

Westmeath Libraries

Library Development Plan

2024-2028



Engaging Communities

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Foreword

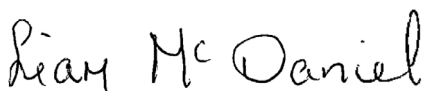
Libraries – engaging communities 2024-2028

Westmeath Libraries is a dynamic and central part of the community in Westmeath. Thanks to a sustained period of development and investment, we have a number of high-quality libraries that meet the needs and expectations of the community of users.

The Library Service is a focal point for the educational, cultural and community development of the County, continually adapting to ensure its relevance to users. This is a broad and challenging goal for all public libraries. An ongoing commitment to enhancing access and ensuring that the needs and expectations of users are met, remains at the heart of all planning for Westmeath Libraries.

This plan was developed following a review of our services and in response to public consultation. The result is a plan which puts community at the heart of the service with a focus on culture, creativity and collaboration.

Westmeath County Council is proud to support our Library Service in ensuring that Libraries assist individuals and groups in fulfilling their potential in contributing to the cultural, social and economic wellbeing of the County.



Cllr. Liam McDaniel
Cathaoirleach



Mr. Pat Gallagher
Chief Executive

“Libraries allow children to ask questions about the world and find the answers. And the wonderful thing is that once a child learns to use a library, the doors to learning are always open”

– Laura Bush



Executive Summary

Westmeath Libraries Development Plan 2024-2028 sets out the key objectives for the development of the library over the next five years. This plan ensures that our library service continues to support the population of Westmeath through the development of skilled, friendly and enthusiastic staff, and by providing welcoming spaces and responsive services for the community.

This five-year plan is underpinned by Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, the Westmeath Corporate Plan 2020-2024, and Westmeath's Local Economic and Community Plan, which sets out the objectives, targets and priorities for the service.

The plan is built on the principles of The Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration the National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027 and references a number of key policy documents, including Westmeath Culture and Creativity Strategy 2023-2027, Westmeath Age Friendly Strategy, and the Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2019-2024.



Mission, Vision and Values



Mission

To enrich the lives of everyone through equal access to high quality information and services.



Vision

A welcoming and progressive service supporting culture, recreation, knowledge and life skills.



Values

Welcoming, Trusted, Creative, Collaborative, Inspiring, Innovative.



Strategic Goal

Provide welcoming, dynamic and inclusive services for our communities that support creativity, culture and knowledge



Objectives

1. Encourage a culture of reading and lifelong learning
2. Develop and improve our services and infrastructure
3. Collaborate and build partnerships
4. Share the History and Culture of Westmeath
5. Support Sustainable Development and Climate Action
6. Develop the marketing and communication of our services



Actions

6 Key objectives and 36 actions are identified supporting our strategic goal

Profile of County Westmeath

Located in the heart of Ireland, County Westmeath covers an area of 1,756 square kilometers and is historically known as the ‘Lake County’, rich in arts, culture, heritage and natural amenities. There are two major urban centres in Westmeath, Athlone and Mullingar, as well as number of substantial towns and villages, including Castlepollard, Kilbeggan, Moate and Kinnegad.

Census 2022 show a population of 96,221 in Westmeath.

During the period 2011-2022 the two main towns, Athlone and Mullingar, experienced a population increase of 13.4% (20,153 to 22,869) and 12.7% (20,103 to 22,667) respectively.

Figures also show that the population is an aging one, with 14,369 (15%) aged 65 years and over. A fact that highlights the need to develop an age-friendly library service.



Population By Town

Town	Population
Athlone	22,869
Mullingar	22,677
Castlepollard	1,349
Moate	3,013
Kinnegad	3,064
Kilbeggan	1,199

Top 3 Non-Irish Nationalities in Westmeath



Westmeath Libraries

Westmeath Libraries is part of the Housing, Community Development, Culture including Library and the Arts, ICT, Corporate Performance & Development including HR Directorate in Westmeath County Council. The County Librarian reports to the Director, who in turn reports to the Chief Executive. The library reports to the Housing, Community, Corporate and Culture Strategic Policy Committee (SPC). This SPC meets four times a year and assists the Council in the formulation, development, monitoring and review of policy.

There are five full-time libraries in Westmeath: Athlone, Mullingar, Castlepollard, Moate and Kilbeggan.

The libraries are open 6 days per week, with at least one late night in all libraries, allowing for greater access by the community.

In 2022 Westmeath Libraries introduced the My Open Library (MOL) service to Castlepollard, Moate and Mullingar Libraries, allowing MOL members access to the library between 8am and 10pm, seven days a week, 365 days a year. This service will be expanded to include Athlone and Kilbeggan libraries in the future.

In recent years substantial work has been invested in renovations, including the new library in Moate, and the refurbishment of Castlepollard and Mullingar. Further upgrades are planned for Kilbeggan and Athlone and work is progressing on a new library in Kinnegad.



2022 At a Glance



210,203

Visits



33

Staff



5

Full time
libraries



256,785

Items borrowed-
online & physical



1,123

Events

Case Study: *Equality Diversity and Inclusion*

In 2021 with funding from the Dormant Accounts Fund Westmeath Libraries held a series of events aimed at celebrating the diversity of the county.

Working with a number of facilitators ten events were held with different community groups, such as schools, homework groups, active retirement groups and the National Learning Network.

The public events included two parenting talks, and an open creative writing workshop focusing on teenagers writing from diverse backgrounds.

275 people participated, and the feedback was very positive. Westmeath Libraries commissioned some short films to highlight different aspects of a selection of the workshops. The workshops showcased the diversity of the participants, as well as highlighting their creativity and personal views on inclusion and are available to watch online.



Feedback from participants in quotes
Celebration of Diversity event in Athlone

“ I liked that everyone had different imaginations ”

“ I will definitely use it [the library] in the future ”

“ I liked how we got to relax and listen to stories. I liked how we got to pick our own thing to paint ”

Case Study: *Libraries and Schools – A Christmas Carol in Covid Times*

Christmas in Westmeath Libraries is usually a busy time of the year, full of family events and school visits. Covid restrictions in 2021 meant we had to adapt our activities. In response to limits to capacity Mullingar Library decided to host a live online storytime of Charles Dicken’s classic *A Christmas Carol*.

Building on staff training, and investments in equipment, dedicated staff put together a slideshow to bring the story to life, complete with images, videos, festive tunes and even sound effects. Such was the demand that a second online event was held, with 15 classes in attendance.

Thanks to the magic of Zoom, this virtual experience allowed for lively interaction between the children and our enthusiastic library staff. It also served as a fantastic opportunity to showcase the plethora of Christmas-related activities we had in store. The feedback from both teachers and children was overwhelmingly positive.



Case Study: *Meet the author*

Through our programme of events Westmeath Libraries has hosted a wide variety of speakers and workshops. These have attracted a wide range of attendees, but we are also aware that not everyone interested can attend for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the time didn't suit, or there is a lack of available transport.

When we held an in-person "Meet the Author" event in Mullingar Library we were able to record an interview with the author, and then feature this in our monthly podcast. Investment in technology and staff training enabled us to capture a flavour of this event and highlight it to an audience who might otherwise have not had the opportunity to hear. Together with other podcast projects, such as our "Life Changes" podcast, Westmeath Libraries have been able to complement our existing programmes and services and share our stories, history, and news with a wider online audience.



Actions to Achieve each Objective

1. Encourage a culture of reading and lifelong learning

Literacy is the right of every member of our society, and the library has a central part to play in providing supports for all, no matter age, background, or current literacy level. Westmeath Libraries will support lifelong learning and literacy at all life stages in an inclusive and welcoming environment.

We will

1

encourage reading for pleasure, create inclusive communities of readers, ensure that all library users have easy access to book clubs, and support wellbeing through events, programming, and our collections.

2

deliver national programmes, such as Right to Read, Ireland Reads, Healthy Ireland and others supporting a culture of reading and literacy to all ages and abilities.

3

promote a STEAM programme of workshops and community events.

4

provide access to study spaces and resources to students, as well as meeting spaces to support collaborative learning opportunities.

5

continue to be a trusted source of information, encouraging digital literacy and the promotion of computer/information skills.

6

encourage and support the development of Skills for Life for all our communities.

Actions to Achieve each Objective

2. Develop our Services and Infrastructure

To ensure that all libraries are staffed with well trained, informed and customer focused staff, that all buildings are fit for purpose, and that the service keeps up with technological and social changes.

We will

7

ensure all libraries are maintained as safe, modern and accessible spaces. We will seek funding to upgrade and improve our library spaces, providing multi-purpose spaces for the community. We will carry out a feasibility study to explore the potential of extending the Aidan Heavy Library in Athlone.

8

continue to offer modern and relevant services. Recognising the importance of public access to digital services and skills development we will work to overcome barriers to access, and provide staff training in the use of innovative technologies.

9

implement new technologies such as My Open Library, 3D Printing, and Virtual Reality, as well as building on existing initiatives to achieve greater access for all.

10

develop our collections, both physical and online to ensure they remain up-to-date and relevant in line with national policies. We will increase the availability of material in the Irish language.

11

avail of funding and opportunities to enable new projects, events, and programming

12

enable staff to avail of all relevant training, and empower them to develop their roles and library services to best meet the needs of library users.

13

ensure that we have the staffing levels needed to deliver our services. Workforce plans will be monitored and mapped against requirements.

Actions to Achieve each Objective

3. Collaboration and Partnership

Westmeath Libraries is a visible and trusted part of the community. Through partnerships we will reach new and existing audiences, develop programmes and share our resources.

We will

14

work with Arts and Heritage to promote our digital presence, including our new website www.westmeathculture.ie

15

collaborate with national and local organisations, as well as with County Council sections to identify new opportunities to deliver quality services, and ensure that the role of the library is incorporated into the Local Economic and Community Plans.

16

continue to organise events and workshops that support communities ensuring that our libraries are welcoming spaces for all.

17

create a culture of welcome and inclusion by becoming a Library of Sanctuary.

18

develop initiatives under the Alternative Collaborative Approach with Longford Libraries.

19

reach out to local groups and schools to develop our role at in the community, building on programmes such as our Age Friendly Libraries.

Actions to Achieve each Objective

4. Promote the History and Culture of Westmeath

The Library plays a central role in remembering and preserving the county's history and sense of place, as well as promoting and developing the culture of Westmeath.

We will

20

collaborate with Arts & Heritage to host exhibitions and events.

21

collect and share the history and stories of Westmeath through community projects, including Oral History and Digitisation.

22

work to capture events/exhibitions in digital formats, where appropriate, to highlight and share the history and cultural memory of Westmeath.

23

digitise primary source material from our archival collections and make this available to the public.

24

continue to invest in resources that support the history and culture of Westmeath, including unique archival materials.

25

Celebrate national festivals such as Cruinniú na nÓg, Seachtain na Gaeilge, Bealtaine, Heritage Week and others by hosting events and exhibitions that promote our culture and heritage.

Actions to Achieve each Objective

5. Support Sustainable Development and Climate Action

Westmeath Libraries are engaged in raising awareness of Climate Change and the development of responses needed by society. We will aim to be more environmentally aware.

We will

26

raise awareness of Climate Change and Sustainable Living, both by providing relevant information, resources and by hosting events.

27

endeavour to minimise the impact on the environment where possible from all our activities.

28

actively encourage waste prevention through education and provision of separated waste facilities, and through provision of water refill stations.

29

be as environmentally friendly and energy efficient as possible in line with the Local Authority Climate Action Plan's energy efficiency and sustainability targets.

30

encourage a culture of re-use through the development of a Library of Things.

Actions to Achieve each Objective

6. Marketing & Communication

Effectively marketing Westmeath Libraries is vital to ensure we keep our existing users as well as reaching out to potential users. Communicating effectively about our resources and services will lead to increased usage and membership.

We will

31

engage with the public through different formats and channels, such as our website, social media, podcasts, newsletters, in-branch displays and local press.

32

develop a promotional marketing campaign focusing on increasing our membership and use of the library service.

33

Use all relevant forms of communications, from social media to word of mouth and physical formats to promote Westmeath Libraries.

34

engage with teenagers and young people to create more relevant services and resources.

35

utilise user-centred design approaches to work with national initiatives and organisations to attract the attention of different user groups.

36

encourage staff to develop their knowledge and expertise in marketing and communications through training and support.

Case Study: *Literacy access that spans the community*

The My Little Library Book Bag initiative is a collaboration between libraries, the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as part of the First 5 Strategy. The initiative has placed books into the hands of 1000s of children in Westmeath and has helped the library service reach children through partnerships with local Early Learning Centres, Westmeath Community Development's Empowering Communities Programme at Dalton Park, Mullingar, Westmeath County Childcare's National Childcare Scheme.

The library service strives to give access to books and help build confidence in reading to all families. As part of these efforts, a Reading to your Baby guide was developed. The guide was launched, with our partners, as part of our very successful Baby Book Club. Westmeath Library Service looks forward to developing these valuable partnerships further through a shared goal of providing access to books, literacy tools and literacy supports from birth onwards. You are never too young to read!



Case Study: *Health and Wellbeing*

As active participants in The Healthy Ireland at your Library Initiative (HIAYL) Westmeath Libraries support the health and well-being of our community through our resources and events. We have been very fortunate to provide events such as talks by Dr Mary O’Kane, Dietitian Aoife McDonald, Cybersafety Ireland, and various Physiotherapists.

In celebration of Bealtaine, Chair Yoga for Seniors was a four-week course delivered in Moate Library by Yoga Instructor Niamh Doyle.

This was a very successful HIAYL event with a full class of nine people attending all four sessions and many requesting more classes for similar events.



“Very relaxing class ... very welcoming and nice. Would like to continue going forward.”

“You walk out feeling so well and more flexible. It’s been a wonderful experience.”

“I have so enjoyed the class and I know it really helped my balance. Hope they can continue.”

“Very good, good teacher. Lovely room and good helpful instructions.”

Case Study: *My Open Library*



“A wonderful resource to help me with my historical research at a time that suits me.”

“I love the early morning hours so that I can collect my requested books before I go to work.”

“It’s great to now have a time that suits me to bring my kids to the library (from a parent who works shift pattern).”

“Castlepollard Library reports that many Ukrainian people living in the area use MOL regularly visiting at weekends for study, working online, using printing facilities, using Wi-Fi to contact loved ones in Ukraine.”

In July 2022 Westmeath Libraries launched the My Open Library (MOL) service in Castlepollard and Moate libraries. This service allows library members to register for MOL and then use the library during unstaffed hours, 365 days a year between 8 am and 10pm. In November 2022 we extended the service to Mullingar Library.

MOL brought with it a number of challenges to the library service as it requires substantial staff time, both to induct new MOL members and to monitor usage and ensure all Health and Safety protocols and regulations are being followed.

While initially there was some apprehension around the MOL service feedback since the service launched has been overwhelmingly positive from library staff. They have learned new skills, and have had to deal with additional demands, but the freedom and flexibility the service offers to our library users means it is worth it.

MOL increases the hours the library is available to shift-workers, families, students and older people, and helps us reduce barriers to access. In early 2023 we celebrated the sign-up of our one thousandth MOL member. And at the end of August 2023 we had recorded 14,378 MOL visits and a membership of 1,445.

Plans are being prepared to extend the MOL service to the new library in Kinnegad, as well as to Athlone and Kilbeggan libraries in the future.

Case Study: **A new Library for Kinnegad**

Westmeath County Council in partnership with Longford Westmeath ETB have secured funding for a new Kinnegad Community Library and Education and Training Centre. This is a core part of the regeneration of the town. This will provide the community with enhanced services supporting recreation and learning. The contract to restore and extend the Old School House in Kinnegad was awarded in February 2023. When open, the new Community Library will offer the My Open Library service and provide a range of facilities including study, meeting rooms, sensory features and more.



Implementation and Monitoring

The Library Development Plan reflects the priorities and strategies of Westmeath Libraries over the next five years.

The plan will be regularly reviewed and monitored, in order to ensure it meets the needs of our changing communities. The plan will be informed by Westmeath County Council's Corporate Plan, Westmeath County Development Plan 2021-2027, and other relevant local and national policies including the national public library strategy.

Effective communication with our community through partnerships and collaboration will ensure a rapid response to changing needs. Ongoing evaluation of our services, events and programmes will inform the development of the service.

Staff feedback will be encouraged through regular team meetings at all levels with staff performance and expertise enhanced through training and continuous performance development.

Westmeath Libraries participation and engagement in national initiatives will ensure that we are achieving our goals.

Westmeath Libraries will report on the progress and implementation of the plan to the Housing, Community, Corporate and Culture Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) and Westmeath County Council.

Appendix 1: **Finances**



Financial Streams



**An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail**
Department of Rural and
Community Development



Clár Éire Ildánach
Creative Ireland
Programme
2017–2022



WESTMEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Comhairle Chontae na hIarmhí

DRCD Funding

Through funding such as Dormant Accounts Fund the Department of Rural and Community Development has supported Westmeath Libraries' projects and infrastructure in reaching out to marginalised, socially excluded and disadvantaged communities.

Healthy Ireland at Your Library

LGMA led nationwide plan has enhanced health and wellbeing book collections (digital and hardcopy), and provided for staff training, events, and promotion through Healthy Ireland at Your Library.

Creative Ireland

Creative Ireland funding supports funding to deliver local programmes and projects.

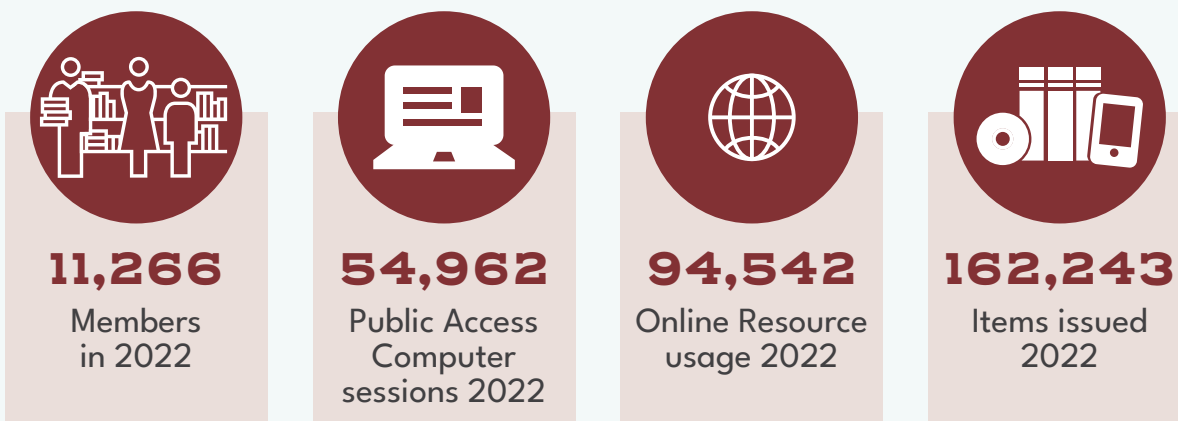
Westmeath County Council

Annual budget is approved by the members of Westmeath County Council, for the running of the library service.

Westmeath Libraries Budget 2019-22

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total Operational Expenditure	€2,620,709.01	€2,507,803.17	€2,510,878.47	€2,876,407.82
Book Expenditure	€99,915.68	€98,168	€101,218.76	€103,738.83
Cost per capita of operating a Library Service	€29.52	€28.25	€28.29	€30.01

Appendix 2: **Library members & usage**



Online Presence

www.westmeathculture.ie

www.facebook.com/westmeathlibraries

www.twitter.com/whcclibrary

www.instagram.com/westmeathlibraries

www.tiktok.com/@westmeathculture

<https://westmeathculture.ie/library/listen/>

Appendix 3: **PESTLE and SWOT Analyses**

POLITICAL



- **National Plans such as**
 - o The Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration: National Public Library strategy 2023-2027
 - o Project Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework
 - o Harnessing Digital: the Digital Ireland Framework
 - o National Disability Inclusion strategy 2017-2021
 - o Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 (currently being reviewed)
 - o National Positive Ageing Strategy
- **County Plans**
 - o Westmeath County Development Plan
 - o Westmeath Local Economic and Community Plan 2016–2021
 - o County Westmeath Heritage Plan 2018-2023
 - o Westmeath Corporate Plan 2020-2024
 - o Irish Language Scheme 2016-2019
 - o Westmeath Culture and Creativity Strategy 2023-2027
 - o Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2019-2024
- **Public Library standards & benchmarks**

ECONOMIC



- Adequate funding for Local Government
- Capital project funding
- National Tendering Systems to ensure value for money
- Increased maintenance costs

SOCIAL



- The role of the library in social inclusion
- Libraries as a community hub
- Collaborations with wide range of stakeholders, delivering programmes, supporting and encouraging social inclusion
- Digital Literacy issues
- Rural areas with specific issues such as isolation or lack of broadband
- Supporting working people and commuters through opening hours - My Open Library
- Provision of free educational, cultural, informative, and engaging opportunities for all
- Older age populations
- Role of libraries in meeting Sustainable Development Goals

Appendix 3: **PESTLE and SWOT Analyses**

TECHNOLOGICAL



- Changes and developments in technology require investment in money and time
- Social Media offers a responsive and immediate way to communicate and respond to people
- Access for all to technology
- Possibilities of digitisation for local studies material to share to a wider audience
- Blended opportunities in the future, allowing libraries to combine live events with the wider reach of online

LEGAL



- Public Procurement and EU Legislation
- Children First: National Guidance for the Protection & Welfare of Children (DCYA)
- Local Government Acts
- GDPR and Freedom of Information legislation
- Official Languages Act 2003
- Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021
- Public Sector Pay Agreement
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 (as amended)

Reporting and regulation requirements; Health and Safety, GDPR, insurance, child protection and risk assessment.

ENVIRONMENTAL



- Westmeath County Council Climate Change Adaptation Strategy 2019-2024
- National and international strategies and targets for energy efficiency and climate action
- Role of libraries in promoting sustainability, climate action, and environmental awareness
- Impact of new developments

Appendix 3: **PESTLE and SWOT Analyses**



STRENGTHS

- Our workforce is creative, flexible, responsive, and dedicated
- Excellent customer service
- No fines or membership fees
- My Open Library service in Castlepollard, Moate and Mullingar
- Free WiFi in all library branches
- Extended opening hours in all five libraries
- Diverse range of events throughout the year
- New website
- Good social media presence
- Online resources
- National requests and distribution service is highly valued
- Development of meeting room spaces in libraries allowing for greater use



WEAKNESSES

- More advertising/promotion needed
- Difficult to engage with non-users
- Some buildings need upgrading
- Reaching teenagers



OPPORTUNITIES

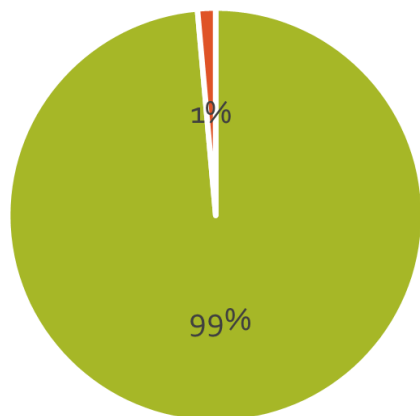
- Combination of in-person and online events allows for greater number of attendees
- Embrace the change that technology brings
- My Open Library
- Build relationships with local organisations to develop new services
- Local Studies expertise
- Potential to develop Maker Spaces
- New website



THREATS

- Public perception of the library
- Lack of physical space
- Possibility of reductions in budgets/funding
- Digital exclusion
- Protesters and Anti-Social behaviour

Appendix 4: Consultation



■ Member ■ Non-Member

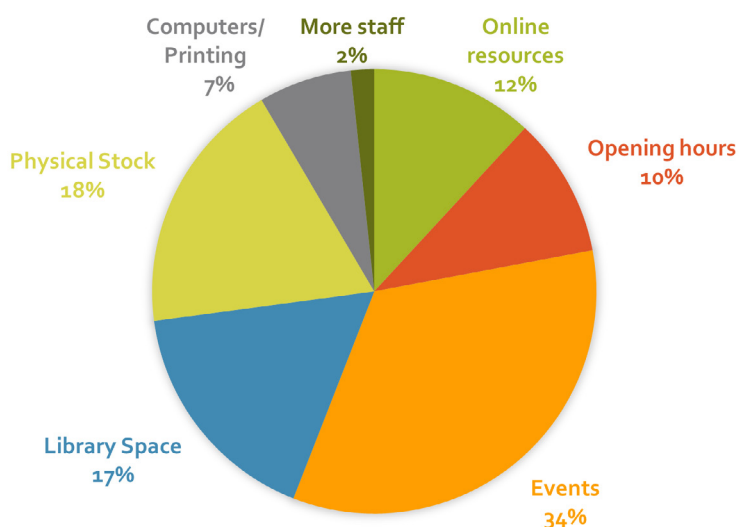
Hardcopy and Online Surveys were made available to allow the public to have their say on Westmeath Libraries.

Overall the majority of respondents were very positive and favourable, with particular mention made of the helpful staff. A large number of comments mentioned the importance of physical books, and were delighted with the national requests/distribution system.

The majority of those who responded were members of the library

70 were members

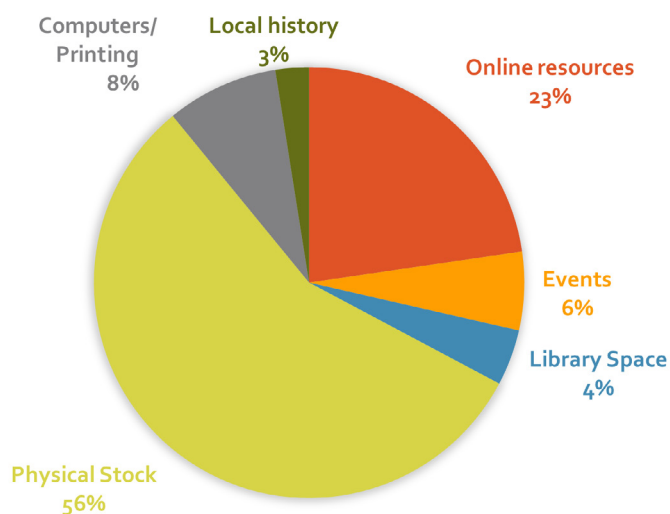
1 was a non-member



Additional Services

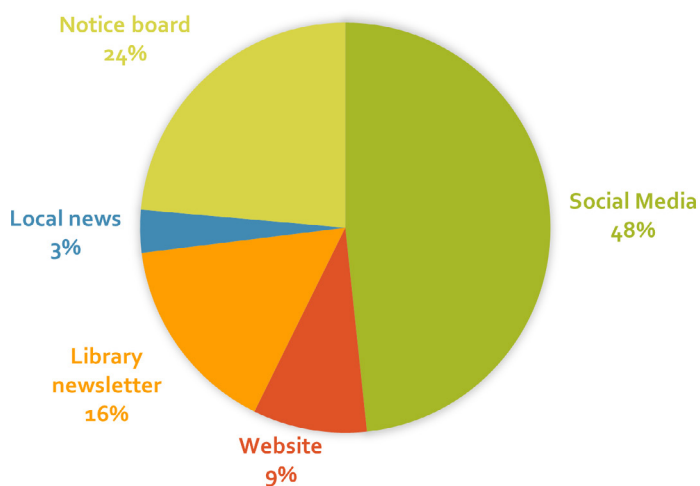
When asked about additional services the majority of people want more events, with over 34% making this request. This was followed by responses about increasing physical stock.

Appendix 4: Consultation



Services currently used

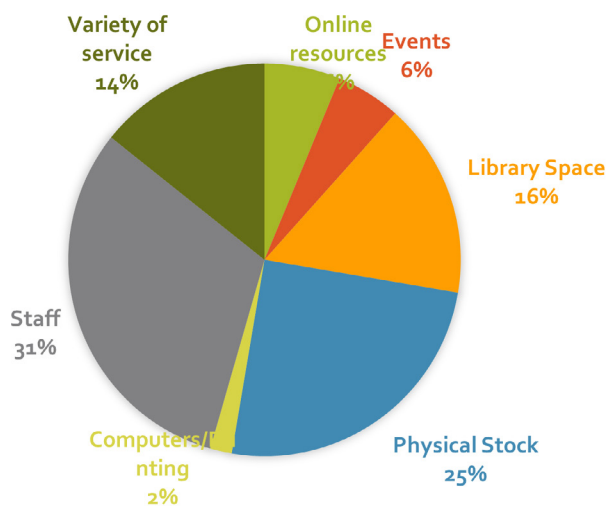
The majority of people currently using the library do so in order to borrow physical stock, books, DVDs etc, with over 50% indicating this was a service they currently used.



Keeping up to date with library news

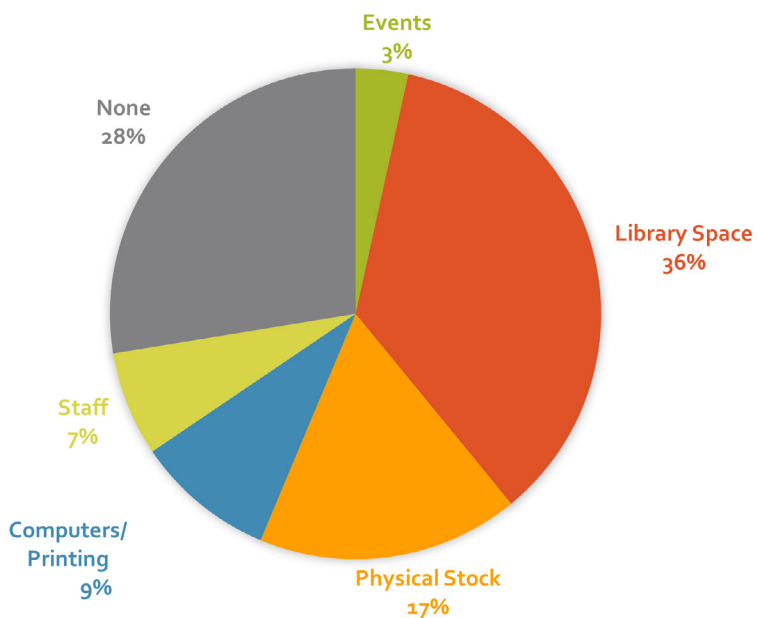
Most people find out about library news and events through social media, with almost half the responses. Notice boards and posters in the library featured in almost a quarter of responses.

Appendix 4: Consultation



What do you love about your library service

The importance of library staff is highlighted when looking at the number of responses mentioning that they love the staff, at 31%, followed with the physical stock at 25%



Improvements to library facilities

Some suggestions for improvements to the layout included more study spaces, and highlighting of staff recommendations. However, over a quarter of those who responded wanted no changes made – 28%

Appendix 4: Consultation



What people think about Westmeath Libraries

Appendix 5: **Public Sector Duty**

Westmeath Libraries recognise our responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by our policies and plans. This is a legal obligation, called the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, and it originated in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014.

We recognise that human rights are the basic universal rights that apply to everyone regardless of race, sex, nationality or any other status. They include civil and political rights like the right to life or the right to a fair trial, and economic and social rights, like the right to work and the right to education. Westmeath Libraries will, in the performance of our functions, have regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination
- Promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services
- Protect the human rights of its members

Vision for the future

“I love the library here and have used its services for the past 3 score years and ten and will continue to do so”

– comment from a library user

