



Hertfordshire Libraries

Annual Report 2023-24

Creating a cleaner, greener, healthier Hertfordshire



“We absolutely love the library. The staff are amazing, helpful and kind. My daughter comes regularly, and it is her happy place.”

Visitor to Stevenage Library

“I'd like to compliment all the staff. They are so friendly and considerate, and the library is the absolute hub of the community.

As a mother of a child with autism, it is very hard to find extracurricular activities where my child is understood and appreciated for who he is... We have always been exceptionally well looked after and supported at the library and my son has benefitted no end. He is a reluctant reader/writer at school, but the library provides a different setting where he is supported to learn and engage.”

Visitor to Tring Library

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Creating a cleaner, greener, healthier Hertfordshire



An evening with author Joanna Wallace at Bushey Library

Foreword

I am proud to share the Libraries Annual Report which highlights and demonstrates the importance of libraries in our communities. As you will see from the families making new friends at Baby Rhyme Time, our children developing a love of reading through the Summer Reading Challenge, to the groups and activities that enable community cohesion and reduce loneliness – our residents are at the heart of our libraries offer.

The breadth of the libraries offer, and the achievements outlined in the report evidence the service's ability to develop and innovate to meet the needs of our residents, and I look forward to continuing to support the Inspiring Libraries journey in the year ahead.

Councillor Caroline Clapper, Executive Member for Education, Libraries & Lifelong Learning

The examples in this year's Annual Report demonstrate that Hertfordshire Libraries are places of inspiration and connection. Our varied programme of events and activities has continued to encourage more people to discover what their local library has to offer them, whether that is unlocking a hidden artistic talent or providing support for improving health and wellbeing.

The imagination, enthusiasm and commitment of our staff and volunteers shines through the pages of this report, and this was particularly evident at the various awards events that I attended this year. Thank you to our teams and partners who contribute to delivering such a successful and valued service throughout the year.

Michele Murphy, Head of Hertfordshire Libraries



Library usage



6,296,384
Issues



6,213,665
Visits



137,250
Borrowers

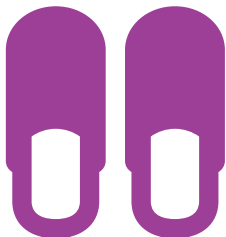


61,997
New members



8,485
Events and
activities

536
Pairs of
slippers
gifted



20,862
Children took
part in Summer
Reading Challenge



61,359
Volunteer
Hours

My Place to connect

We have developed our offer for adults of all ages with a variety of organised groups which provide an opportunity for connection and support for those experiencing loneliness. Groups such as Tuesday Allsorts at Welwyn Garden City have themed topics and invited speakers, truly offering something for everyone. These general social groups, which bring joy, the chance to discover a shared interest, make friends or learn something new, take place across the county.

Crafting groups are increasingly popular, with Knit and Natter and Craftea sessions enabling more experienced crafters to support beginners as they chat and work on their own projects. Other groups include social reading groups, which uses reading and books as informal conversation starters, games groups and mindfulness activities.

These groups can have a powerful impact. A blind customer was encouraged by Cheshunt staff to go along to a library board games group, for which they sourced braille versions of games to make it more inclusive. Through a chance conversation about a shared love of bike riding, he arranged an outing with another member of the group who has now become the front rider for him on his tandem which had lain unused for 7 years. He told us that without the member of staff telling him about the group ***“I would never have played these games and met a front rider. We also may be getting one of the other people along with us, so it seems I have possibly spurred someone else into action.”***



Top: Tuesday Allsorts group attend talk on Westerns. Right: Craftea group at Harpenden Library. Below: Always Invited session at Hitchin Library



My Place to connect

We were delighted to welcome High Sheriff of Hertfordshire, Liz Green, to every library in the county as part of a tour to raise awareness about the impact of low literacy levels in adults and promote the stock and services available at libraries. Reflecting on her visits Liz said:

“Libraries are a key part of the community and do such important work and activities.”

The visits showcased the numerous opportunities Hertfordshire libraries offer residents for connection, with libraries hosting author events, demonstrating the use of the various creative technology available in our CreatorSpaces, alongside our core activities, such as Storytimes and LEGO clubs.

My Place to Connect characterises so much of the work of our staff and volunteers in their day-to-day delivery of library services and activities, as does the targeted work we do in specific libraries or with particular partners. Working alongside SPACE, an award-winning Hertfordshire based charity supporting families of children and young people who are neurodivergent, we have offered regular theatre shows for families. SPACE shared their thanks for:

‘creating such a warm, supportive and inclusive environment for our families. SPACE families are always welcome at libraries across Hertfordshire, you will always be greeted with a warm smile and friendly face!’



Left: Liz Green with author Ken Follet at Stevenage Library. Right: Liz Green visits the CreatorSpace at St Albans Library. Bottom: Liz Green at Tring Library.

Experience reading, art and culture

Our Arts Council England funded My Story: Artist in Residence programme has featured at five our libraries this year and has illuminated the transformative power of art within community spaces, with well over 100 people participating in an artistic event or workshop.

Artistic techniques have varied from watercolour to weaving, sketching to composite photography, and more. The residencies have seen collaborations with local organisations, including Open Art Box in Stevenage where those with early-stage dementia and their families expressed their memories of Stevenage as art, fostering understanding and storytelling within the community. The residencies have also offered accessible art opportunities to a range of audiences, including Watford Day Services.

Community connection has been at the heart of each residency and the artists and participants' work together has reaffirmed the vital role that art and culture play in building vibrant, connected communities.

“The artists were inspiring and made the art accessible. It was lovely to meet so many new people and see that libraries have so much to offer”.



Top: Artwork created and art in action at Hatfield Library. Middle: Watford Day Services visit Watford Library. Bottom: Katharine Harper, Artist in Residence at Stevenage Library.

Over **20,000** Hertfordshire children participated in 2023's national Summer Reading Challenge, *Ready, Set, Read!* The challenge, which celebrates reading for pleasure, saw **586,017** children's books borrowed. For National Poetry Day, we welcomed Simon Mole, poet and writer, for two online poetry events attended by over **3,000** children from schools across Hertfordshire.

In November, we launched Winter Reads, our first Hertfordshire Libraries' wide reading campaign for the winter months, featuring a range of reading related challenges for all ages. Over **3,800** Hertfordshire residents took part in the campaign which was created to be accessible to avid readers and new or reluctant readers alike, encouraging each participant to tailor the challenge to suit them.

2023 was also the first year of the My First Library Adventure promotion, designed to promote library membership as children transition to school and start on their learning to read journey. Two Hertfordshire schools enjoyed lively class visits with author/illustrator Alex Willmore.

Our libraries hosted a wide range of cultural activities throughout the year, from author evenings to poetry nights, performances featuring puppets to those featuring live music and dance. An attendee at a Sanskruti Dance performance of *Magical Honey* shared: '***Captivating, we loved the dance and the music, the children were mesmerised***'.



Top left: Sanskruti Dance performance. Top right: Sadia Azmat, author, at a Winter Reads event. Bottom left: Alex Willmore with a Hertfordshire Reception class for My First Library Adventure. Bottom right: Isabelle Schuler, author, at a Winter Reads event.

Improve health and wellbeing

During the Autumn and Winter months, we delivered six Slipper Swaps in partnership with Adult Care Services. This year, we gave out more pairs of slippers than ever before, with 536 pairs being gifted.

Each Slipper Swap aims to raise awareness on fall prevention and each event had an occupational therapist available to offer advice. In addition, the events provide an opportunity for attendees to access advice from a range of partner organisations, including NHS Social Prescribing Team, Age UK, Alzheimer's Society, and more.

A partner from Age UK Hoddesdon shared: ***“I had meaningful conversations with every person that approached the table. Attendees really seemed as if they benefitted from having the opportunity to speak to organisations and being in a secure, warm, and welcoming space of a library helps old and vulnerable people reach out for help and access services.”***

As well as gifting slippers, library staff responded to other needs by sharing library services which improve health and wellbeing, including assistive technology available on our public PCs for an attendee with a visual impairment, our Reminiscence collection for an attendee's friend with Dementia, and our Home Library Service, as well as introducing attendees to partners in attendance.

A slipper swap attendee shared: ***“This is a superb idea. I'm often slipping slightly so I'll be much safer. Thank you.”***



Slipper Swaps at Hemel Hempstead, Hatfield and Stevenage libraries.

Improve health and wellbeing

Alongside delivery of events in libraries which support health and wellbeing, our staff and volunteers are also busy working in partnership to improve health and wellbeing in the community.

Small Acts of Kindness, a Hertfordshire based charity whose aim is to reduce loneliness and isolation, produce 'Warm in Winter' bags, which Hertfordshire Libraries staff collect and distribute to those most in need. Each Warm in Winter gift bag contains essential items including: a fleece blanket, thermal gloves, hat and socks, a selection of hot drinks, soup and porridge as well as Small Acts of Kindness Purple Pages information pack with a wealth of literature from national, county and local organisations providing support, services and activities to help break the cycle of loneliness and isolation.

Library staff have visited the Ohana family group, the newly created HCC support and friendship group for care experienced young parents. Alongside promoting the library service and the benefits of sharing books with young children, we gifted special book packs from the charity BookTrust for the families to enjoy at home. Increasing access to books is just one way we improve the health and wellbeing of Hertfordshire residents; one mum shared: ***"Before he was given this book, he wasn't interested in me reading to him at all. This one appeals to him because it's interactive and there is lots to look at... It is helping with his talking and he has learnt lots of new words."***



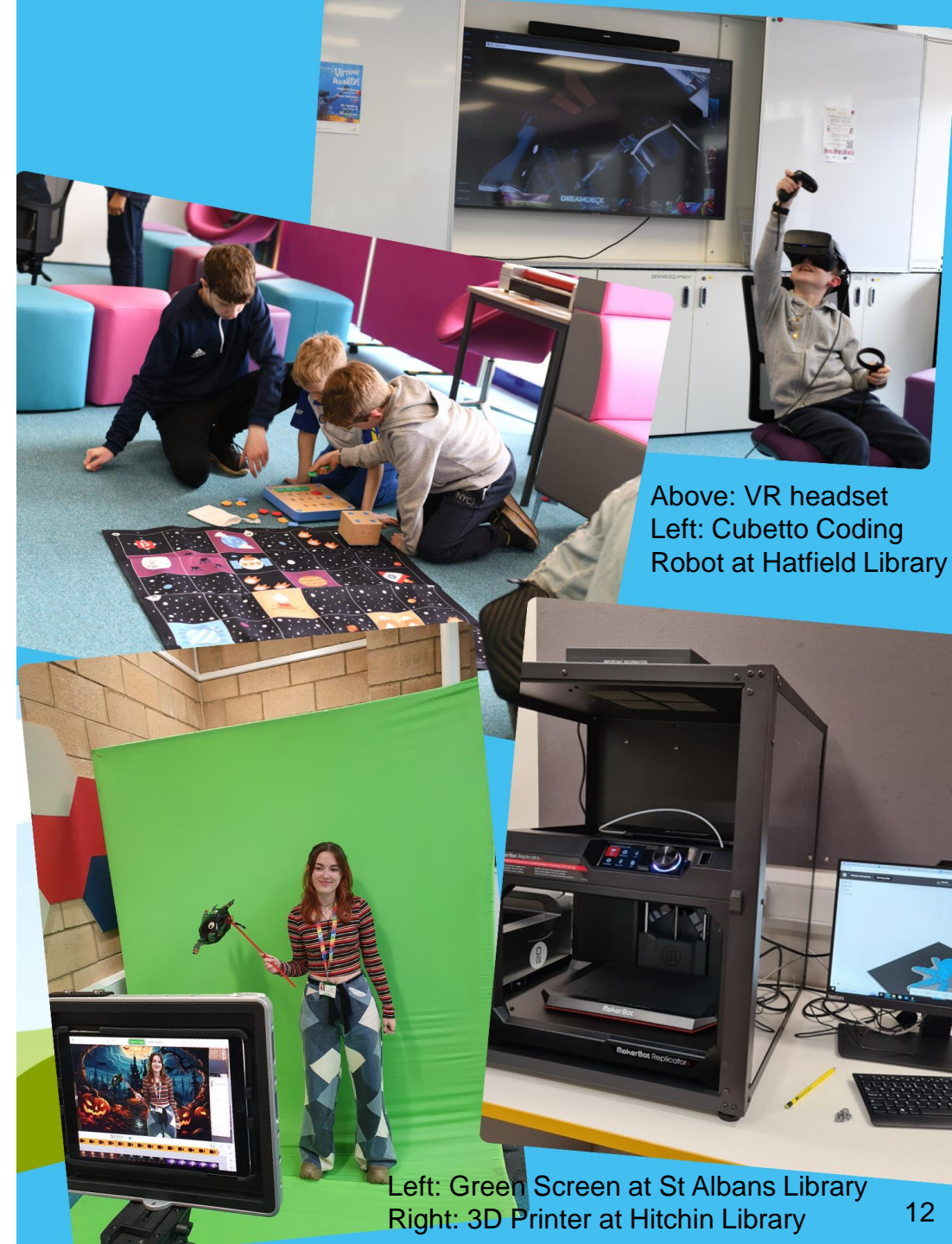
Explore innovative technology

Our six CreatorSpaces, which offer a space to be creative using digital technology, have been used in a variety of ways to engage Hertfordshire residents. Hemel Hempstead's and Watford's CreatorSpaces were used to great effect during the Artist in Residence programme, exploring art and creativity with use of the digital embroidery machines:

“Great room. Brilliant range of tools, equipment and materials”

The team at St Albans Library have been proactively supporting refugees and asylum seekers and ran a Young Film Makers Club for Ukrainian children using the CreatorSpace facilities. The film club enabled Ukrainian children to explore stop motion, green screen and foley effects, different camera techniques and editing. The children were able to make a range of their own stop-motion films using LEGO and mini figures, and they also made a thought-provoking arthouse-style documentary on the film club itself. The project brought the Ukrainian children's imaginations to life and demonstrates how the library has become a place of sanctuary for them.

The opportunity to engage with CreatorSpace technology has been extended around the county with 68 CreatorSpace Out of the Box workshops and drop-in events delivered across Hertfordshire libraries.



Above: VR headset
Left: Cubetto Coding
Robot at Hatfield Library

Left: Green Screen at St Albans Library
Right: 3D Printer at Hitchin Library

Explore innovative technology

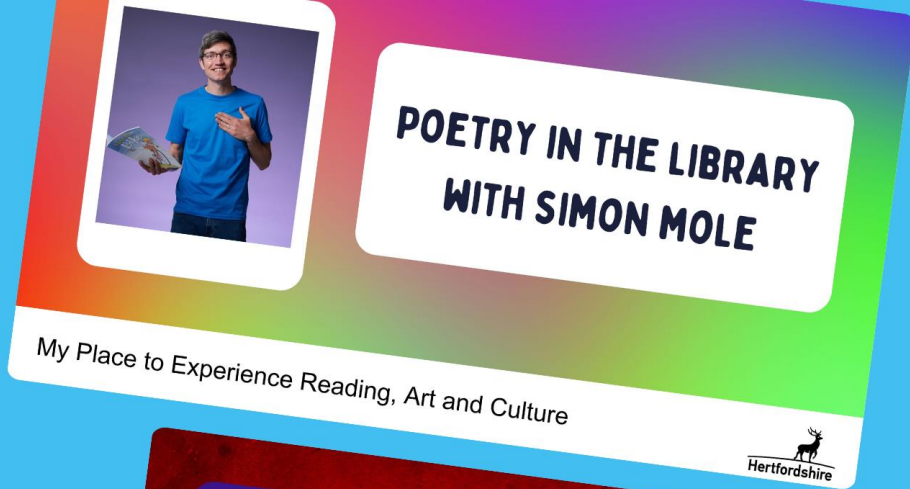
With funding from Arts Council England, through the LibraryOn grants programme, we were able to acquire quality digital kit to improve our online presence. Use of this technology has enabled and will enable us to develop a strong digital cultural offer, increasing access opportunities for those for whom visiting a public space is challenging and those for whom online engagement is a preference. Several of our cultural events over the past year have been captured to be enjoyed freely via our YouTube channel; scan the QR code to visit and enjoy author talks, artist tutorials, poetry and dance.



Sets of Hublets, tablets which provide library visitors with access to our e-services, the internet and email, games, and trusted information from the library, HCC and partners are now in place in 30 Hertfordshire libraries. Hublets have supported our digital inclusion agenda, enabling those without a device at home to explore technology for free. Usage of these devices, new to many of our libraries this year, has been high and the variety of feedback has been very positive:

“I like being able to read a digital newspaper in a comfortable seat by the window rather than at a PC”.

“When I’m doing my homework after school, I can use a Hublet for reference”.



YouTube
title slides

Discover information and learning

Hatfield, North Watford and Waltham Cross libraries have worked with Step2Skills to beat number anxiety and improve adult numeracy as part of the national Multiply programme. The libraries hosted a range of courses and engaged with visitors to signpost them towards numeracy support.

In partnership with The Institution of Engineering and Technology, libraries have delivered FIRST LEGO League Discover, an exciting 10-week STEM learning programme for Key Stage 1 children. 10 classes from schools in Hoddesdon, St Albans and Watford have been exploring how science, technology, engineering and maths are used in everyday life. The children attending have learnt about teamwork, communication, problem-solving and design skills, while having fun building with the fantastic DUPLO, donated by the LEGO Foundation.

Our libraries have provided learning opportunities for all ages over the past year and the national Green Libraries Week gave information and learning opportunities focused on sustainability. Libraries delivered a variety of activities, from nature walks to mindfulness talks, reuse and recycle workshops, seed swaps and green themed poetry events. Many events were delivered in partnership, including with HCC WasteAware colleagues, Citizens Advice and local sustainability groups.



Below: Seed Swap display at Buntingford Library.



Discover information and learning

Libraries play a crucial role in promoting digital inclusion throughout the year with over 250 Taster sessions delivered by library staff, which support individuals to increase their skills online: ***'I found my tutor to be professional, knowledgeable, courteous, personable, and articulate. A great person to have showing people steps to improve their knowledge and skills.'*** (Feedback from Borehamwood).

Libraries marked the national campaign, Get Online Week, by providing an array of events including Techy Tea Parties and Tea and Tablets sessions, offering a welcoming environment for people to learn about technology and develop IT confidence. Libraries partnered with local organisations, including Hertfordshire Police, to offer internet safety sessions and cyber-crime and fraud awareness events, which equipped attendees with the latest information and guidance for protecting themselves. As well as improving digital literacy, all these events also foster community cohesion.

Central to the digital support offered to Hertfordshire communities is our provision of public PCs; a library user wrote to tell us: ***"I have been homeless for two weeks...I wanted you to know what a difference you have made to my days. You have provided a warm safe place while I was solving problems. Your free internet connection has allowed me to keep working & your kindness has helped me get through one of the hardest times in my life."***



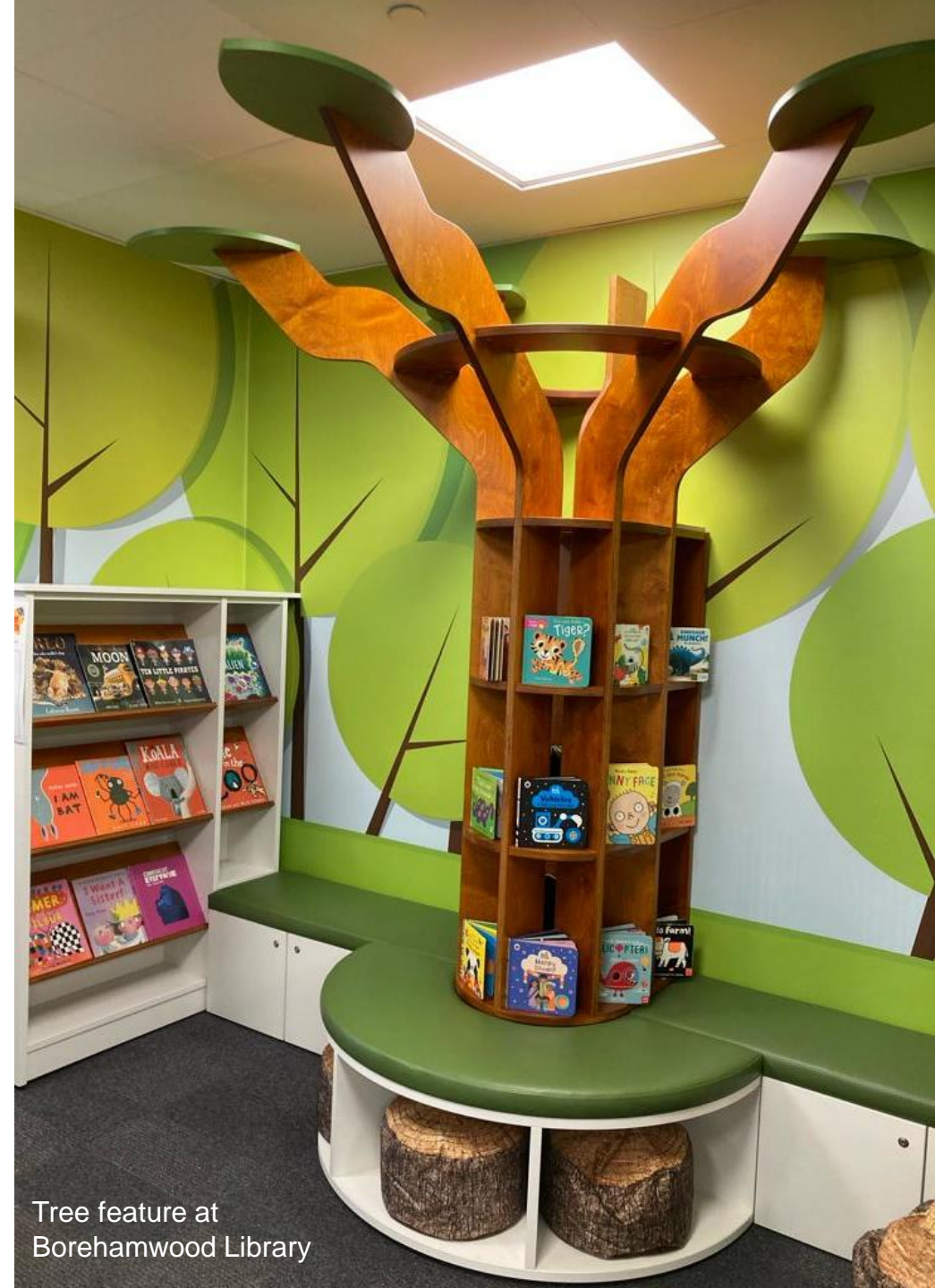
Improving library spaces

The start of this year saw the completion of a refurbishment to and re-opening of Buntingford Library, offering a reconfigured space to support the wide variety of use by the community, both in the public area and in the meeting room. Essential maintenance works and improvements to aid accessibility were part of the refurbishment which was received warmly by local residents: ***“I’m thrilled with the new library – it’s bright and airy, such a difference, super!”***

Responding to local need, Borehamwood Library’s children’s area was updated to offer increased seating alongside an attractive tree feature to showcase the latest additions to stock. There was also an increase to CreatorSpace Out of the Box kit to support the provision of digital activities.

Several improvements have been made across the county:

- The public meeting room at Bishop’s Stortford Library, enhancing the room hire offer.
- The young adult area at Bushey, responding to community need.
- Layout changes to the public IT area in Tring, alongside essential works.
- Increased capacity for children’s area and floorspace at Brookman's Park Library and London Colney Library, respectively.
- Improving the flexibility of our spaces with updates to shelving.



Tree feature at
Borehamwood Library

My Voice

People across Hertfordshire have contributed over 60,000 hours in volunteering to our libraries in the past year and part of this contribution has come from over 800 My Voice volunteers. My Voice is a project devised by Hertfordshire Libraries, funded by an Arts Council England grant, which puts youth voice at the heart of our services. My Voice has seen us work with a variety of Hertfordshire charities and organisations to engage young people aged 14-24 and provide them with meaningful volunteering opportunities.

My Voice has empowered young people to develop activities and clubs for their peers, including Manga-Anime workshops, revision sessions, book groups and Dungeons & Dragons clubs. The young people and young adults volunteering have had a positive impact on individual libraries; Maya, a volunteer at Welwyn Garden City library, shared:

“I’m gaining a lot of confidence, last week I read a book in Storytime for the first time, and it’s made me more confident talking in front of big groups of people. I like meeting new people and being more creative. I have created some really cool displays.”

The enthusiasm, skills, and ideas of volunteers like Maya have benefitted the public and enhanced our service.



Top: Maya, My Voice volunteer at Welwyn Garden City, alongside a display. Bottom: Young people attending My Voice drama workshop (left) and Manga-Anime workshop (right).



Awards

In October, we held our annual Inspiring Libraries Awards which celebrate our staff and volunteers. Librarians working on two projects, My Voice and My First, were also honoured at the inaugural HCC Resources awards in the categories of Championing Equality and Fairness and Most Innovative Project.

Two areas of our service were shortlisted for a national Libraries Connected award, which celebrate the achievements of people working in public libraries.

Our Early Years librarians were shortlisted in the Children's Promise category and were recognised for **“showing dedication and tireless effort in promoting the importance of library membership, the love of books and book sharing from the earliest age to families and wider Early Years partnerships across Hertfordshire.”**

The St Albans Library team were shortlisted in the Culture and Creativity category, which recognised their work as **“being highly proactive and working together with a can-do attitude to exploit to the full the resources in the library to support culture, creativity and wellbeing for all residents in the local community, including those at risk of being socially excluded.”** This included working with partners to create weekly creativity sessions for Ukrainian refugees and their hosts, including a special Young Film Makers Club for Ukrainian children.



Left: Paola Munns, Chair of Cuffley Community Library Volunteers, our Volunteer of the year. Right: Hannah Pegg and Margaret Street, two of our winners at the Resources Awards. Bottom: Winners of Inspiring Libraries Awards.

Partners



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healthier Hertfordshire