Charlotte

Library Customer Service Advisor, Inspire

Charlotte joined the project feeling concerned about collecting data within a short timeframe. During the first test cycle, Charlotte encouraged members of craft groups to try using AI to generate inspiration for craft patterns and collected simple feedback.

"I undertook training using Learn My Way and the AI Gateway. [This] helped my understanding of AI and honed my digital media literacy skills. [In] the second sprint, I collaborated with Inspire Learning staff [on] lesson planning, such as learning how to adapt my teaching style to engage users. Resources shared by project partners provided me with a strong foundation to develop my skills sessions."

Before	After
Concerned about the short delivery timeframe	Confident in ability to educate staff and users on using AI
Unfamiliar with AI	Deeper knowledge of digital media literacy and technology
Uncertain about role in the project	Readiness to take on a leadership role on digital queries

"Due to the valuable training I received during this project, I can now deliver digital skills sessions confidently and hope to continue this practise."

Lessons learned about staff development

The project provided valuable insights into what supports staff learning:

- Staff confidence grew through learning by doing and was enhanced by using existing training materials and e-learning where needed.
- A broad range of skills are developed through Test and Learn, including facilitation, negotiation, presentation, collaboration, delegation, as well as those on the topic of focus e.g. improved digital media literacy — especially around supporting users to balance AI opportunities with risks.
- Attitudes to AI shifted, with many staff developing a clearer understanding of the library's role in supporting communities to navigate AI safely and responsibly.
- Collaboration was a major enabler of learning. All participants agreed or strongly agreed that peer collaboration supported both their learning and their engagement.
- Cross-organisational working builds cohesion, helping staff see their contributions as part of a wider collective effort.
- Incremental change supports sustainable development, with staff recognising that small adjustments can lead to meaningful long-term improvements.

"Collaboration within our service has improved – it's been nice to work more closely than we normally do with certain libraries in our region. I also feel like I have developed a more continuous improvement mindset – working on this short project has shown small incremental changes can help and be used going forward, rather than a long project with big changes." Middle Manager

What worked well

Several aspects of how we applied Test and Learn worked well:

- Time for in-person co-creation that brought together staff from different teams and levels, enabling learning to be shared between development staff and frontline colleagues.
- Drawing on structured support and resources from Good Things Foundation to guide the development of ideas and approaches.
- Creating protected time and structure for reflection, helping teams consider what influenced outcomes and identify what to adapt next.
- Using small-scale tests that reduced risk and made change feel manageable.
- A continuous improvement mindset, strengthened through regular iteration.
- Keeping administrative demands low so staff could focus on engagement and delivery.
- Working at pace, which helped maintain momentum despite competing priorities.

Challenges

The project also highlighted several challenges:

- There was a need for clearer communication and shared understanding at the outset. Some staff found it difficult to innovate without sufficient direction, particularly as we were refining the Test and Learn plan at pace, even between the first workshop with Group 1 and the first workshop with Group 2. A small number of staff were unsure what the project would involve or how it would address the complexities of digital inclusion and emerging technologies, and two chose not to continue after the first workshop.
- Starting without existing case studies meant we could not offer concrete examples of what effective interventions might look like. We kept the brief open to avoid being overly prescriptive and to allow libraries to draw on resources of their choosing. However, this level of openness proved challenging. We therefore directed teams to use the two resources provided by Good Things Foundation to guide co-creation, narrowing the scope slightly to offer clearer direction while still preserving space for local innovation.

"Many of us struggled knowing where to put our focus at the beginning of the project, leading to a bit of a false start on the first sprint, but it was overcome in the second sprint, allowing us to make more focused efforts." Frontline staff

- Time and capacity constraints, particularly around planning and promoting activities to reach the widest possible audience.
- Cultural barriers, where organisational support for experimentation was present but not yet consistent across teams.
- Limited cultural shift, with only modest improvements in perceptions of organisational support for innovation. Our survey data showed small increases in favourable responses for "our library service encourages staff to innovate in their work" (from 64% to 69.6%) and "our library service embraces learning from failure" (from 60% to 60.9%), showing that while experimentation became more visible through the project, cultural change is progressing gradually.

Figure 4 illustrates these modest but meaningful shifts in staff perceptions of organisational culture, showing small increases in agreement across all three indicators.

These challenges underline the importance of clear communication, diverse teams with a strong mix of skills and roles, and visible leadership endorsement when embedding Test and Learn across services.

"The timescale has been a limiting factor (though also motivating in some ways) … It has also been a limiting factor on promotion of sessions." Library Development

"The staff in the project are those… interested in digital and AI, but when it comes to the wider staffing, there is always some resistance to change and 'the new'—many genuinely didn't know what AI was." Library Development

Organisational culture: Shift in staff perceptions

Figure 4: Shifts in staff perceptions about the organisational support for a culture of experimentation

Bringing Test and Learn into your workforce development plan

Embedding Test and Learn within your workforce development plan provides a practical, flexible way for staff to build skills and confidence while responding to real service priorities. This approach works best when it is anchored in your strategic objectives and aligned with the Universal Library Offers (ULOs).

How to get started

01 **Choose a focus area**: select an area where staff skills and community needs are evolving. This may be an emerging technology, a priority user group, or a service offer you want to strengthen.

02 **Form a small working group:** bring together a mix of staff who have interest or experience in the area. Test and Learn works particularly well when teams include a range of roles, responsibilities and perspectives.

03 **Facilitate an initial discussion**: begin with a short, structured conversation to clarify what the team wants to explore. Ideally, invite a facilitator to guide this discussion or consider asking someone from a different team to take on this role. This keeps the conversation focused and provides a valuable opportunity for staff to develop their own facilitation skills in a supported environment.

04 **Create space for creative thinking**: before moving into detailed planning, give the team time to think creatively using activities like the 30 circles exercise. This could also include quick idea generation on sticky notes using prompts like "what if we designed this for someone visiting the library for the first time?" or imagining how users might experience a new offer. Spending a few minutes on creative thinking helps teams avoid jumping straight into detail and opens new possibilities for innovation. The aim is not to develop a finished idea but to broaden the range of options to explore.

05 **Use available expertise and evidence:** where possible, draw on existing research, guidance and subject-matter expertise to inform your ideas. This might include toolkits from previous projects, published research, a Libraries Connected webinar, local authority knowledge, or insights from partners who work with your target user group.

06 **Design a simple question:** effective Test and Learn cycles often begin with a clear, manageable question such as:
- How might we improve engagement with our digital learning offers?
- What simple changes could make our new board games club more inclusive?

07 **Agree an approach to data collection:** decide what insights will be most useful and how staff will capture them. This might include brief user conversations, observation notes, quick feedback cards or basic participation data. The aim is to gather enough information to understand what happened and why, without creating additional burden.

08 **Set a clear timescale for the first round of testing:** agree how long the initial test will run. This could be a single session, a week, or a short period of regular activity. A defined timescale helps keep the cycle focused and makes it easier for staff to plan around existing responsibilities.

09 **Run a small experiment:** encourage staff to test a low-risk idea with users. The focus should be on learning, not perfection.

10 **Reflect and refine:** gather feedback, discuss what worked and what didn't, and make small adjustments before testing again.

11 **Test again:** apply the refinements and run the activity again. Small cycles help staff strengthen their confidence and understanding.

12 **Repeat until you are ready to scale up:** continue the cycle of testing, learning and refining until you have a clear sense of what works. When the approach feels effective and feasible on a larger scale, consider adopting it more widely.

Where Test and Learn can add value

Staff identified several areas where Test and Learn could add value, including:

Introducing new digital technologies	Designing new events, activities and creative, play-based sessions
Staff felt Test and Learn would help them build confidence with emerging digital tools and technologies and help them understand how best to support users.	Test and Learn provides a structured way to explore ideas, from new events to creative or play-based activities such as Lego clubs, gather user feedback, and refine approaches before scaling up.
Promoting and marketing library services	**Developing or expanding literacy programming**
Quick experiments with messaging, formats or channels could help identify what resonates with different audiences.	Suggestions included co-designing library programmes with parents e.g. early years reading programmes.

These examples show that Test and Learn can be used in a wide range of service areas, from digital engagement to creative programming. It also supports staff to develop skills in facilitation, communication, collaboration and problem solving as part of their everyday work.

Staff story: Louise

Library Supervisor, Northumberland

At the beginning the project, Louise felt quite nervous about AI and unsure how she could support customers with it when she had her own reservations. In the first sprint, Louise ran 1:1 sessions with library members, using a person-centred approach to help them build their digital skills.

"I completed learning on the AI Gateway and Learn My Way, I also practised with [other] AI tools. I completed the 'Living with AI' course from Scottish AI alliance for a deeper dive. The 'Test and learn' approach enabled me to try new things without fear of failing and highlighted the importance of recording and reflecting on experiences. I have never felt judged or as though I am getting things wrong.

As we approach the end, I feel a lot more confident in my own understanding of AI, it's capacity and limitations, and I use many different AI tools now. I feel proud of the work I have done, working with learners to overcome their anxiety around digital literacy and AI and seeing the positive impact [on users]."

Before	After
Nervous about AI and its impact on society	Increased knowledge of how AI works and managing the risks
Lack of confidence in ability to run sessions with users	Increased confidence and enjoyment of session delivery
	New perspective on failure as a learning opportunity

"I have loved this project from start to finish, it has challenged me and encouraged me to try things out of my comfort zone and through collaboration and practical experience I find myself with new skills that I will continue sharing with others."

Test and Learn template

What would you like to explore through this Test and Learn cycle?
This could relate to a practice area, emerging technology, user group, or service you want to strengthen.

Staff members and roles
Who is involved? What skills will be valuable? Include a mix of roles, experiences and perspectives. Who will be responsible for leading the project, facilitating the discussion, collecting data, leading the activity, communications.

Initial thoughts
What does the team want to understand or investigate?

Possible approaches to explore

What are the different ways you could explore this area through Test and Learn?
Consider different formats, activities or starting points before choosing one direction.

Expertise and evidence

What research, toolkits, webinars, partner insights or local knowledge can help inform
your approach?

Your question

A clear, manageable question to guide your first cycle.

How might we...   ?

Data collection plan

What insights will you gather, how will you gather them and how often?

Resources

What space, technology, equipment, materials or staff time will this require?
Are any permissions or bookings needed?

Communication

Who needs to know about this Test and Learn cycle? How will you keep them informed?

Timescale for first test

Define the period for your first small experiment. When will you reconvene to discuss results?

First small experiment

What low-risk idea will you test? What will you do? What is the intended outcome?

Reflection (After first test)

What worked? What didn't? What surprised you?

Refinements
What changes will you make before testing again?

Second test
What happened when you applied your refinements?

Next steps
Revise? Repeat? Adapt? Scale up?

About our organisations

Libraries Connected is an independent charity that supports, promotes and represents public libraries across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies. It provides practical support, training and advice to library services, leads national programmes and raises the profile of libraries through strategic partnerships.

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital inclusion charity. It helps fix the digital divide through its National Digital Inclusion Network, made up of over 8,000 community partners. Good Things provides high quality digital inclusion resources, alongside research and evidence to understand digital exclusion and inform its strategy, policy and advocacy work.

WSA Community is a community development organisation that delivers research, learning and evaluation projects. It is committed to equity, diversity and inclusion and works alongside communities to build capacity, co-create learning, evaluate projects and deliver training.

Our partner library services serve a combined population of **1.2 million people**, spanning a diverse demographic and geographic range.

Newcastle Libraries provides a network of 14 libraries across the city. Innovative and creative services sit alongside its historic collections. Recognised as part of the Libraries Development Framework, and as a Library of Sanctuary, it's proud to deliver an inclusive, modern public library service.

Northumberland Libraries, managed by Northumberland County Council, the Library Service comprises 29 libraries across the county. These include stand-alone buildings, libraries co-located in community buildings and leisure centres and a mobile library service, which uses two vehicles to visit 73 villages. The majority offer public access to PCs, free internet and Wi-Fi.

Inspire: Culture, Learning & Libraries is contracted by Nottinghamshire County Council to operate 57 public library buildings and three mobile libraries. Inspire is a National Portfolio Organisation for Arts Council England, delivering cultural activities through public libraries. It also offers alternative education provision for 16–19 year olds through Inspire College and Adult Learning in the form of accredited and leisure courses.

Nottingham City Libraries runs 14 libraries within Nottingham City, serving a population that is both ethnically and socio-economically diverse. These include a mix of stand-alone libraries, libraries co-located within Joint Service Centres, which also house NHS and council services, and a library within HMP Nottingham.

Suggested citation

Scott, R. (2026). Test and Learn: A practical approach to workforce development in public libraries. Libraries Connected.

Resources

- Copper, C. M. (2023) The Experimental Library: A guide to taking risks, failing forward, and creating change. Facet Publishing.
- Design Thinking for Libraries
- Innovating in Trusted Spaces: Resources and Learning Report

References

- Allman, K., Blank, G. & Wong, A. (2021). Libraries on the front lines of the digital divide: The Oxfordshire digital inclusion project report. Centre for Socio-Legal Studies. University of Oxford. oii.ox.ac.uk
- Asiri, A., & Finlay, J. (2025). Digital competencies of public library professionals in England. Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship, 37(1), 35-57. DOI: tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1941126X.2025.2455785
- BBC Shared Data Unit. (2024). Public libraries in 'crisis' as councils cut services. bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn9lexplel5o
- CILIP. (2023). Workforce Mapping 2023. cilip.org.uk
- CILIP. (2024). Come rain or shine: Preparing public libraries for the future in an age of uncertainty. cilip.org.uk/page/come-rain-download
- Copper, C. M. (2023) The Experimental Library: A guide to taking risks, failing forward, and creating change. Facet Publishing.
- Cox, A. (2025). AI and the UK Library Profession: Survey Report. CILIP. cilip.org.uk/page/AISurveyReport2025
- Good Things Foundation. (2024). Digital inclusion: What the main UK datasets tell us. goodthingsfoundation.org/policy-and-research/research-and-evidence/research-2024/digital-inclusion-datasets
- Public Digital. (2024). Adopting the practice of Test and Learn. public.digital/test-and-learn
- UK government. Test, Learn and Grow
- Zenou, T., and Ivanov, H. (2025). Breaking the echo chamber: Enhancing disinformation resilience in the UK. Henry Jackson Society. henryjacksonsociety.org

About
Libraries Connected

We are an independent charity that supports, promotes and represents public libraries. Our work is driven and led by our membership, which includes almost every library service in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Crown Dependencies.

Across the areas we serve there are 176 individual library services with around 3,000 library branches serving over 61 million people. Our unique approach is to bring these services together to share experience, expertise and evidence – driving innovation and impact across the public library sector. While senior library leaders sit on our board and committees, we work with library staff at all levels.

As well as providing practical support, training and advice to libraries, we represent them to government and raise their profile in the media. We also develop and lead national library projects with cultural, academic and corporate partners.

✉ Libraries Connected, Maggie O'Neill Business and Training Centre, 433 Liverpool Road, Huyton, Liverpool , L36 8HT

🖥 info@librariesconnected.org.uk
www.librariesconnected.org.uk