

PUBLIC LIBRARIES: BEYOND ADEQUATE RECOMMENDATIONS

A report by the Scottish Library and Information
Council on behalf of the Public Libraries Beyond
Adequate Advisory Group

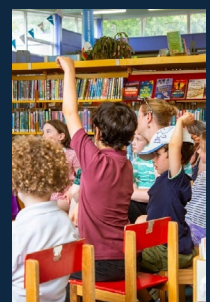
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Introduction

The **Public Libraries: Beyond Adequate Advisory Group** was convened by SLIC on behalf of the Scottish Government to clarify how local authorities can meet their statutory duty to provide an “adequate” public library service in a way that is equitable, financially sustainable, and aligned with Scotland’s national outcomes. The group’s role was to examine legislation; data led evidence; good practice in development of national standards; and sector experience to recommend how a fair, consistent level of service could be defined, measured, and supported across Scotland.

Scotland’s public libraries remain among our most trusted and transformative public services. When properly resourced, they provide key infrastructure to tackle poverty, support literacy, foster wellbeing, and advance digital inclusion. Their strength lies in their ability to simultaneously address multiple societal challenges, working in an integrated way with diverse societal partners. The success and potential of our libraries is articulated in [*Fast Forward: Scotland’s Public Library Strategy Refresh 2026*](#).

‘Libraries must be supported by all levels of government, which share a multi-level responsibility to maintain and strengthen the network of public libraries, including through sustainable funding.’

However, the equity gap of service provision continues to grow. Without clearer national parameters for what constitutes an “adequate” public library service, provision is likely to continue diverging across Scotland, increasing geographic inequity, and weakening consistent delivery of statutory duties. In the context of ongoing financial constraint, this creates heightened risk of incremental service erosion without clear benchmarks, inconsistent legal interpretation across authorities, and potential challenge where adequacy is disputed. There is also growing reputational risk to Government and local authorities, alongside missed opportunities to align libraries with key national priorities on literacy, digital inclusion, employability, preventative health, and community resilience.

To mitigate these risks, the Cabinet Secretary is invited to endorse the Advisory Group’s recommendations, including development of a Scottish Universal Library Offer, strengthened assurance and transparency, and a national costing exercise to support sustainable, equitable provision.

Recommendations

The discussions held by the advisory group have consistently supported the emergence of key themes.

- **Universal Offer & Innovative Service Delivery**
- **Measurement & Accountability**
- **Funding & Costs**
- **Leadership Awareness**
- **National and local positioning**

The following recommendations are grouped to reflect these themes and to ensure a comprehensive approach to supporting public libraries across Scotland to deliver excellent public services.

Universal Library Offer & Innovative Service Delivery

Recommendation 1: A Universal Offer is developed to define the essential services and experiences every person in Scotland should have access to through their public library service. While “adequate” remains the legal standard, the Universal Offer would define the minimum national entitlements, outcomes, and access that every community should expect, expressed in a way that is proportionate and evidence based. Further information on the definition and components of a universal offer can be found at **Appendix 1**.

Driver: Inequity of provision and service delivery is currently a feature across Scotland’s public libraries. Articulating a clear and transparent offer of what Scotland’s people can expect from their public libraries is paramount to ensure fairer public services.

Lead Organisation: APLS (service definition & operational standards), CILIPS (Professional Standards), SLIC (Evidence and reporting coordination)

Timescale: Winter 2026- in advance of new strategy publication

Support Required: Financial (Scoping, consultation, design, and promotion)

Recommendation 2: Undertake an exercise to establish the full cost envelope required for statutory compliance and equitable delivery across all thirty-two authorities, identifying current funding gaps and financial risk exposure. Ensure the ongoing delivery of a Universal offer is reflected in the national and local authority financial settlement.

Driver: The implementation of a guiding Universal Offer will highlight where services are struggling to deliver a basic level of service. Ensuring services can access support will drive improved equity across Scotland.

Lead Organisations: APLS, SLIC

Timescale: By Winter 2026 to support budget process.

Support required: In Kind OSLA to support process and verification of budgetary requirements.

Recommendation 3: Development of a new public library strategy to follow *Forward: Scotland's public library strategy 2021-25* and *Fast Forward 2026*. This should incorporate the Universal Offer and set a clear direction of what excellence and innovation looks like for the library sector, decision makers, and elected officials.

Driver: The previous national strategies have proved transformational in positively influencing local service delivery and nationally articulating the immense contribution public libraries make across policy areas. A collective vision remains key to delivering excellent public services.

Lead Organisation: SLIC

Timescale: by April 2027

Support Required: Financial (Scoping, Consultation, Development, Delivery)

In Kind: Strategy endorsed by Scottish Government & COSLA.

‘Libraries are cost effective, scalable, and already in place.’

Measurement & Accountability

Recommendation 4: How Good is Our Public Library Service (HGIOPLS) is the nationally recognised sector-led, peer-reviewed improvement framework aligning with a Universal Offer and with endorsement from key national bodies. The sector adopts the principles in the forthcoming Local Government National Self Evaluation Framework.

Driver: A credible and widely endorsed evaluation framework is required to ensure service provision across Scotland is consistent. This credibility must come from national bodies driving improvement across the local government sector.

Lead Organisations: SLIC

Timescale: Autumn 2026

Support required: In Kind: COSLA, SOLACE, Improvement Service endorse and recognise the framework. Share across networks and support adoption.

Recommendation 5: Participation in How Good is our Public Library Service self-evaluation and peer review should be a formal expectation for all thirty-two local authorities once every 3 years, moving towards embedding continuous improvement as standard practice. This recommendation is in line with expectations for Local Authorities as set out by Audit Scotland Accounts Commission.

Driver: Feedback was strong from across the advisory group partners that engagement with self-evaluation and peer review structures should not be an opt out programme and was important for assuring all thirty-two library services contribute to Scotland's national public library offer.

Lead Organisations: APLS (assessment support provided by SLIC)

Timescale: Ongoing and monitored each 3-year cycle

Support required: Financial: to support a robust peer assessment network conducting up to eleven visits per year and providing additional supportive feedback to services where required.

Recommendation 6: Conduct a full review of benchmarking criteria, library data framework, core quantitative measures, and qualitative evidence gathering. Ensure robustness and alignment across the sector with a view to making data publicly accessible.

Driver: There is a wealth of data already being collected across several partner organisations on the output of Scotland’s public libraries. A review to ensure accuracy, robustness and how appropriate it is to demonstrate sector value is required to strengthen advocacy and reporting.

Lead Organisations: APLS, Improvement Service, SLIC

Timescale: Spring 2027

Support required: In Kind- From all agencies involved in the collection and dissemination of data relating to public libraries. Adoption by COSLA and Scottish Government as definitive data sets for Library performance.

‘Data-informed policy making is key in effectively strengthening the multiple roles of libraries.’

Funding & Costs

Recommendation 7: Library services have access to multi-year settlements to reduce procurement inefficiencies, improve contract negotiation power, and support workforce stability—delivering measurable value for money.

Driver: The uncertainty created by annual funding cycles means services are often unable to procure the most competitive contracts across resources, LMS providers, digital infrastructure, and licensing. Being able to deliver equitable services is dependent on all services being able to realise financial efficiencies.

Lead Organisations: COSLA, Scottish Government

Timescale: Ongoing

Support required: Adoption of planned, multi-year investment, underpinned by national costing, collaborative procurement, and strengthened governance.

Recommendation 8: Library services have a defined minimum standard of digital access across the country, recognising libraries as essential hubs for digital inclusion, innovation, and data literacy.

Driver: There has been no significant investment in digital infrastructure across libraries in over 2 decades. Some services can no longer provide even the most basic digital support. This is essential for continuing to support all of Scotland's people to be digitally included and ready for the rapidly advancing digital future.

Lead Organisations: SLIC, Scottish Government, COSLA

Timescale: end of 2027

Support required: **Financial-**Capital fund for infrastructure upgrading. A detailed scoping exercise is underway to provide more accurate costing.

‘Public libraries must be digitally mature institutions, supporting staff and users in navigating the digital society.’

Leadership Awareness

Recommendation 9: Improve awareness and understanding among elected members and senior decision-makers of their statutory nature and in the contribution public libraries make through the development of targeted awareness training and ongoing information sharing channels.

Driver: Supporting decision making is key to a more consistent strategic support for successful delivery of and financial support for public library services. Where SLIC currently have an advocacy role, a comprehensive suite of resources and training is required like those offered across other UK nations.

Lead Organisations: CILIPS, COSLA, Scottish Government

Timescale: Ongoing- commence following 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections

Support required: Financial- one-off development cost (subject to detailed scoping and procurement).

National & Local Positioning

Recommendation 10: Commission research which investigates the social return on investment and preventative spend of Scotland's public libraries to establish the Scotland specific contribution they are making across policy both nationally and locally (see Appendix 2).

Driver: Public Libraries provide excellent value for money. Research which relates specifically to the Scottish context is key for fully articulating the contribution they make across policy areas and demonstrating where investing in libraries can proactively contribute to improving societal challenges.

Lead Organisations: SLIC

Timescale: by Spring 2027

Support required: Financial (subject to detailed scoping and procurement).

Review

Public libraries represent existing, trusted infrastructure in every community in Scotland. At a time of fiscal constraint, they provide a cost-effective means of delivering national priorities on child poverty, digital inclusion, health prevention, and lifelong learning. The recommendations in this report focus on maximising the impact of current investment, ensuring equity of access, and providing Ministers with clear national assurance while preserving local democratic delivery.

To ensure these recommendations translate into measurable improvements, a formal 12-month implementation review will be undertaken. This will be nationally coordinated in partnership with SLIC/COSLA and local authorities and will assess progress in delivering the Universal Library Offer, strengthening assurance and data transparency, and establishing financial sustainability. The review will provide Ministers, COSLA and Local Authority Chief Executives with clear evidence of progress; identify any barriers to delivery; and inform future policy, funding, and improvement activity, while maintaining a proportionate approach that minimises additional reporting burden on services.

‘Funding for public libraries should be stable, diversified, and aligned with long-term policy goals.’

Advisory Group

Members

- Association of Public Libraries Scotland (APLS)
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals Scotland (CILIPS)
- Clackmannanshire Council
- Community Leisure UK (CLUK)
- Confederation of Local Authorities Scotland (COSLA)
- Highlife Highland
- Local Government Directors of Finance Scotland
- On Fife
- Scottish Government (Observers)
- Scottish Library & Information Council (SLIC)
- Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)

At the first meeting in June 2025, members set the context. They reviewed the current legal duty on local authorities to provide an “adequate” library service, noting that the term is not clearly defined in law. Presentations highlighted financial pressures, service reductions, and growing social need, alongside the wide-ranging role libraries play in literacy, digital inclusion, wellbeing, and community connection. The group also explored the How Good Is Our Public Library Service? (HGIOPLS) framework as a tool for self-evaluation and improvement and discussed how libraries could better evidence their impact while balancing aspirations for excellence with financial realities.

The second meeting in September 2025 shifted toward practical mechanisms. Members examined standards and quality frameworks from other countries, alongside emerging work on national library data and benchmarking. Discussion focused on how clearer standards, a shared “universal offer,” and stronger, more consistent data could help ensure equity of provision across Scotland and support services to move beyond adequacy toward excellence.

By the third meeting, held in person in December 2025, the group worked in detail on defining service levels. They described a continuum from a basic minimum, through an “adequate” modern, community-embedded service, to ensuring services remain compliant, equitable and outcome-focused within constrained public finances. The basic/minimum/adequate terms were all interpreted as being interchangeable by the group and accompanied by a common feeling that setting a minimum would over time become the maximum that services provided. A Universal Offer is a much more favourable proposition in terms of terminology and direction of travel. However, this must be matched by robust measurement, peer review, some form of external scrutiny, and clear national support — including sustainable funding, clearer expectations, and stronger advocacy — to enable local authorities to deliver fair library services consistently.

APPENDIX 1 - Universal Offer Definition & Components

The Universal Offer should be presented as the clear, measurable framework through which local authorities can demonstrate that they meet their statutory duty to provide an adequate public library service. It would be delivered through locally determined service models, supported by proportionate national standards, sustainable resourcing, and strong cross government alignment. This approach maintains local flexibility, enabling services to respond to differing needs and geographies, while establishing national clarity and consistency. Local democratic accountability for achieving adequacy would therefore be preserved.

- ✓ **Is universal and equitable:** it applies across all council areas, with particular attention to reaching communities facing disadvantage or isolation.
- ✓ **Describes consistent outcomes but supports local choice:** councils deliver the offer in ways that make sense for their communities.
- ✓ **Is built around core areas of public value:** reading, information digital, wellbeing, and culture & creativity
- ✓ **Recognises cross-sector impact:** it explicitly connects library activity to wider public priorities such as learning, employability, health prevention, social inclusion, civic engagement, and cultural participation.
- ✓ **Supports continuous improvement:** it includes an approach to measuring performance and impact that focuses on learning, partnership, and shared improvement rather than punitive compliance.
- ✓ **Is underpinned by key enablers:** capable staff, accessible spaces (including outreach/mobiles), refreshed collections, digital infrastructure, and effective leadership and partnership working.

Core Components While the specific framework for Scotland can be tailored locally, a Scottish Universal Offer could be expressed through four inter-linked components adapted from *Libraries Connected's* (librariesconnected.org.uk) model:

1. **Reading** — Promoting literacy, enjoyment of reading and learning across life stages.
2. **Information & Digital** — Helping people access trusted information, improve digital skills, and benefit from free digital access.
3. **Health & Wellbeing** — Providing access to health-related information, supportive programmes, connections to services, and space for personal wellbeing.
4. **Culture & Creativity** — Supporting community cultural engagement, creativity, heritage celebration, and local identity

APPENDIX 2: National Positioning Key Themes

Public libraries are essential national infrastructure that deliver directly on Scotland's core priorities across the **National Performance Framework, Child Poverty Strategy, Digital Scotland, Community Wealth Building, Preventative Spend Agenda, and Public Service Reform**. As accessible, trusted, place-based services, libraries simultaneously support learning and employability, reduce child poverty through attainment and family support, enable digital inclusion and access to services, improve health and wellbeing through preventative community provision, strengthen democratic participation, and function as cultural and economic anchors within local communities.

Clear, consistent national messaging can strengthen understanding of the Universal Offer and its role in delivering these wider public sector outcomes. This should be framed as jointly developed branding and advocacy that supports local delivery and partnership working.

Libraries are critical national assets that function as:

1. Education and Learning Infrastructure

Libraries support early years development, literacy, digital and media literacy, lifelong learning, and employability.

2. Health and Wellbeing Partners

Libraries provide safe, inclusive spaces; access to health information; and community-based support and signposting.

3. Digital Inclusion Hubs

Libraries deliver free connectivity, devices, and digital support enabling access to services, education, and employment.

4. Civic and Democratic Spaces

Libraries function as trusted, neutral environments supporting informed participation and community dialogue.

5. Cultural and Community Anchors

Libraries deliver cultural programmes, celebrate heritage, and strengthen local identity and cohesion.

Framed in this way, libraries should be recognised as core civic infrastructure contributing directly to national priorities. **Sustained investment in libraries therefore represents a high-impact, preventative policy lever that advances multiple national outcomes while delivering inclusive, community-level public service reform.**

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: A Universal Offer is developed to define the essential services and experiences every person in Scotland should have access to through their public library service. While “adequate” remains the legal standard, the **Universal Offer** would define the minimum national entitlements, outcomes, and access that every community should expect, expressed in a way that is proportionate and evidence based.

Recommendation 2: Undertake an exercise to establish the **full cost envelope required for statutory compliance and equitable delivery** across all thirty-two authorities, identifying current funding gaps and financial risk exposure. Ensure the ongoing delivery of a Universal offer is reflected in the national and local authority financial settlement.

Recommendation 3: Development of a **new public library strategy** to follow.

Forward: Scotland’s public library strategy 2021-25 and Fast Forward 202C. This should incorporate the Universal Offer and set a clear direction of what excellence and innovation looks like for the library sector, decision makers, and elected officials.

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