



BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Bedford Borough Library Needs Assessment

2026

Bedford Borough Libraries Needs Assessment 2026

1. Summary

- 1.1 This needs assessment has been developed to help shape the future development of library services across Bedford Borough. Its purpose is to help ensure that the service continues to meet statutory requirements, responds effectively to the needs of local communities and key demographic groups, and operates within the available financial resources.
- 1.2 The assessment provides evidence of the current library service provision for Bedford Borough residents and demonstrates how the service is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities.
- 1.3 It also identifies areas where service developments or changes could be considered to help ensure that the library service remains relevant, sustainable, and well positioned to meet future demands. The assessment recognises the evolving role of libraries and importance of considering ways in which the service can continue to meet the needs of a changing society and local communities.
- 1.4 The Libraries Needs Assessment helps provide the evidence base for the emerging Bedford Borough Library Strategy 2026-31 and any options proposals for the library service, and will be updated to include evidence from the public consultation taking place in 2026.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Bedford Borough Council has a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service for people who live, work or study within the Borough.
- 2.2 The current library network in Bedford Borough comprises five static library sites, a Mobile Library, a Home Library Service and online services, providing a range of ways for residents to access library services.
- 2.3 This needs assessment considers evidence for how effectively the current service meets the requirements of modern library services and the needs of Bedford Borough's residents. It reviews existing provision, patterns of use and demographic information to understand the extent to which services are accessible, equitable and responsive to local communities.
- 2.4 Current usage data shows that Bedford Central Library attracts the highest levels of activity, while Kempston and Putnoe libraries also serve significant numbers of users from more defined catchment areas to the northeast and southwest of Bedford. Bromham and Wootton libraries support rapidly changing village communities that are experiencing population growth, particularly because of new housing development.
- 2.5 The assessment recognises that expectations of library services have evolved considerably over time. While the provision of reading materials remains a core statutory requirement, libraries now support a wider range of learning and information,

digital, health and wellbeing, cultural and community needs. Advances in technology, changing patterns of information access and increasing digital inclusion requirements continue to influence how residents use library services and what they expect from them.

- 2.6 In determining local need, the assessment draws on a range of evidence including population and demographic data, the Bedford Borough Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), Census information, and library usage data drawn from the Library Management System. Together, these sources help provide an understanding of current demand, levels of engagement and the differing needs of communities across the Borough.
- 2.7 Consideration is given to groups identified within the legislation and wider equality duties, including children and young people, older people, disabled people and those with additional needs. The assessment also considers the Council's responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people from different backgrounds.
- 2.8 The evidence highlights that Bedford Borough's population is changing and becoming increasingly diverse. As a result, there is an ongoing need to ensure that library services remain accessible, relevant and responsive to the varying needs of residents, communities and population groups across the Borough, both now and in the future.

3. National Context

- 3.1 Public libraries are a statutory local authority service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, which requires councils to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service for all who wish to use it. The nature of this duty has evolved over time, with library services now encompassing physical collections, digital resources, community spaces and outreach services.
- 3.2 Libraries support a broad range of national policy objectives beyond reading and lending books. They contribute to improving literacy, reducing digital exclusion, supporting education and lifelong learning, promoting health and wellbeing, tackling social isolation and helping people access employment, skills and public services.
- 3.3 National guidance from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Arts Council England (ACE) and Libraries Connected recognises libraries as key community assets that should respond to changing demographics, patterns of demand and advances in digital technology. As local authorities continue to face financial pressures, there is an increasing emphasis on ensuring library services are evidence-led, accessible and able to demonstrate value to local communities.
- 3.4 This needs assessment helps provide the evidence base to understand current and future demand for library services, assess whether provision remains aligned with local need, and identify opportunities to improve accessibility, efficiency and community outcomes.
- 3.5 Between April 2024 and March 2025, 31% of adults nationally engaged with libraries at least once in the 12-month period, compared to 30% for 2023/24. Of those who engaged with libraries physically, the most popular ways to engage* were:

Borrowing, browsing or returning items	61%
Using free Wi-Fi, computer or printing facilities	26%
Taking a child to borrow, browse or return books	26%

[*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2024-25-annual-publication/headline-findings-for-the-participation-survey-april-2024-to-march-2025](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2024-25-annual-publication/headline-findings-for-the-participation-survey-april-2024-to-march-2025)

3.6 Of those who engaged with libraries, the most popular ways to engage* were:

Reserving or renewing books or paying a fine	46%
Borrowing digital or online resource	46%
Searching online catalogues or dictionaries or making an enquiry	44%

[*https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2024-25-annual-publication/headline-findings-for-the-participation-survey-april-2024-to-march-2025](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2024-25-annual-publication/headline-findings-for-the-participation-survey-april-2024-to-march-2025)

3.7 In August 2025, ACE published the first annual English Libraries Activity Dataset**, capturing activity within public libraries in England between April 2023 and March 2024. In 2023/24, ACE estimate that libraries across England had:

- 6 million members
- 725,000 in-person events with 11 million attendees
- 130 million physical book loans and 2 million physical audiobook loans
- 13 million e-book loans and 12million e-audiobook loans
- 143 million physical visits
- 25,000 public computers and devices used for 14 million hours.

** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/secondary-data-analysis-of-arts-council-englands-english-public-libraries-activity-dataset-2324>

3.8 DCMS oversees and promotes the improvement of local government's provision of public library services in England. It is also responsible for other library policy such as DCMS sponsorship of the British Library and Public Lending Right Scheme. The work of the DCMS Taskforce produced *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021*.

3.9 Baroness Sanderson's Independent Review of Public Libraries in England was published in January 2024 with eight recommendations:

- The establishment of a national data hub to better evidence the role libraries play in our society.
- A national branding campaign to raise awareness of our libraries.
- The closer involvement of the British Library.
- An expanded library membership including Universal Library Membership for children.
- A stronger volunteer network.
- The creation of a libraries minister and a more joined-up approach within government.
- The establishment of a Libraries Laureate.
- A change to the timing of Libraries Week to better involve politicians nationally.

- 3.10 ACE is the development agency for public libraries in England. They fund programmes and initiatives for libraries and commission research to provide evidence for library development.
- 3.11 Libraries Connected represents all public library services in England and Wales and is funded by ACE as a sector support organisation. It has established itself as a clear, strong voice in the sector and initiated and delivered some key work strands and partnerships. Libraries Connected developed the four Universal Library Offers, of which there are currently four:
- Culture and Creativity – enabling local communities to enjoy high-quality arts and cultural experiences through libraries.
 - Health and Wellbeing – supporting the health and wellbeing of communities through services that inform, engage and connect.
 - Information and Digital – ensuring communities can access quality information and digital services, learn new digital skills and feel safe online.
 - Reading – building a literate and confident society by developing, delivering and promoting creative reading activities in libraries.

4. Local Context

- 4.1 Bedford Borough is home to an estimated 194,976 residents (ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates, 2024), an increase from 185,300 recorded in the 2021 Census, demonstrating continued population growth and increasing demand for local services.
- 4.2 The Borough contains approximately 75,558 projected households (2022-based ONS projections), reflecting ongoing housing growth that will influence future demand for library provision.
- 4.3 Bedford Borough is also increasingly diverse. According to the 2021 Census, 64.1% of residents identified as White British, down from 71.5% in 2011, highlighting the importance of ensuring library services remain accessible, inclusive and responsive to the needs of a changing population. Understanding how population growth, demographic change and the distribution of communities across the Borough influence demand is a key purpose of this needs assessment.
- 4.4 185,235 people from Bedford Borough completed the General Health question in the 2021 Census and there were around 29,800 people who characterised themselves as not being in good health. As expected, age was the most significant factor affecting people's perception of health, with the proportion of people in Bedford Borough reporting good or very good health reducing from 97.4% for the youngest group (0 to 9 years) to 60.2% for the oldest (90 years and over).
- 4.5 It is forecast that the older age groups will grow fastest and therefore it can be expected that there will be an increasing number of people who are not in good or very good health over time.
- 4.6 Bedford Borough lies in the East of England, roughly midway between the M1 and A1 and about 20-25 miles north of the M25. Its central location within the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor provides good access to major employment, leisure and business centres, such as Milton Keynes, Cambridge and London. Located within the historic

county of Bedfordshire, the Borough borders North Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes, with wider connections to Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Northamptonshire.

- 4.7 As one of England’s fastest-growing areas, the Borough is well placed to capitalise on its proximity to leading universities, planned new towns, expanded airports, new east-west rail links and a major new theme park and resort, at the heart of the nationally important Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor.

4.8 Population and Demographics

- 4.8.1 The following pages and diagrams/datasets provide a high level overview of the evidence base and local make-up of the Borough:

- Population growth (Fig 1)
- Age (Fig 2)
- Areas of Deprivation (Fig 3)
- Ethnicity (Fig 4 & 5)
- Disability (Fig 6)
- Economic activity, employment, education and health outcomes (Fig 7 & 8)
- Digital exclusion (Fig 9).

Local Population Forecasts 2023-43

- 4.8.2 Population forecasts offer an approximation of the present and anticipated population. This information is essential for planning service provision that reflects the demographics and needs of the population. No forecast can be expected to be 100% accurate; however, these forecasts use additional local information that builds on ONS projection assumptions to deliver forecasts that are more likely to reflect future population change. These forecasts take into account local housing growth plans and current demographic data.

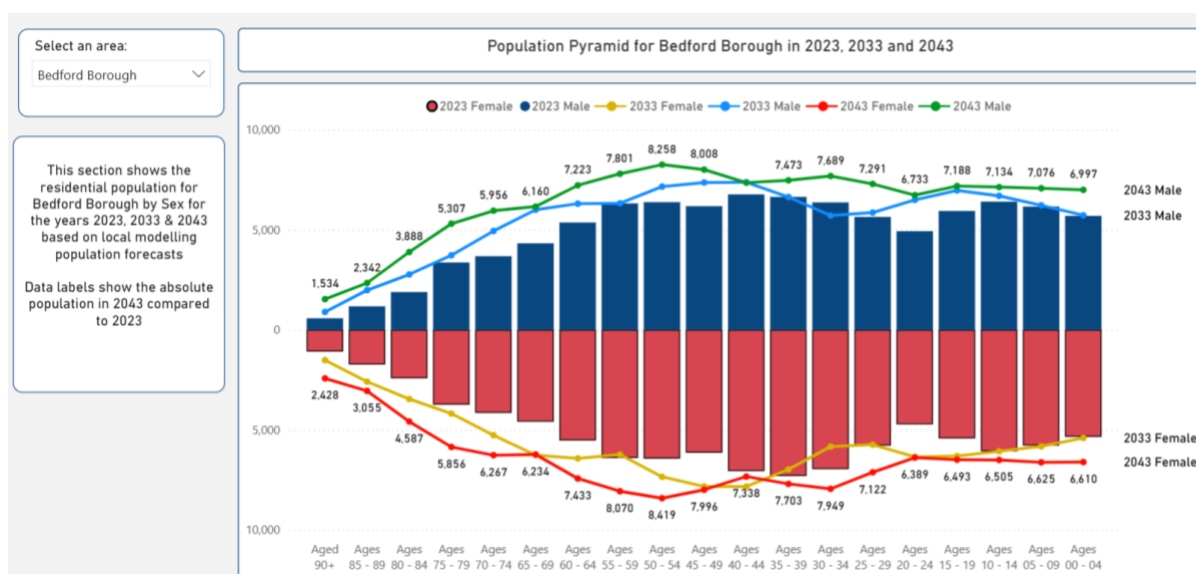


Figure 1: Population Pyramid for Bedford Borough in 2023, 2033 and 2043. Source [Population Forecasts 2023–2043 | Bedford JSNA](#)

- 4.8.3 Population growth and change forecasts suggest that the Council needs to continue to ensure that library services remain flexible to be able to respond to changing population distribution over time. This includes the provision of local access through libraries located in the communities that use them, the relevance of a network approach rather than a single-site approach, and the role of outreach services where fixed provision is less practical.

Age

- 4.8.4 The population pyramid demonstrates that Bedford Borough's population is projected to become significantly older over the next two decades. Between 2023 and 2043, the most substantial population growth is expected among residents aged 60 years and over, particularly those aged 65 to 79 years, with increases evident for both males and females.
- 4.8.5 In contrast, younger age groups and much of the working-age population are projected to remain relatively stable, with only modest changes over the period. This shift towards an older age profile reflects wider demographic trends and is likely to increase demand for health and social care services, support for people living with long-term conditions, accessible housing and services that enable older people to live independently.

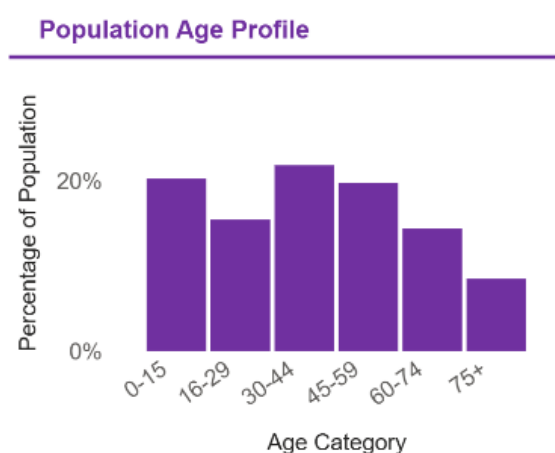


Figure 2: Current Population Age Profile, Bedford Borough. Source: [Demographics Dashboard | Bedford JSNA](#)

- 4.8.6 Given that population ageing is a clear demographic trend, with the largest growth projected among people aged over 60 and particularly 65-79, and the increasing number of residents likely to experience poorer health as the population ages as noted below, the following aspects of library services may have increased relevance and importance over time:
- Accessible buildings and services
 - Health and wellbeing support
 - Social connection and opportunities to reduce isolation
 - Outreach services
 - Digital support for older residents
 - Reading and cultural opportunities that support active ageing.

Deprivation

- 4.8.7 The Council's current Health and Wellbeing Strategy shows that people living in poorer parts of Bedford Borough live shorter lives than people living in more affluent areas. The difference in life expectancy between people living in the most and least deprived areas is on average 8 years for women and 9 years for men.
- 4.8.8 The map at Figure 3 below shows levels of deprivation across Bedford Borough using the 2025 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), presented by national decile. Areas in red and orange fall within the most deprived deciles nationally, while darker green areas are among the least deprived. Deprivation is most concentrated in parts of urban Bedford and Kempston, although there are smaller pockets elsewhere, while much of the rural Bedford Borough falls within the less deprived deciles.

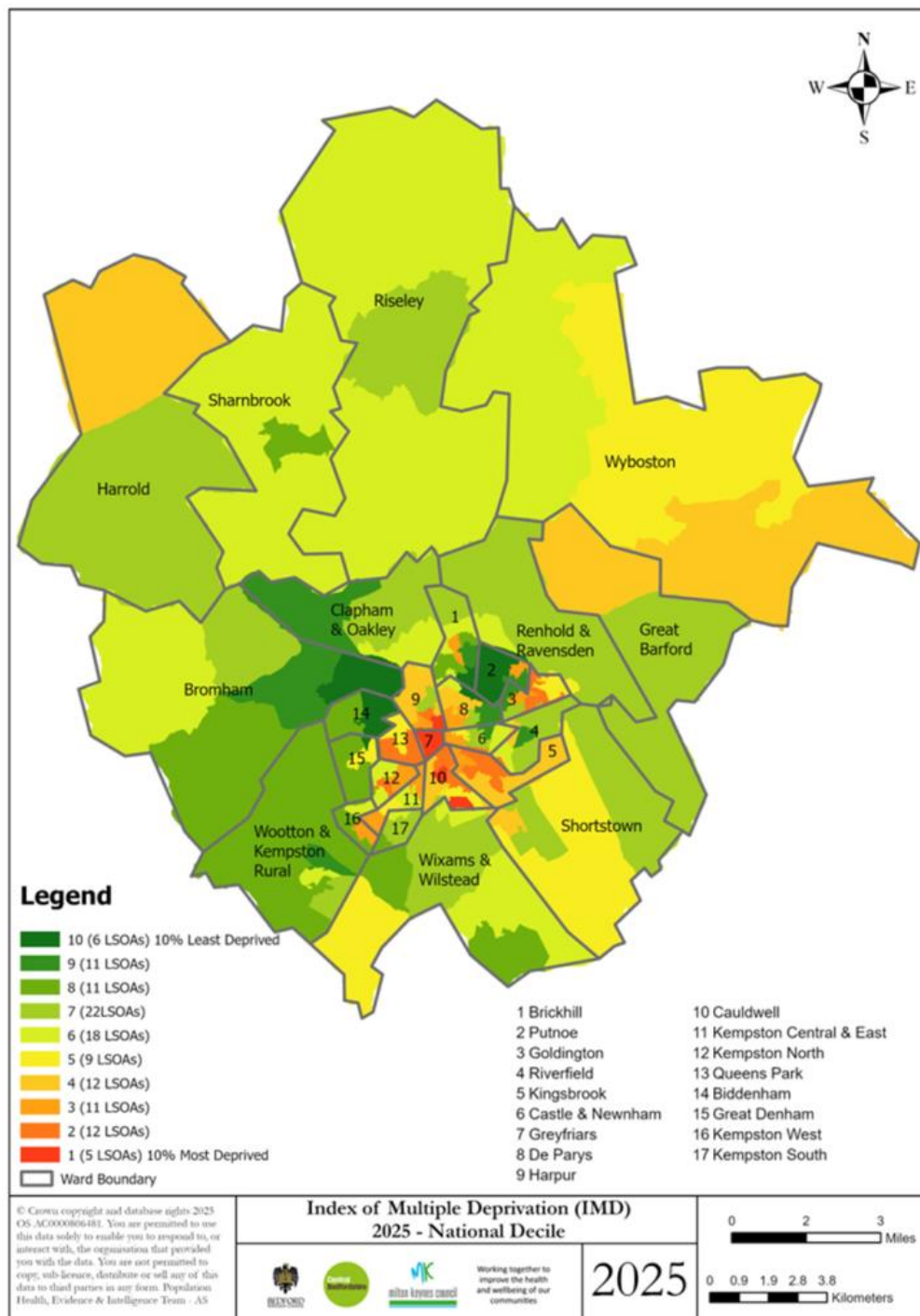


Figure 3: Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025 – LSOA Map, Bedford Borough. Source: [Indices of Deprivation 2025 | Bedford JSNA](#)

- 4.8.9 The Indices of Deprivation 2025 (IMD 2025) rank Bedford Borough as the 94th most deprived local authority out of 153 upper-tier local authorities in England on the overall *Rank of Average Score* measure. This represents a relatively stable position compared to the IMD 2019 results, when the Borough was ranked 96th most deprived out of 151 authorities.
- 4.8.10 Within Bedford Borough, there is considerable variation in deprivation levels across the area, with pockets of marked deprivation concentrated in the Harpur, Greyfriars and Cauldwell wards.
- 4.8.11 Overall, five Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) fall within the most deprived 10% nationally – one more than in 2019. Six LSOAs are among the least deprived 10% nationally. The total number of LSOAs increased by 14 between the 2019 and 2025 data releases.
- 4.8.12 This evidence would support retaining good access to services for communities experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage. This includes maintaining a library presence in or easily accessibly from areas of highest need (noting the importance of Bedford Central Library in this regard), free access to resources and information, targeted programmes, and libraries continuing to act as trusted community hubs.

Ethnicity

- 4.8.13 Ethnic composition varies widely across the wards of Bedford Borough. Overall, 35.9% of residents identified as other than White British (including White English, Northern Irish Scottish and Welsh) in the 2021 census.
- 4.8.14 Bedford Borough also stands out for the size and diversity of its ethnic minority population. About one in three people describe themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority. The largest ethnic minority groups are 'Other White' (which includes people of white ethnicity from Eastern Europe), Indian, Black African, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi. People from ethnic minority groups live throughout the Borough but are particularly likely to live in Queens Park and Kempston. Bedford is also a multilingual community. In around one in seven households, English is not the main language spoken by all members, which can sometimes create barriers to accessing services and opportunities.

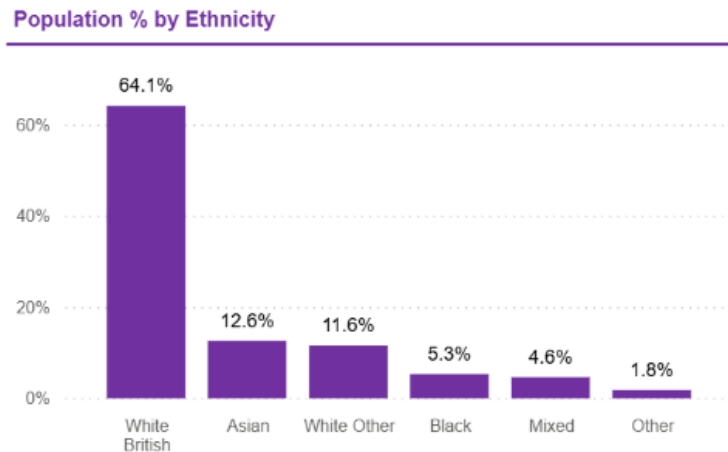


Figure 4: Population Percentage by Ethnicity, Bedford Borough. Source: [Demographics Dashboard | Bedford JSNA](#)

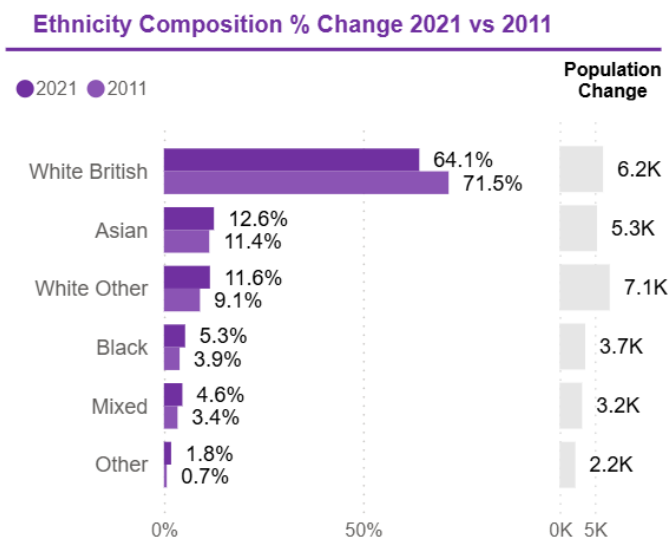


Figure 5: Ethnicity Composition Percentage Change, 2021 vs 2011, Bedford Borough. Source: [Demographics Dashboard | Bedford JSNA](#)

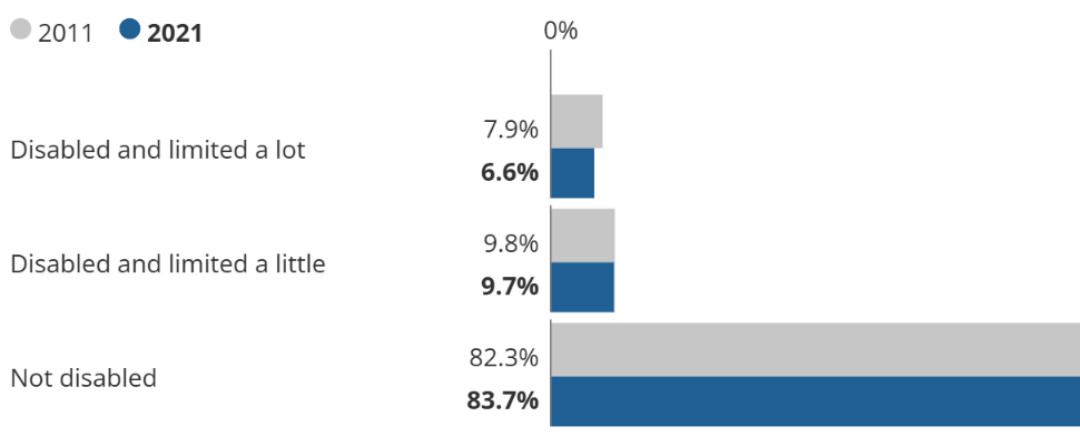
- 4.8.15 Given the trend of the Borough becoming increasingly diverse, with 35.9% of residents currently identifying as other than White British and around one in seven households having English as something other than the main language spoken by all members, it is likely that services that support libraries' role as welcoming civic spaces for all residents will continue to grow in relevance. This may include ensuring library stock reflects different cultures and languages, providing clear and accessible information, running activities that support community cohesion, and providing support for learning and information access.

Disabilities

- 4.8.16 In Bedford Borough, 28,727 people were disabled in 2021, representing 15.5% of the population, compared with 25,201 people (16.0%) in 2011. When differences in population age are taken into account, the 2021 age-standardised proportion was

16.3%, comprising 6.6% whose daily activities were limited a lot and 9.7% whose activities were limited a little. Bedford Borough's proportion was lower than the England figure of 17.7%. Although the proportion of disabled people has fallen since 2011, the number has increased because of population growth.

Age-standardised proportion of usual residents by long-term health condition or illness, **Bedford**



Source: Office for National Statistics – 2011 Census and Census 2021

Figure 6: Age-Standardised Proportion of Usual Residents by Long-Term Health Condition or Illness, Bedford Borough. Source: [How life has changed in Bedford: Census 2021](#)

- 4.8.17 This evidence supports the need for libraries to continue to focus on the development of accessible buildings and layouts, accessible formats and technologies, and, where possible, tailored support and outreach services.

Economic Activity, Employment, Education and Health Outcomes

- 4.8.18 Health outcomes in Bedford are closely linked to employment, skills and qualifications. People who are economically inactive, have never worked, work in lower-skilled occupations, or have no formal qualifications are significantly more likely to report poor health than the Bedford average. This highlights the important role libraries can play in reducing inequalities through access to learning throughout life, digital inclusion, employability support, basic skills and literacy development, access to information and online services, and community wellbeing services.
- 4.8.19 By providing accessible opportunities to improve literacy, gain qualifications, access employment support and connect with local services, libraries can help address some of the wider social factors associated with poorer health outcomes. The assessment also points to the need and opportunity for libraries to work in partnership with education and employment support services to help improve outcomes for local people.

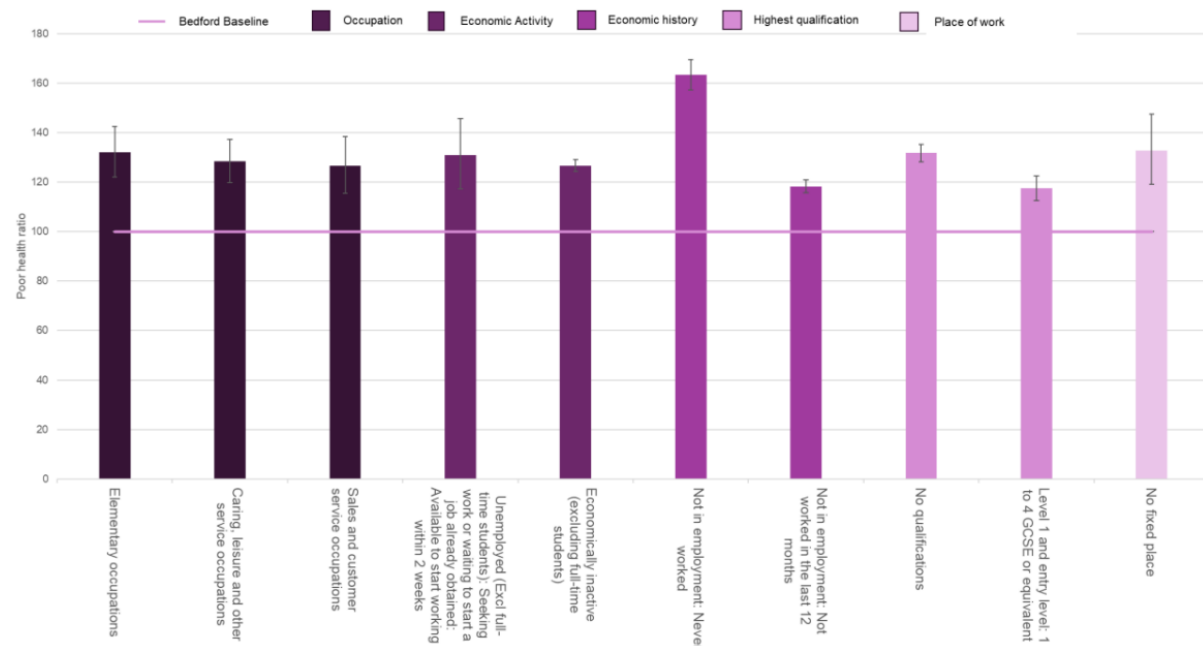


Figure 7: Characteristics of Employment, Economic Activity and Education for which Significantly more Females Report not Good Health, Bedford Borough. Source: <https://bedford.jsna.uk/jsna/population-place/inequalities-in-health-perception>

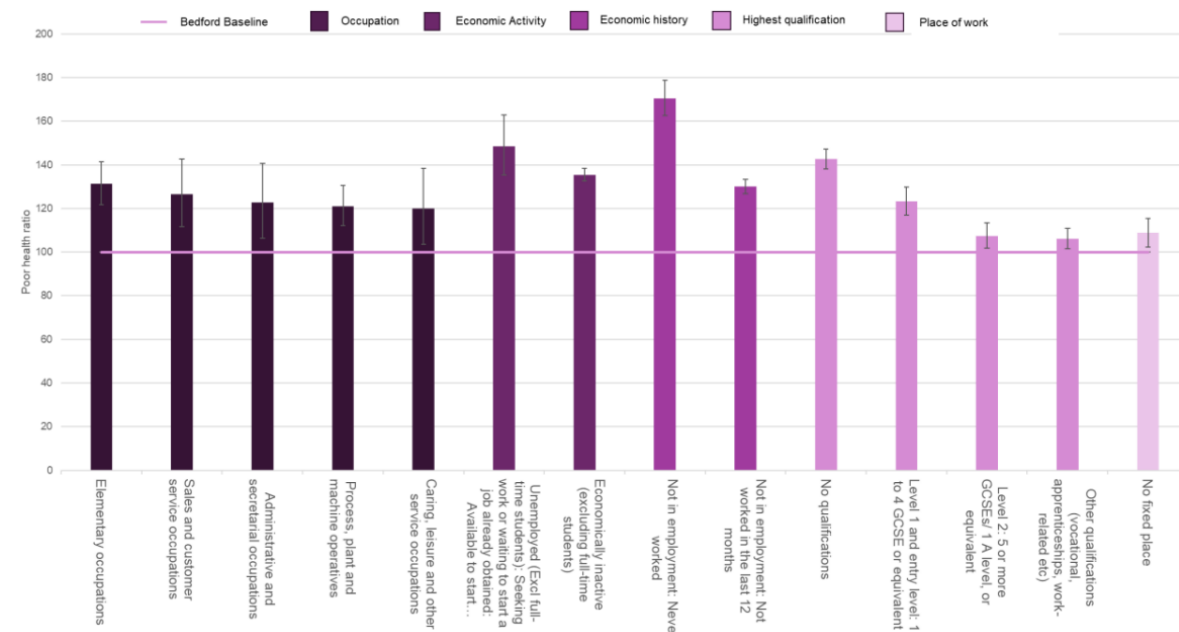


Figure 8: Characteristics of Employment, Economic Activity and Education for which Significantly more Males Report not Good Health, Bedford Borough. Source: <https://bedford.jsna.uk/jsna/population-place/inequalities-in-health-perception>

Digital Exclusion

- 4.8.20 Digital exclusion is influenced by multiple overlapping factors, including access to devices and connectivity, affordability and digital skills or confidence. The NHS Digital Exclusion Risk Atlas (DERA) combines these indicators into a single overall risk score, enabling users to explore geographic patterns of digital exclusion and identify areas where the risk may be higher.
- 4.8.21 DERA combines multiple indicators associated with digital exclusion, including connectivity, affordability, digital skills, access to devices and wider demographic factors, into a single risk index.
- 4.8.22 The analysis is presented at LSOA level, enabling detailed local insight alongside aggregated views at Integrated Care Board (ICB), regional and national levels. This shows some correlation between areas of higher deprivation and those at greater risk of digital exclusion, particularly in urban parts of the Borough. This in turn supports the need for libraries to continue to deliver digital inclusion services.

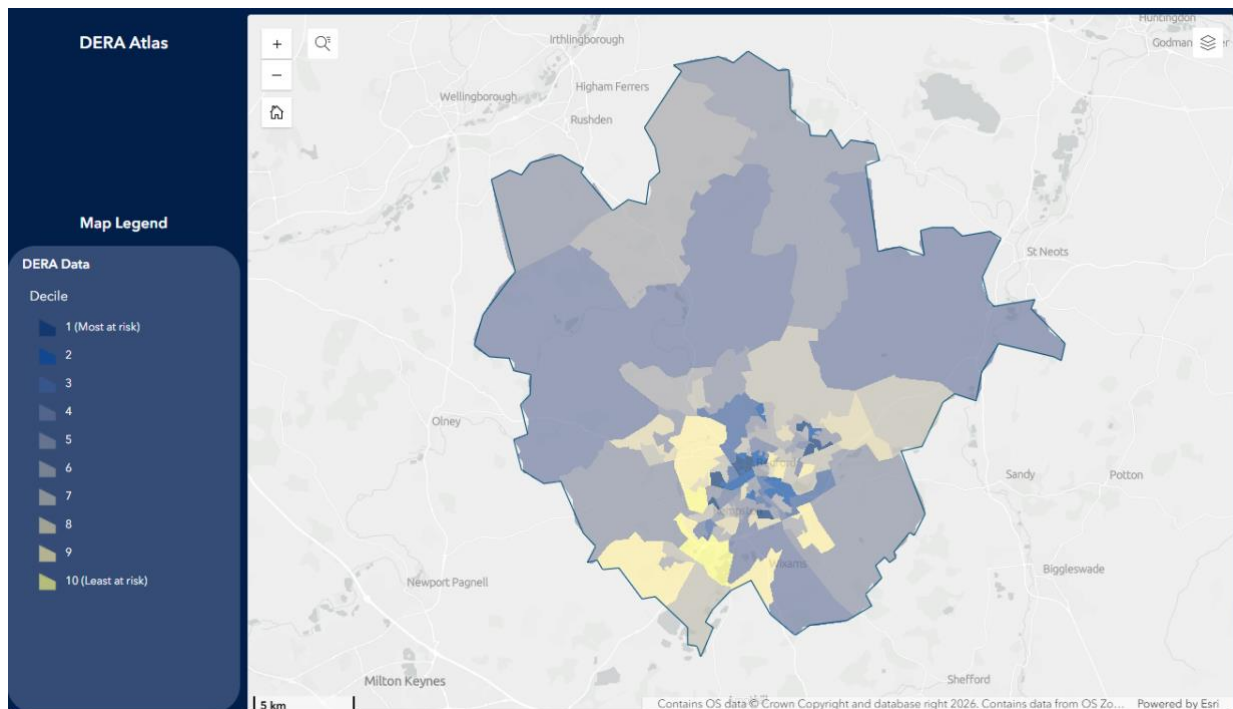


Figure 9: Digital Exclusion Risk Atlas, Bedford Borough. Source:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/about/equality/equality-hub/national-healthcare-inequalities-improvement-programme/the-digital-exclusion-risk-atlas>

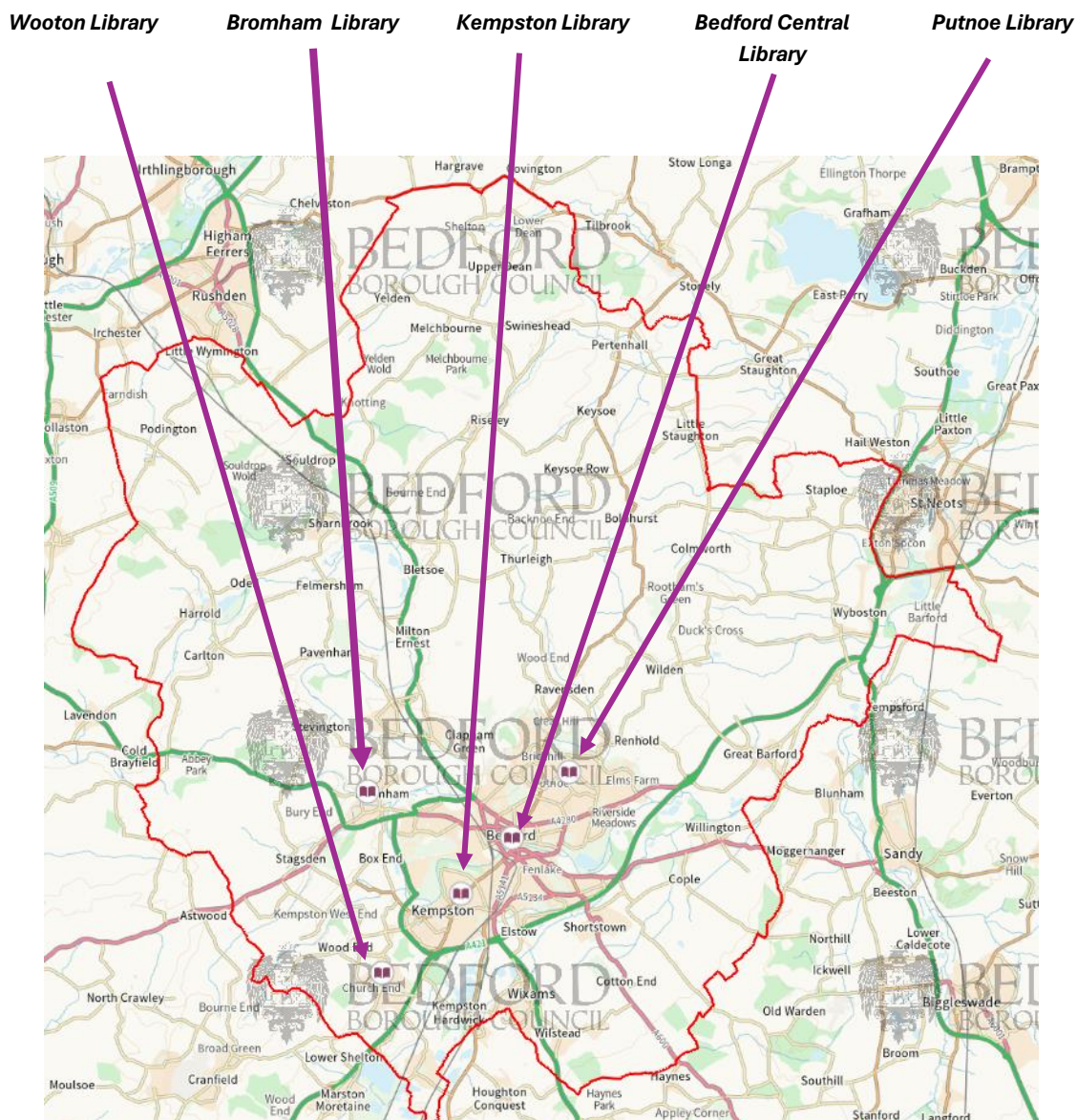
Summary of Need from Local Context

- 4.8.23 The local context assessment suggests that the library service needs to continue to be flexible to respond to population and demographic changes, support the reduction of inequalities, help tackle digital exclusion, and support learning, health and community wellbeing across both urban and rural communities.

5. Current Service Provision and Offer

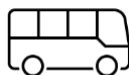
5.1 Bedford Borough Council's library estate comprises five fixed libraries, a mobile library service, a home library service and a 24/7 online library service, with these services running as a connected network rather than relying on individual sites.

5.2 Library locations are as follows:



5.3 Other services include:

**Mobile Library
Service**



**Home Library
Service**



**Online library
services**



- 5.4 The location of libraries against the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is shown below. This is a relative measure of deprivation for small areas across England, combining deprivation indicators: Income; Employment; Education Skills and Training; Health and Disability; Crime; Barriers to Housing and Services and Living Environment. Data shows Average LSOA Rank; a lower rank indicates an area experiences higher deprivation.

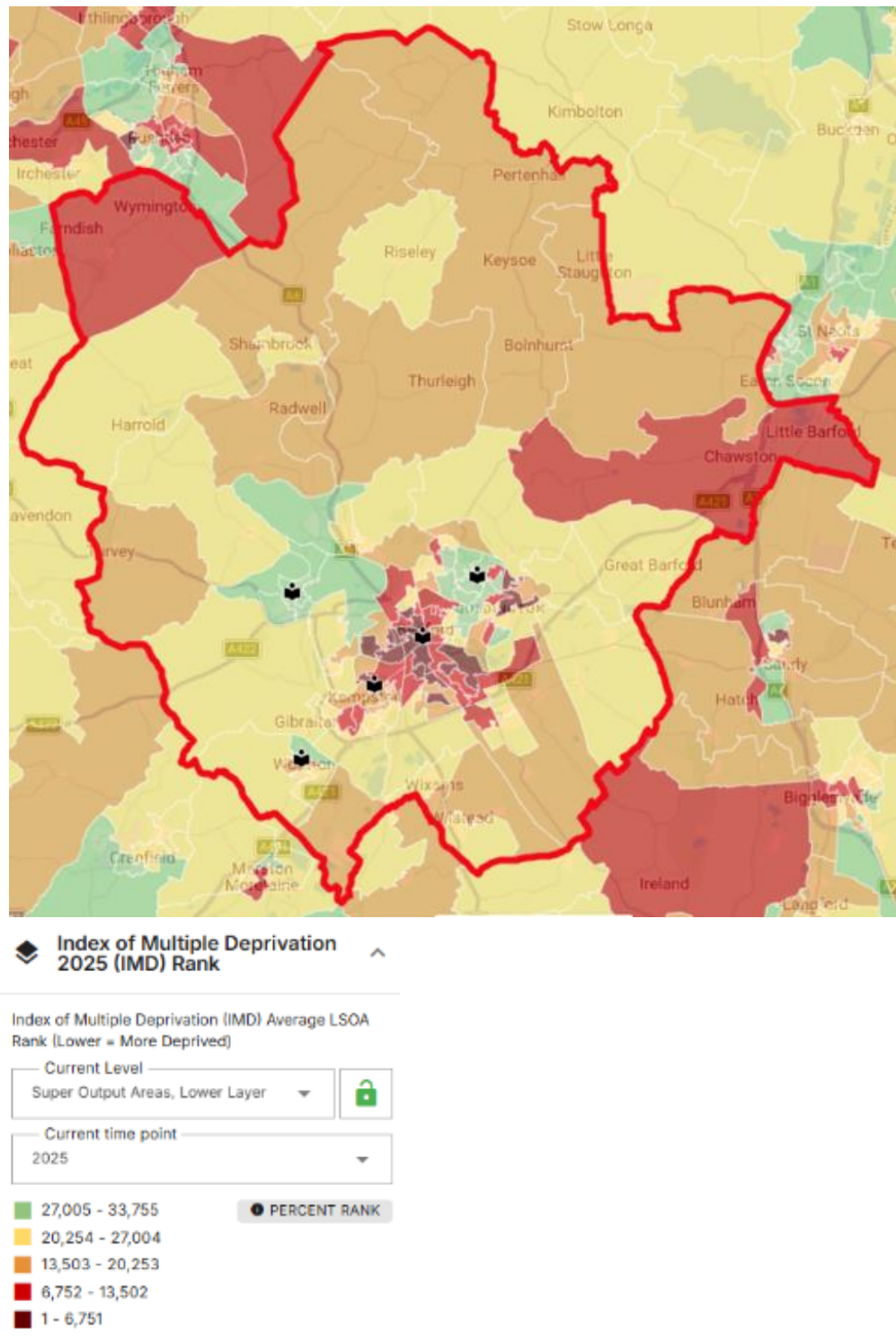


Figure 10: Location of Bedford Borough Libraries Relative to Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025. Source: <https://bedfordboroughcommunity.localinsight.org/#/map>

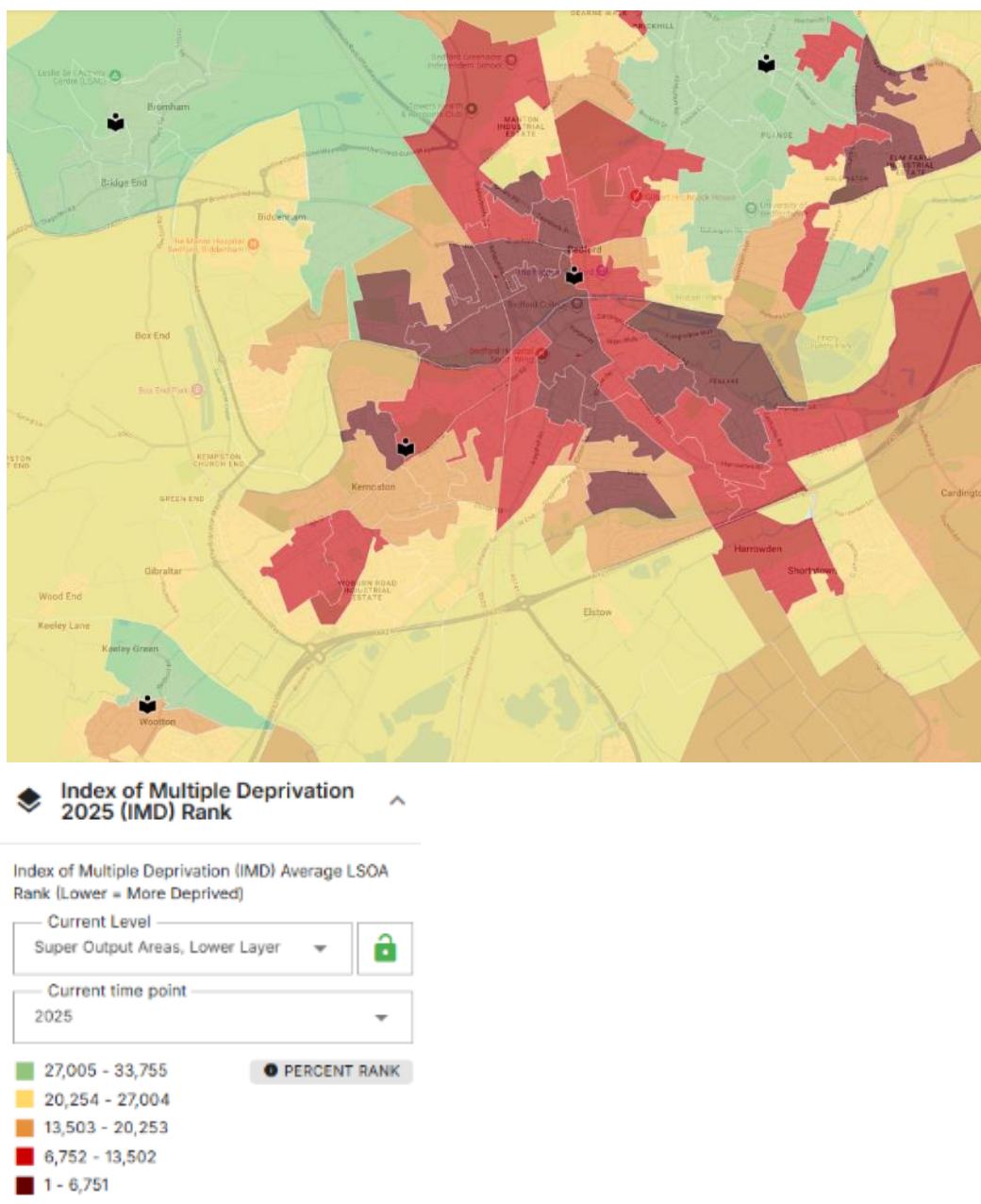


Figure 11: Location of Bedford Borough Libraries Relative to Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025 – Enhanced Zoom. Source: <https://bedfordboroughcommunity.localinsight.org/#/map>

5.5 The Bedford Borough library estate (fixed service points) comprises the following:

Library	Address	Floor space/size	Date of construction
Bedford Central Library	Harpur Street Bedford MK40 1PG	2,184m ² (gross internal floor area)	1972
Kempston Library	Halsey Road Kempston Bedford MK42 8AT	448m ² (gross internal floor area)	1960

Putnoe Library	Library Walk Putnoe Bedford MK41 8HQ	280m ² (gross internal floor area)	1968
Wootton Library	Lorraine Road Wootton Bedford MK43 9LH	219m ² (gross internal floor area)	1983
Bromham Library	Springfield Drive Bromham Bedford Borough MK43 8NT	100m ² (gross internal floor area)	1976

- 5.6 Total library opening hours are as follows (full opening hours for each library are shown in Appendix A):

Library	Total Opening Hours (Staffed and Self-Service)
Bedford Central Library	60 hours/week
Kempston Library	48.5 hours/week
Putnoe Library	48 hours/week
Wootton Library	45 hours/week
Bromham Library	44 hours/week

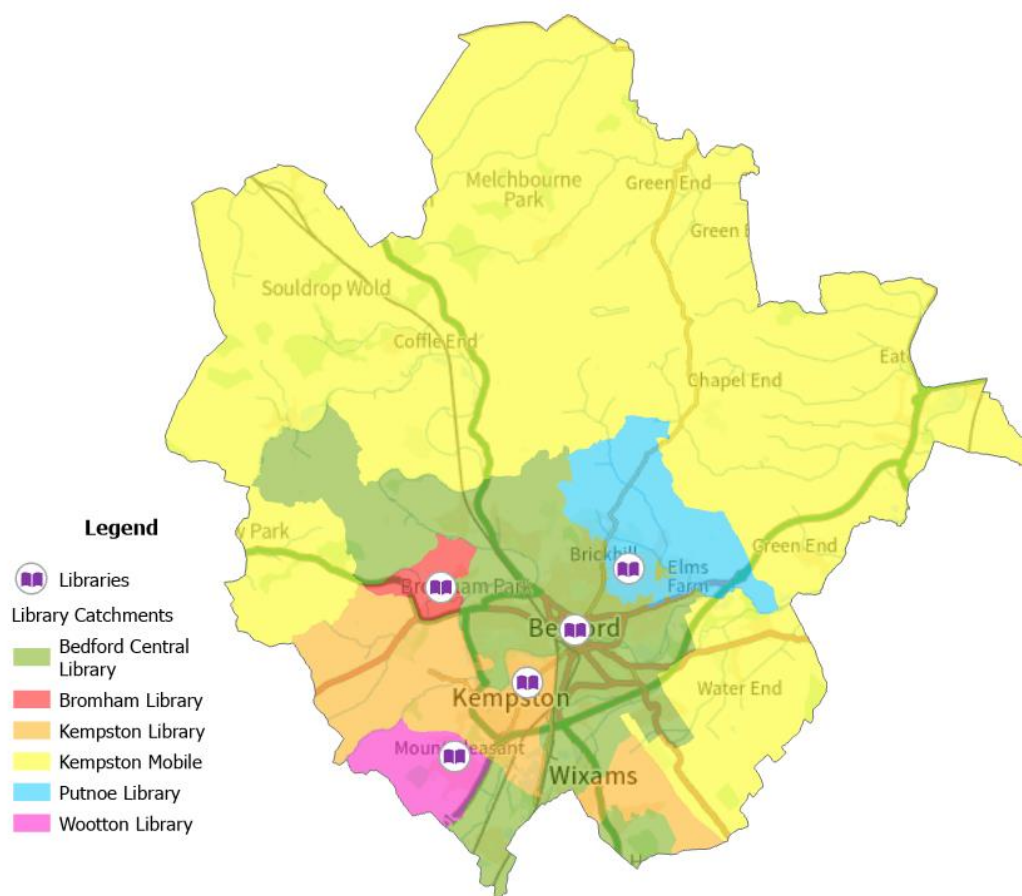
- 5.7 The library network configuration of sites of differing sizes, locations and opening hours is intended to provide a Borough-wide spread of provision, access for both urban and rural communities, and services close to where residents live. The introduction of the self-service LibraryPlus model has also enabled the service to provide substantial opening hours despite a relatively small library estate.

6. Library Catchment Areas

- 6.1 Catchments for each of the libraries (fixed service points and the Mobile Library) have been determined by Lower-layer Super Output Area. Each of the 117 LSOA areas in Bedford Borough has been assigned to the library with the most registered library members residing there who are Active Borrowers, with the breakdown as follows:

Library	Count of LSOAs assigned to library based on most Active Borrower postcodes evident in that area
Bedford Central Library	63
Bromham Library	3
Kempston Library	19
Kempston Mobile	13
Putnoe Library	14
Wootton Library	4
(blank)	1
Grand Total	117

- 6.2 Active Borrowers is a count of the total number of registered library members who have borrowed or renewed a book or resource from a library within the past 12 months. It does not include library users who have attended a library for another reason (e.g. to participate in an event or activity, or use a public access computer) or users who have accessed online library services.
- 6.3 One LSOA (containing Wymington and Podington) returned a nil result under the Active Borrower methodology. For the purpose of the catchment mapping exercise, this has been assigned to the Mobile Library catchment area.
- 6.4 The map below includes every LSOA coloured according to the library with the largest number of registered members who are Active Borrowers in that area. This is a borrower-based catchment model: it reflects registered members who are Active Borrowers (active in the last 12 months), not necessarily the branch they use most frequently.



- 6.5 Off 11,988 Active Borrower records, 11,315 were successfully matched to an LSOA. Of these, 10,922 lived within Bedford Borough and were included in the catchment population analysis. 393 lived outside the Borough and 683 borrower records could not be geographically matched. The data is set out in the table below:

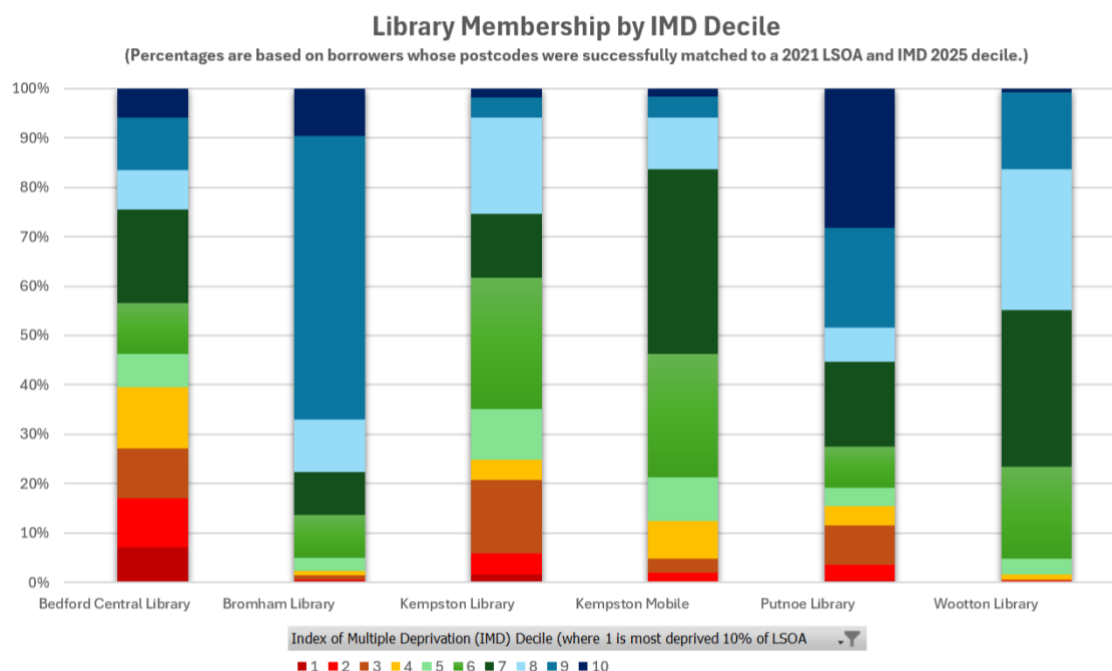
Data	Bedford Central Library	Kempston Library	Putnoe Library	Wootton Library	Bromham Library	Mobile Library
Catchment area population*	109,154	30,395	20,481	8,350	4,708	21,888
Catchment area total number of Active Borrowers	5,832	1,720	1,449	536	479	906
Catchment area Active Borrowers as percentage of total population	5.3%	5.7%	7.1%	6.4%	10.2%	4.1%

*[Lower layer Super Output Area population estimates \(Accredited official statistics\) - Office for National Statistics](#)

- 6.6 The catchment analysis demonstrates that each library within the Borough network appears to attract usages from particular geographic areas, defining their role to an extent, with residents using different libraries depending on where they live. It also highlights the role played by the Mobile Library in terms of Active Borrower membership, particularly for more rural areas where fixed provision may not be practical.

7. Library Membership by Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2025

- 7.1 Using the breakdown of Active Borrowers by the library each user is registered with, it is possible to provide a breakdown of membership of each library by IMD decile. It should be noted that this is based on Active Borrowers (last 12 months) only and therefore does not include users who have accessed a library for a purpose that did include borrowing or renewing library stock. It therefore excludes library users who attended a library for another reason, for example to participate in an event or activity, or use a public access computer), or users who have accessed online library services.
- 7.2 The table below shows the breakdown of membership (Active Borrowers) for each library by IMD 2025 decile. This shows that Bedford Central library has the most members (defined by Active Borrowers) from the most deprived areas within the Borough and those areas with above-average levels of relative deprivation. Bromham Library has the most members from areas of below-average deprivation.



- 7.3 This analysis reinforces that libraries are positioned within different socio-economic contexts, serving different social needs and different populations. It supports a case for continued targeted service delivery, recognising local differences, and avoiding assumptions that each library serves an identical community.
- 7.4 Looking across sections 6-7 above, the analysis shows that the current library service comprises a distributed network of fixed, outreach and online services that provides broad geographic coverage across the Borough. It demonstrates that each library serves a distinct catchment area, that Bedford Central Library performs a strategic Borough-wide role because of its scale and reach, that outreach forms a component of access provision, and that libraries serve communities with different demographic and deprivation profiles.

8. Library Usage and Participation Data

- 8.1 Core total library usage data for 2025/26 is shown in the table below:

Data	Totals
Total library footfall	343,514
Total physical issues and renewals	317,819
Total digital issues and renewals*	908,636
Total registered members**	119,143
Active borrowers***	11,970
Active users****	14,529
Virtual Library users	243,260

*This is the combined figure for Bedford and Central Bedfordshire as online library services are shared between both authorities.

**This is the total number of registered library members regardless of whether they have used a library in the past 12 months.

***Total number of Active Borrowers at 31 March 2026, defined as library members who have borrowed or renewed physical library stock within a library in the past 12 months.

****Active users is Active Borrowers plus public access computer users within the libraries in the past 12 months.

- 8.2 Library usage data by service point (excluding the Home Library Service) in 2025/26 is shown in the table below:

Data	Bedford Central Library	Kempston Library	Putnoe Library	Wootton Library	Bromham Library	Mobile Library
Footfall by library	204,623	44,372	42,218	19,388	21,945	10,968
Physical issues and renewals by library	122,018	43,976	61,198	18,892	31,906	20,890
Registered borrowers by library*	58,678	13,209	10,919	3,292	3,374	4,614
Active users for each library**	9,038	3,138	3,317	888	1,305	1,163

*This is the total number of library members who registered at the particular library, regardless of whether they have used a library in the past 12 months.

**All users is all Active Borrowers plus public access computer users who have used the particular library in the past 12 months.

- 8.3 Total public access computer usage (in hours) is shown in the table below. This is also shown as a percentage of the total public access computer capacity available to library users, which is calculated as the total number of public access computers x the total number of hours they are available for use.

Total public access computer usage (hours)	16,625
Public access computer usage as a percentage of total hours available	4.90%

- 8.4 This is broken down by each library as follows:

Data	Bedford Central Library	Kempston Library	Putnoe Library	Wootton Library	Bromham Library
Total public access computer usage (hours)	13,927	1,502	832	298	67
Public access computer usage as a percentage of	11.88%	4.99%	3.15%	2.78%	1.73%

total hours available					
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8.5 Public computer use is therefore heavily concentrated at Bedford Central Library, which accounts for 84% of usage. The total amount of usage shows the importance of digital inclusion and access within the service offer, however it is low as a percentage of the overall hours of computer access available to customers (ranging from 2% at Bromham Library to 12% at Bedford Central Library). This may be linked to increased personal device ownership and greater reliance on library Wi-Fi rather than public access computers (noting that Wi-Fi usage is not included in the data analysed here). Computer provision may be able to be rationalised or redesigned without affecting most users, whilst still considering digital inclusion needs.

8.6 During 2025/26, total participation at library events and activities was 50,425 (28,352 children and 22,073 adults), at 3,115 events. This breaks down across each library as follows:

Library	No. of Events	No. of Children	No. of Adults
Bedford Central Library	1,384	13,887	10,218
Kempston Library	525	6,864	4,597
Putnoe Library	415	3,074	3,312
Wootton Library	425	2,193	2,337
Bromham Library	366	2,334	1,609
Total	3,115	28,352	22,073

8.7 Physical stock issue and renewal percentages by stock category and by library service point are shown in the table below:

Library	Adults	Children's	Other
Bedford Central Library	43.78%	55.96%	0.26%
Kempston Library	27.78%	72.21%	0.01%
Putnoe Library	40.45%	59.54%	0.01%
Wootton Library	22.96%	77.03%	0.01%
Bromham Library	28.56%	71.44%	0.00%
Mobile Library	56.99%	43.00%	0.01%
Home Library Service	94.82%	2.56%	2.62%

8.8 The data in the tables above strongly supports the case that libraries are no longer primarily a book-lending service, with evidence suggesting that the Borough's library service operates as a digital service, a cultural and activity service, a community service, and a learning service, as well as a traditional lending service.

9. Library Membership

9.1 Library membership information has been analysed on the basis of the 'active users' metric, which is a total count of all library members who have used a library in the past 12 months for the purposes of borrowing or renewing books or other material, or using the public access computers. This is a total of 14,529 active users.

- 9.2 The active user count therefore excludes other uses of libraries, including attending activities or events and using the Wi-Fi.
- 9.3 The membership breakdown of active users by registered library (the library at which a customer became a member) is as follows:

Library	Percentage of Active Users
Bedford Central Library	52.37%
Kempston Library	15.19%
Putnoe Library	13.28%
Wootton Library	4.15%
Bromham Library	5.11%
Mobile Library	2.43%
Home Library Service	0.56%
Online members	2.72%
Other	4.19%

- 9.4 The gender breakdown of active library users is as follows:

Gender	Percentage of Active Users
Female	56.30%
Male	33.42%
Unknown	10.28%

- 9.5 The gender breakdown of active library users by the library they are registered with is as follows:

Library	Female	Male	Unknown
Bedford Central Library	53.03%	35.66%	11.31%
Kempston Library	61.40%	33.62%	4.98%
Putnoe Library	63.32%	30.36%	6.32%
Wootton Library	58.21%	27.69%	14.10%
Bromham Library	63.07%	29.25%	7.68%
Mobile Library	46.18%	10.20%	43.62%
Home Library Service	48.78%	13.41%	37.81%
Online members	56.46%	43.29%	0.25%

- 9.6 The age breakdown of active library users is as follows:

Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	31.51%
18-24	3.52%
25-34	7.12%
35-44	14.96%
45-54	9.96%
55-64	7.52%
65-74	8.82%
75+	10.89%

Unknown	5.70%
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9.7 The age breakdown of active library users by the library they are registered with is as follows:

Bedford Central Library	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	26.32%
18-24	4.67%
25-34	8.48%
35-44	15.05%
45-54	10.99%
55-64	8.77%
65-74	8.90%
75+	10.84%
Unknown	5.98%

Kempston Library	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	40.69%
18-24	2.63%
25-34	7.02%
35-44	16.45%
45-54	9.47%
55-64	5.35%
65-74	7.39%
75+	5.89%
Unknown	5.11%

Putnoe Library	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	35.08%
18-24	2.33%
25-34	4.51%
35-44	13.16%
45-54	8.86%
55-64	7.20%
65-74	10.21%
75+	13.32%
Unknown	5.33%

Wootton Library	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	44.94%
18-24	1.99%
25-34	6.30%
35-44	17.41%
45-54	6.63%
55-64	4.81%
65-74	5.47%

75+	9.45%
Unknown	3.00%

Mobile Library	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	42.49%
18-24	0.57%
25-34	1.98%
35-44	7.08%
45-54	5.95%
55-64	2.83%
65-74	10.48%
75+	25.78%
Unknown	2.84%

Home Library Service	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	2.44%
18-24	0.00%
25-34	4.88%
35-44	0.00%
45-54	1.22%
55-64	2.44%
65-74	3.66%
75+	75.61%
Unknown	9.75%

Online Members	
Age Group	Percentage of Active Users
Under 18	42.53%
18-24	3.04%
25-34	8.35%
35-44	22.53%
45-54	11.14%
55-64	3.04%
65-74	5.82%
75+	1.27%
Unknown	2.28%

9.8 The summarised borrower category breakdown of active library users is as follows:

Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	31.76%
Teen	3.10%
Adult	43.70%
Adult Concession	1.03%
OAP	18.18%
Specific Disability	0.18%
Home Library Service	0.81%
Other	1.24%

- 9.9 The borrower category breakdown of active library users by the library they are registered with is as follows:

Bedford Central Library	
Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	26.05%
Teen	4.24%
Adult	48.13%%
Adult Concession	1.52%
OAP	19.14%
Specific Disability	0.21%
Home Library Service	0.11%
Other	0.60%

Kempston Library	
Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	41.32%
Teen	2.85%
Adult	41.87%
Adult Concession	0.68%
OAP	11.42%
Specific Disability	0.14%
Home Library Service	0.68%
Other	1.04%

Putnoe Library	
Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	35.91%
Teen	1.76%
Adult	38.29%
Adult Concession	0.62%
OAP	22.07%
Specific Disability	0.10%
Home Library Service	0.05%
Other	1.20%

Wootton Library	
Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	45.11%
Teen	1.66%
Adult	37.31%
Adult Concession	0.00%
OAP	13.93%
Specific Disability	0.33%
Home Library Service	0.50%
Other	1.16%

Bromham Library	
Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	42.32%

Teen	1.08%
Adult	36.52%
Adult Concession	0.00%
OAP	18.87%
Specific Disability	0.00%
Home Library Service	0.13%
Other	1.08%

Mobile Library	
Borrower Category	Percentage of Active Users
Child	43.34%
Teen	0.28%
Adult	18.41%
Adult Concession	0.00%
OAP	33.14%
Specific Disability	0.00%
Home Library Service	2.27%
Other	2.56%

- 9.10 Bedford Central Library acts as a key hub for the Borough library network. It accounts for almost 60% of total library footfall, 38% of total in-person stock issues and renewals, 49% of registered borrowers, and a significant percentage of active users. It also delivers around 45% of the events and activities that take place across the library network, and accounts for around half of attendances at these activities. Bedford Central Library is functioning as the Borough's principal library, the largest digital access point, the largest activity and events venue and a major civic facility.
- 9.11 The branch libraries continue to play an important role, with some performing strongly relative to their scale. For example, Putnoe Library has a strong proportion of physical issues and renewals (61,198) against its footfall (42,218), and Bromham recorded nearly 32,000 issues and renewals from a very small building. This supports a view that the Borough's branch libraries have strong borrowing activity and good levels of community engagement.
- 9.12 The importance of services for children and families is clear from the data. Children's stock accounts for 72% of borrowing at Kempston Library, 77% at Wootton, 71% at Bromham, 60% at Putnoe and nearly 60% at Bedford Central Library. Across the network, 31.5% of active users are aged under 18, with this ranging up to 45% at individual libraries. There were also over 28,300 children who participated in library activities and events in 2025/26.
- 9.13 Conversely, library engagement appears relatively weak among young adults and people in their twenties. To an extent this does not necessarily correlate with specific observations at Bedford Central Library regarding the use of study space by students, although it should be noted that the library usage data in this needs assessment does not include people using library sites to access Wi-Fi. Bedford Central Library appears to have the most balanced age profile of active users overall.
- 9.14 The Borough's libraries are also supporting an ageing population, with nearly 20% of active users aged over 65, and 18% of active users being in the OAP borrower category. This aligns with the population and demographic changes outlined earlier in the needs

assessment and supports the continued need to support accessibility and health and wellbeing activity within libraries. The data also shows the role that the Mobile Library and Home Library Service are playing in supporting residents who may otherwise face barriers to accessing library services.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 This needs assessment seeks to provide an evidence base for understanding current and future demand for library services in Bedford Borough, drawing on demographic information, population forecasts, deprivation data, digital exclusion evidence, library usage data, membership information, and catchment analysis.
- 10.2 The evidence indicates that the library service needs to continue to support reading, learning, information access, digital inclusion, health and wellbeing, cultural participation and community connection.
- 10.3 The assessment identifies a number of factors that will influence future demand for library services. Bedford Borough's population continues to grow and is becoming increasingly diverse, while the largest population increases are projected amongst older age groups. There remain areas of deprivation and digital exclusion, alongside clear links between poorer health outcomes, lower levels of educational attainment and wider social inequalities.
- 10.4 The catchment analysis demonstrates that residents use different libraries according to where they live and that each library serves an identifiable geographic area and population. The findings support the continued importance of a networked approach to service delivery, combining fixed libraries, outreach provision and digital services.
- 10.5 The assessment highlights the role of Bedford Central Library within the network, as it accounts for the highest levels of visits, borrowing, activity participation, and digital access, serves the largest catchment area and has the strongest reach into communities experiencing deprivation. The assessment also shows the continuing value of Kempston, Putnoe, Bromham and Wootton libraries in serving distinct communities. The data indicates that these libraries play a particularly important role in supporting children and families, and acting as trusted centres for community activity.
- 10.6 The data shows that children and families are one of the most significant user groups across the Borough's library network. Children's stock accounts for the majority of borrowing at most libraries and over 28,000 children participated in library activities. This helps demonstrate the continuing importance of libraries in supporting literacy, reading for pleasure, learning and family engagement.
- 10.7 The assessment also highlights the significance of services for older residents. Nearly one-fifth of active users are aged 65 or over, while the Mobile Library and Home Library Service play a role in supporting residents who may otherwise face barriers to accessing services. This is relevant as the Borough's population continues to age; accessibility, health and wellbeing support, and opportunities for social connection are likely to remain important aspects of library service provision.
- 10.8 The assessment also demonstrates the continuing importance of libraries in supporting communities experiencing disadvantage. Bedford Central Library and Kempston Library

show the strongest levels of engagement from residents living in deprived areas. This suggests that libraries continue to play an important role in reducing barriers to information, learning, digital access and community support. Evidence of levels of digital usage, online engagement and public computer use also demonstrates that digital services are an integral part of the library offer, and supports a continuing need for libraries to play a role in digital inclusion.

- 10.9 The Borough's library network provides accessible services across urban and rural communities, and supports a range of residents. Future service planning should build on these strengths while ensuring resources remain focused on areas of greatest need, for example supporting children and families, responding to an ageing population, and tackling inequalities and digital exclusion.
- 10.10 The evidence contained within this assessment will help inform library strategy, service planning and development, and consideration of any service changes, in order to help sustain accessible, relevant and efficient services. It also helps provide a framework against which consultation responses, performance information and changing patterns of community need can be assessed to ensure that the Council continues to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.

Appendix A – Library Opening Hours

Bedford Central Library

Staff availability	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Self-service	9am-11am	9am-11am	9am-11am	9am-11am	9am-11am	9am-10am	10am-11am
Staffed	11am-4pm	11am-4pm	11am-4pm	11am-4pm	11am-4pm	10am-5pm	11am-2pm
Self-service	4pm-6pm	4pm-6pm	4pm-6pm	4pm-6pm	4pm-6pm	5pm-6pm	2pm-4pm

Kempston Library

Staff availability	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Self-service	9.30am-2pm		9.30am-2pm		9.30am-6pm	
Staffed	2pm-5pm	10am-4pm	2pm-5pm	10am-4pm		10am-4pm
Self-service	5pm-6pm	4pm-6pm	5pm-6pm	4pm-6pm		4pm-5pm

Putnoe Library

Staff availability	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Self-service	9am-2pm		9am-6pm		9am-2pm	
Staffed	2pm-5pm	10am-4pm		10am-4pm	2pm-5pm	10am-4pm
Self-service	5pm-6pm	4pm-6pm		4pm-6pm	5pm-6pm	4pm-5pm

Wooton Library

Staff availability	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Self-service	9am-2pm		9am-2pm		9am-2pm	9am-11am
Staffed	2pm-5pm	10am-12pm	2pm-5pm	10pm-12pm	2pm-5pm	11am-1pm
Self-service		12pm-5pm		12pm-5pm		1pm-4pm

Bromham Library

Staff availability	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Self-service		9am-2pm		9am-2pm		9am-10am

Staff availability	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Staffed	10am-12pm	2pm-5pm	10am-12pm	2pm-5pm	10am-12pm	10am-1pm
Self-service	12pm-5pm		12pm-5pm		12pm-5pm	1pm-4pm