

# **The National Library Card**

**A Birthright to Library Membership**

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## A World of Books and Beyond

In our Arts for Us All<sup>1</sup> pamphlet we called for a universally applied library card, issued at birth to every British citizen. Our expanded proposal for the 'National Library Card' aims to make public library membership a universal right, embedding library engagement from the earliest stages of life, through school and beyond, fostering a culture of reading, learning and enrichment that supports individual development and social cohesion, while also alleviating pressure on other public services.

While rooted in libraries and cultural access, the National Library Card is equally an early years intervention, aligned with the Department for Education's leadership in child development outcomes and the Opportunity Mission. Fundamentally, it aims to establish a deeper relationship between citizens and their local library network from birth onwards.<sup>2</sup>

Robust international and UK-based evidence<sup>3 4</sup> demonstrates the profound benefits of library access in early childhood and throughout school years. Libraries are proven to boost early literacy and school readiness for learning. In the United States, the Growing Young Minds report found that public libraries are "critical partners in the national early learning infrastructure," especially for children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. The report highlighted that libraries provide "brain-building activities that engage parents and caregivers from birth," supporting cognitive and social development.<sup>5</sup> These findings are echoed across UK initiatives including Bookstart and Early Words Together, which consistently link early library use to vocabulary growth and narrative skills in supporting literacy. Early exposure to books also strongly boosts later literacy: one study found that adolescents with a home library (about 80 books) had literacy levels comparable to university.<sup>6</sup> Embedding library engagement from birth, therefore, is not merely a worthy ambition – it is a strategic intervention with measurable developmental outcomes.

By explicitly linking to the Government's early years strategy, Giving every

child the best start in life, the National Library Card can be positioned as a joint DfE/DCMS initiative. At the heart of this strategy is the target that 75% of children should achieve a “good level of development” by age five in 2028. The National Library Card directly contributes to this ambition by enriching the Home Learning Environment – the recognised determinant of early outcomes – and ensuring that every family has the tools to build early language and cognitive skills.

## The Problem

Too many families, children and young people are missing out on the proven benefits of libraries because they are not automatically engaged or supported to use them. This lack of connection contributes to weaker early literacy, lower school readiness and reduced access to vital community and digital resources. These are problems which carry long-term social and economic costs. The National Library Card addresses this gap by making library membership universal from birth and embedding sustained engagement through trusted practitioners.

Previous pilot schemes have demonstrated the potential of such initiatives but also highlighted the need for such sustained engagement beyond the initial provision of a library card. Integrating the National Library Card with early years practitioners, such as midwives and nursery workers – and later, schoolteachers – is essential to establish habitual library use. The National Library Card – a lifelong membership scheme – is intended to normalise public library use as part of everyday life, not merely to hand out a card. This is particularly important for families unfamiliar with library services.

## Background

Libraries are still statutory services in the UK, offering free access to books, digital resources and community programmes. Despite their value, many libraries have suffered from significant funding cuts, leading to reduced hours

and limited outreach capabilities. Yet research indicates that early exposure to reading, and library services positively impacts literacy, educational attainment and social mobility.<sup>7</sup> This initiative is part of reaffirming libraries' vital role in the life of every citizen.

## The Evolving Role of Britain's Libraries

British libraries have undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, adapting to the evolving needs of their communities while leveraging advancements in technology and education. Across the country, libraries have modernised their services, enhanced accessibility, and fostered a culture of lifelong learning and literacy. The integration of digital resources and technology — from e-books and online databases to access to digital archives — has expanded their reach while building on libraries' historic mission to democratise knowledge.

There are numerous success stories that illustrate this renewal. Oxford's Westgate Library, for example, has become one of the country's most effective business and intellectual property centres, while Suffolk's libraries have pioneered new models of community health and wellbeing support. Partnerships with organisations such as The Reading Agency have also placed reading for pleasure at the heart of modern library use: in 2023, over 700,000 children took part in its Summer Reading Challenge, including more than 48,000 early years participants.

At a local level, libraries have shown profound creativity in reimagining their role — from Leeds' playboxes for infants, which build literacy and numeracy skills, to St Helens' year-long partnership with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra supporting perinatal wellbeing. This quiet innovation demonstrates how libraries continue to evolve as vital civic and educational spaces. Their core purpose — lending books, improving literacy, and providing inclusive spaces for study, connection and discovery — remains constant, but their reach and relevance have grown. It is on this living foundation that the National Library Card seeks to build.

## Foundations of the National Library Card

Our aim is to establish a universally-applied library card – that is, lifelong library membership – for everyone, beginning at birth, to promote equitable access to knowledge, and cultural/digital/community resources. Every newborn and child raised in the UK would receive a 'National Library Card', ensuring that all families (including those who immigrate to the UK) benefit equally. We envisage the key components of this policy being:

**Automatic Issuance:** Integrate the National Library Card with the birth registration process, ensuring every newborn receives a library card to their local library without requiring separate application procedures. Some councils (e.g. Northamptonshire) have already piloted automatic library card issuance at birth.<sup>8</sup> In such models, registrars provide the family with the card during the appointment, minimising extra paperwork. Parents then activate the card at the library. This process requires coordination and incentivisation, but such schemes show it can be done. Registrars would need brief training, and local registrars would be supported by the scheme (e.g. through dedicated staff or simple IT integration). This would address any registrar workload concern.

**Practitioner Engagement:** Train and involve midwives, health visitors and nursery staff to introduce families to library services. This should not only highlight the benefits of early literacy, but also the value of early years community support for parents and carers as well as access to digital resources. Libraries can be a trusted space that connects families with others, builds local networks and strengthens community bonds from the earliest months of a child's life. This intergenerational involvement – e.g. grandparents attending rhyme time, parents learning alongside children, parenting support materials – enhances the social fabric of local communities and tackles feelings of isolation.

**Resource Provision:** Building on the BookStart programme, provide families with starter packs, including age-appropriate books and information on local library programmes to encourage initial engagement.

Ongoing Support: Signpost follow-up initiatives such as library-hosted events for young children and parents but also ensure access to broader resources. For many parents juggling work and home responsibilities, libraries are a lifeline – offering information, free internet access, and digital literacy support. Positioning the 'National Library Card' as a gateway to these wider services reinforces its role as a support mechanism for families, not just a reading initiative.

Ongoing Evaluation: Work with librarians, library staff and early years stakeholders to centralise the aspiration to establish metrics that go beyond literacy. Evaluation should also consider indicators of community engagement, service uptake and social connectedness. Libraries must be seen – and measured – as inclusive community spaces where everyone can find something of value. That inclusive ethos is what will help to embed the National Library Card as an integral part of civic life.

Early Years Foundation: Crucially, the National Library Card is not only a cultural entitlement but a practical instrument for achieving improved early years outcomes. Evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)<sup>9</sup> and Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE)<sup>10</sup> longitudinal studies highlight the importance of a stimulating Home Learning Environment in promoting later educational attainment. Activities such as shared reading and visiting the library were found to contribute positively to early cognitive and social development. By embedding library membership from birth, the scheme offers the Department for Education a highly cost-efficient way to strengthen the Home Learning Environment and sustain progress towards the national early years development target.

To ensure families take up the card, the programme would include follow-up activities within the first few months (e.g. inviting them to a welcome session at the library). This hands-on approach helps families sign up and benefit from library programmes.

## A New Start for Sure Start

Introduced in 1998 by the Labour government, the Sure Start programme was a flagship early years policy designed to improve outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas by providing integrated services including childcare, early education, health support and parental guidance. At its peak, Sure Start supported over 3,600 centres across the UK and was widely credited with bringing early years services under one roof, reducing inequalities and strengthening community networks. However, following a decade of austerity, Sure Start faced severe funding cuts and centre closures. By 2019, over 1,300 centres had been lost, and many remaining services were scaled back or absorbed into the broader 'Family Hub' programme that replaced them. This retrenchment left a significant gap in the early years support landscape, particularly for low-income families.

Despite their own resource pressures, libraries have further helped to fill this void. Across the country, public libraries have quietly taken on aspects of the Sure Start mission – running baby rhyme times, stay-and-play sessions, breastfeeding groups and story hours that not only support literacy but also offer informal parental support and social connection. However, libraries have done this while facing their own cuts: between 2009/10 and 2019/20, local government spending on public library services in England fell by over 33% in real terms, with over 800 library branches closing and many others reducing staff, opening hours and outreach capacity. This decline outpaced cuts to other cultural services and significantly weakened libraries' ability to deliver early years programming.<sup>11</sup>

A universal policy such as the National Library Card has the potential to restore some of the ambitions of Sure Start and the expansion of Family Hubs by embedding libraries more formally into the early years system. Like these schemes, the National Library Card focuses on early intervention, universal access and trusted relationships with practitioners to build healthy foundations for life. As with the reinvigorated family hubs, it can mirror and modernise several of Sure Start's key benefits:



Improved educational outcomes: Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)<sup>12</sup> found that children with access to Sure Start centres performed better in language and mathematics, with particularly large gains for children from minority ethnic backgrounds and low-income families – equivalent to nearly two GCSE grades by Key Stage 4.

Better health and development: Sure Start contributed to reduced hospitalisations for older children, lower obesity levels, fewer accidental injuries and increased rates of breastfeeding and oral hygiene.

Support for children with additional needs: The programme helped reduce the likelihood of children being identified with special educational needs, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Parental support and community engagement: Sure Start acted as a gateway to wider services, supporting maternal mental health and parenting confidence while strengthening social networks.

The National Library Card can help pick up some areas where Sure Start left off – particularly through its emphasis on engaging midwives, health visitors and nursery staff. By embedding library access in the earliest touchpoints with families and following up with practitioner-led encouragement, the scheme offers a scalable way to reconnect families with enriching, universal support. As libraries increasingly serve as cultural and community hubs, the National Library Card helps to formalise their role in early years provision – not by replicating Sure Start, but by reviving its spirit through the family hub infrastructure and services that remain.

In doing so, the National Library Card becomes not just a policy for reading and enrichment, but a broader tool for lifelong learning and community renewal, rooted in civic life and delivered locally.

Positioning the National Library Card within the framework of "Giving every child the best start in life" ensures it is not seen solely as a library policy, but as a cornerstone of the government's early years strategy. By integrating the Family Hubs and the Start for Life services, the National Library Card helps

government deliver on its Opportunity Mission while restoring the ambition of Sure Start in a modern, sustainable form.

## Integrating with Existing Schemes and Services

It is important to situate the National Library Card within the current early years landscape, which still retains some elements of Sure Start's legacy, albeit in fragmented form. While many Sure Start centres have closed, several local authorities have repurposed them into Family Hubs, first piloted through the Start for Life programme. In July 2025, the government confirmed a major expansion of the policy, announcing that Family Hubs will now support an additional 500,000 children annually — part of a broader effort to revive early intervention and improve access to integrated family services.<sup>13</sup> As of mid-2025, there are an estimated 2,100 family hubs and children's centres across England, with an average annual spend of £275,000 per hub — just over half of the average spend per centre under Sure Start. These hubs act as local one-stop access points for parenting support, speech and language services, and early years development, serving children and families from conception to age 19 (or 25 for those with SEND).

Crucially, libraries are increasingly being recognised as essential delivery partners within this system. For example, Dorset Council has designated all its libraries as family hub access points, with Dorchester Library now co-located with a full-service Family Hub. Library staff there are trained to guide parents towards early help services and deliver programmes such as Bookstart and Healthy Start. Similarly, Wakefield has piloted joint library–family hub Storytime sessions at hub sites, increasing family engagement and subsequent use of local libraries. Integrating library enrolment into family hub workflows (e.g. postnatal sessions, weaning workshops, stay-and-play groups) and training hub staff to promote the National Library Card would ensure the scheme reaches the families who need it most — including those who might otherwise never visit a library.

BookTrust's laudable Bookstart initiative, launched in 1992, distributes free book packs to over 90% of newborn babies and more than 400,000 toddlers and preschoolers in England and Wales each year. However, some families are still missed — often those least connected to early years or health services. A 2022 evaluation by BookTrust noted that families in temporary housing, recent migrants, or those disengaged from health visitors were more likely not to receive the packs. These gaps highlight the need for a complementary, universal system such as the National Library Card, which uses automatic library enrolment at birth to reach all families — not just those already engaged.<sup>14</sup> While its packs are primarily delivered through health visitors and early years practitioners, Bookstart's scheme does not involve formal library membership or a structured, ongoing relationship with library services. An existing and successful model for how sustained use can be achieved, using a card as a vehicle for activation, is provided by initiatives such as The Reading Agency's 'Summer Reading Challenge', along with associated data and evidence.

The National Library Card builds on these foundations by formalising access to library infrastructure. The scheme seeks not to duplicate but to connect and extend existing early years literacy efforts with a clearer national and local government framework and local practitioner delivery.

## Lessons from the Pilot Schemes

Several pilot projects across the UK have tested the concept of automatic library membership for children. These schemes provided valuable insights into both the potential of universal library access and the structural limitations that need to be addressed if such policies are to succeed at scale.

## ACE Pilots

In 2012, Arts Council England funded 22 pilot projects across a diverse but self-selecting group of local authorities.<sup>15</sup> These pilots partnered with a range

of local actors, including birth registrars, children's centres and schools, to offer library cards to children either at birth, when starting school, or at other key life stages. While the selection included rural, urban and coastal areas, the participants were largely councils with an existing interest in library innovation. This may have contributed to stronger short-term uptake but also exposed delivery challenges: follow-up capacity was inconsistent, with some authorities struggling to maintain staff engagement after pilot funding ended. The final evaluation, published in 2014, found that simply providing a card was not enough. As the final evaluation put it, "cards in themselves have almost no impact on library use and should only be considered a first step".<sup>16</sup> A central lesson was that "membership needs to be made real" through sustained engagement. The National Library Card aims to explicitly address this by embedding follow-up touchpoints across the early years and school journey [see Timeline]. The policy includes structured involvement from practitioners to guide families into library use — especially at key milestones such as the 6-week check, 12-month review, and nursery enrolment. Local authorities and family hubs will be encouraged to include 'first visit' events, referral incentives, and personalised nudges (e.g. via text or app notifications) to prevent drop-off after initial sign-up.

Moreover, children whose parents were unfamiliar with library services were far less likely to use the card unless introduced through direct, tangible outreach. Nevertheless, cards themselves, as with every membership scheme, are important manifestations of 'belonging'. This conclusion was strongly reinforced by the Children's Library Journeys research project, commissioned in 2015 by the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) and Arts Council England.<sup>17</sup> The project aimed to design a national framework for library engagement with children and families, based on developmental stages and the lived experience of library professionals. Its findings made several key points that deepen our understanding of the earlier pilots:

Key life transitions are critical moments for engagement. Libraries are particularly valuable at moments of change in a child's life – such as birth,

starting school, or moving into adolescence – when routines are disrupted and support is most needed. The library can offer both continuity and community during these times.

Regular, age-appropriate interactions are essential. The report emphasised that library membership must be backed up by structured activities that recur at appropriate intervals. For example, baby rhyme times, story sessions and library visits with nurseries or schools can normalise library use from the start.

Parental engagement is vital. Parents, especially in the early years, are gatekeepers to library use. Efforts to engage children need to be paired with strategies to inform, encourage and involve parents and carers.

Partnerships are the delivery mechanism. The most successful interventions were those that embedded libraries into the existing infrastructure of early childhood – working with midwives, health visitors, early years teams and schools. These partners provided trusted channels through which libraries could connect to families.

Marketing and perception matter. Misconceptions about libraries – such as that they are quiet, adult spaces – persist. Recent DCMS research reinforces the continued need for a national marketing campaign to reframe public libraries as vibrant, family-friendly and inclusive spaces – especially among non-users who continue to associate libraries with outdated or unwelcoming environments.<sup>18</sup>

Digital tools should complement physical access. Some participants suggested that a digital offer, including apps, personalised reading suggestions, or gamified experiences, could help sustain interest, especially as children grow older and become more independent readers.

Despite well-evidenced benefits, many of the pilot schemes struggled to maintain long-term engagement. Their evaluations show that this was often due to limited follow-up capacity, fragmented delivery models and a lack of coordination with wider early years services. These findings point to the

need for a more systemic approach: one that moves beyond pilot culture and integrates libraries into early childhood development as a matter of course, not exception. Since 2015, the library landscape has changed significantly — not least through the expansion of digital borrowing. During the pandemic, eBook lending in England surged by 146%, and use of platforms like BorrowBox and Libby has continued to grow among families with young children. Integrating these digital tools into the National Library Card — for example, by offering new parents app-based reading access — will help the policy stay relevant to evolving user habits.<sup>1920</sup>

The National Library Card builds directly on these lessons, recognising that receiving a library card is only the beginning. A universal, practitioner-led model has the potential to create a seamless and sustained introduction to library use across the critical early years of development and primary school experience — precisely the kind of joined-up national approach recommended by the Children's Library Journeys framework

## Scotland's ECALM Programme

In 2015, the Scottish Government launched Every Child a Library Member (ECALM) - a national initiative to ensure all children in Scotland received automatic library membership at key life stages. All 32 Scottish local authorities signed up and 24 participated in pilot delivery using grants from the Public Library Improvement Fund (PLIF). These pilots trialled methods to offer automatic library membership at birth, early years education and through primary school enrolment.

Funding was modest but widespread: a total of £80,000 was distributed through PLIF, with an average grant of £3,219.95 per authority. Some councils received as little as £250 and the highest was £5,000, illustrating how even low-level investment supported experimentation and local delivery models.

The ECALM pilots found strong public support for integrated services. Parents responded favourably to receiving a library card at birth registration,

especially where registration staff were trained to explain the offer. Several local authorities used the Tell Us Once (TUO) system – a UK-wide digital birth notification platform – to facilitate joined-up delivery. In some areas, library membership was made a default (opt-out) part of the birth registration process, which significantly reduced friction and increased take-up.

Yet, as with pilots in England, ECALM confirmed that passive membership was insufficient. The most effective schemes actively encouraged engagement:

- Shetland scheduled regular library visits for all primary pupils.
- LEGO and Minecraft clubs were used to attract children in socially deprived areas.
- Highland used education databases to automatically enrol children while preserving parental choice.
- Some areas dropped guarantor or ID requirements for nursery-aged children, increasing accessibility.

The social case for ECALM was also clearly stated in the Scottish Government's rationale. Children in Scotland's most deprived areas were found to be:

- 6-13 months behind their peers in problem-solving by age 5.
- 11-18 months behind in expressive vocabulary at the same age.
- Up to 2 years behind by age 15.

Promoting early literacy through library access was explicitly positioned as a tool to help close this attainment gap.

Challenges included data protection, technical integration between registrar and library systems and the sustainability of funding post-pilot. But the programme demonstrated how national intent combined with local flexibility can create scalable models for universal access.

Finally, like the ACE pilots in England, ECALM found that library membership

for children increased usage by parents and carers, further reinforcing the intergenerational value of early library engagement.

All of these schemes highlighted the importance of early and automatic library membership in promoting literacy and community involvement. Recurring lessons that need to be learnt include the necessity of integrating library services with other community services, ensuring sustained engagement beyond initial membership and tailoring outreach efforts to meet the needs of diverse communities.

## Kicking in the Habit: Embedding Libraries in Early Years and Childhood Services

To ensure the National Library Card becomes more than a symbolic gesture, it must be supported by a structured and sustained relationship between families and local libraries throughout the early years.

In past schemes – including those trialled by Arts Council England and various local authorities – library cards were often handed to parents in welcome packs without meaningful follow-up. To overcome this, the National Library Card policy must be embedded within the routines of community health services. During postnatal care, midwives are in a unique position to provide parents with more than just information. At their first visits, typically within the first 6 weeks after birth, they could explain what the National Library Card is, highlight the free events available at the local library – such as baby rhyme time or sensory play – and hand over a small “starter pack” containing a book, a baby-friendly activity and details of nearby sessions and support. This engagement should also highlight additional early years resources available via the library or community partners – such as information on ‘with baby’ cinema sessions, playgroups or community coffee mornings/yoga sessions etc – helping to support parents and carers not just in literacy, but in building social networks and confidence.

This initial engagement could then be reinforced by health visitors,



particularly at key developmental milestones such as the 6-8 week check and the 12-month review. These visits are natural moments to encourage reading, play and parent-child interaction – all of which libraries facilitate. Health visitors could suggest specific library activities, signpost relevant groups and even refer families into library-based programmes where they exist. For those facing isolation or postnatal mental health difficulties, libraries could also become part of early social prescribing models, offering low-pressure environments to connect with others. This model aligns with findings from the 2014 pilot evaluation, which noted that “messages were deemed to be more powerful when communicated by people with whom non-user parents have an established relationship, such as health visitors.”<sup>21</sup>

As children grow, nurseries and early years settings become the next key partners. Many already take part in BookTrust’s Bookstart programme<sup>22</sup> which provides free book packs to children at two key early years stages; newborn and 3-4 years old. Each pack contains a book, a finger puppet, as well as guidance for parents and activity ideas, at a cost of around £7-10 per pack, funded through a mix of government support via Arts Council England. A National Library Card would build on the learnings of the Bookstart programme but also prioritise an ongoing and embedded relationship with practitioners.

The Summer Reading Challenge, run by The Reading Agency, offers an interesting demonstration of the value of automatic/universal library membership alongside wraparound activity at primary school age. An independent evaluation of the scheme found that children who had been provided with automatic library membership read more books than in comparator groups. Longitudinal data shows that automatic/universal library membership leads to lasting behaviour change, with year-round engagement between public libraries and schools taking place and book issues remaining consistently higher across the year for children provided with a library card.

Crucially, this approach also brings parents and caregivers along with the process. Automatic/universal library membership provided through this auto-enrolment/delivery mechanism was found to reduce one of the main

barriers around library use: uncertainty surrounding what is required to sign up for membership and access the library. Providing children with a library card and membership helped children to feel they were 'entitled' to use the library service, encouraging them to ask their parents to take them to their local library. This helped challenge parents' existing, sometimes negative, perceptions of libraries and raised awareness that the library is a free resource they can access.

Ultimately, embedding the National Library Card in the rhythms of early childhood care and schooling is not about creating new burdens for midwives or nursery workers/teachers, but about equipping them with a light-touch, well-resourced toolkit to help families form lifelong habits of learning, play and belonging. By positioning libraries not just as buildings but as partners in a child's development and enrichment, the National Library Card has the potential to re-establish libraries as essential cultural infrastructure for all.

## Maternity Vanguard

A promising model for this kind of integration can be found in the Maternity Vanguard project, developed as part of NHS England's Better Births programme.<sup>23</sup> Piloted in areas such as Dudley, the project linked maternity services with public libraries to support early years development. Midwives and health visitors were encouraged to refer families to local libraries, where they could access Bookstart packs, attend baby rhyme times and receive guidance on reading with children. The project demonstrated how simple, low-cost interventions – such as health professionals signposting families to libraries – could significantly increase library attendance and early book sharing, particularly among families who might otherwise not engage. The Maternity Vanguard project offers a practical precedent for the National Library Card's emphasis on practitioner-led introductions to library use.

## Library Journey Timeline

Below is our timeline illustrating the key touchpoints and objectives for how

the National Library Card can support a child's evolving relationship with libraries from birth through to early adulthood.

## Birth to 12 Months

### Touchpoints:

Automatic registration for the National Library Card at birth (via NHS or civil registration system).

Welcome pack delivered via health visitor or midwife, including a physical book, library card (or QR-enabled digital card) and guide for parents on early language development.

Integration with Family Hubs, offering postnatal group Storytimes and first-book gifting.

Cross-referral with Healthy Start and Start for Life services to engage harder-to-reach families.

### Objective:

Establish reading and library awareness from the outset, positioned as a core part of infant wellbeing and development.

## Ages 1–3 (Toddlers & Early Years)

### Touchpoints:

Library-linked activities promoted through Family Hubs and early years settings (e.g. baby rhyme time, toddler play-and-read sessions).

National Library Card reminders and invitations sent at age 2 (aligned with two-year developmental review).

BookTrust's Bookstart packs integrated into National Library Card milestones.

Digital nudges via app/email for parents: e.g. "Your child is ready for their next story pack".

### Objective:

Build a habit of shared reading and parent-child library use; increase parental confidence in using cultural spaces.

## Ages 4–7 (Reception to Key Stage 1)

### Touchpoints:

- School-led reactivation of the National Library Card at Reception entry.
- Literacy-linked incentives (e.g. sticker charts, summer reading challenges) promoted through schools.
- Delivery of National Library Card library programming in schools (e.g. author visits, class library cards, family reading events).
- Opportunity for library visits tied to the phonics screening checkpoint (Year 1).

### Objective:

Embed library use in early literacy learning; create a bridge between home reading and formal education.

## Ages 8–11 (Key Stage 2)

### Touchpoints:

- National Library Card-linked Summer Reading Challenge and family events.
- Reinforcement at transition points (e.g. Year 3 "independent reader" pack).

- Optional Reading Passport add-on that tracks reading milestones, with library rewards or badges.
- Integration with Reading Agency programmes, e.g. Blue Peter Book Club

### Objective:

Sustain momentum beyond early years by aligning the Card with school curriculum goals and pupil autonomy.

## Ages 11–14 (Key Stage 3 / Early Secondary)

### Touchpoints:

- Potential upgrade to Teen Library Card with access to age-appropriate content (physical and digital).
- Library as study space, cultural space and social space promoted through schools and youth services.
- Integration with homework clubs, coding, cultural and digital access programmes.
- Youth-led design of Card features via co-creation pilots.

### Objective:

Recast the library as a relevant, self-directed learning and enrichment environment; reduce fall-off in engagement at adolescence.

## Ages 15–18 (Later Secondary to Transition Years)

### Touchpoints:

- Opportunities for volunteering or library-based work experience through the National Library Card.
- Access to career and study resources via the library: UCAS prep, CV support, etc.
- Option to transition into an adult National Library Card tier (library + digital + cultural offers).
- Alumni-style digital comms strategy to keep disengaged teens connected.

## Objective:

Position libraries as lifelong tools for learning, creativity, cultural experiences and social mobility.

Across all stages of the National Library Card journey, five underlying principles guide delivery. First, milestone-based nudging ensures that families receive prompts to re-engage with the library offer at key stages in their child's development. Second, the programme treats parents and carers as active partners, recognising the critical role of family engagement in fostering literacy. Third, the Card integrates digital and physical access, supporting eBooks, events and local place-based provision. Fourth, a strong focus on equity and inclusion ensures that targeted strategies are used to reach children most at risk of non-engagement. Finally, tracking and insight mechanisms, using anonymised usage data with consent, allow for monitoring of progression across the library journey and inform future service improvements.

## Implementation Strategy

This policy envisages a regional approach to implementation, led by local authorities to ensure that resources go further. Since there have been several pilots already, with clear lessons learned (see above), we propose a trailblazer scheme, to proceed from proper baselining. A suggested region is the East Library Region which includes library services and Best Start

Family Hubs for: Bedford Borough, Cambridgeshire, Central Bedfordshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk, Peterborough, Southend-on-Sea, Suffolk and Thurrock. To maximise impact, the National Library Card should be co-badged as a joint DCMS/DfE programme in collaboration with, where overlap, the Department for Health and Social Care (champions of 'Best Start in Life' policies), and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for local delivery. This is central to the government's mission-led approach, and thus to cross-departmental working.

As a co-badged initiative, DCMS would provide cultural leadership, aligning the policy with 'enrichment' and 'Arts for everyone, everywhere', with DfE aligning the policy with its statutory responsibility for early childhood educational outcomes. Framing the National Library Card in this way strengthens its credibility as a delivery tool for the Opportunity Mission.

A consortium of long-term partners – including both public bodies and charities like The Reading Agency and the National Literacy Trust – would be essential to support sustained engagement and rollout nationally over time. To champion this work locally, each region could appoint National Library Card coordinators who would train practitioners, ensure materials are refreshed, and track engagement

Delivering the National Library Card will require coordinated action both locally and nationally. The first step is to work in close partnership with local authorities to integrate the National Library Card into existing birth registration workflows. Many councils used the 'Tell Us Once' system, which could offer a model for a streamlined route to automatically issue library memberships at the point of registration.

Alongside system integration, investment in inductions for early years practitioners is essential.. This could take the form of brief, embedded modules as part of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), as well as the provision of promotional materials and referral guidance.

To ensure long-term impact, the National Library Card must extend beyond early years and maintain momentum as children progress through primary

education. Schools, particularly at the transition from Reception to Key Stage 1 and later into Key Stage 2, are crucial partners in embedding a culture of reading and reinforcing library use. In Cornwall, for example, the Schools Library Service (SLS) works with local library authorities to deliver books directly into classrooms, run library cards-for-pupils initiatives, and coordinate author visits — all of which help normalise reading as part of everyday school life. Penguin Random House and the National Literacy Trust, supported by the Foyles Foundation, have together launched a major “Libraries for Primaries” campaign to place libraries in schools. This campaign has been publicly endorsed by the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, underlining the consensus for strengthening children’s access to reading spaces. The link between these and the use of community libraries is essential.

The National Library Card could mirror this by formalising handover points: e.g. integrating library welcome packs into school enrolment or using Year 1 or Year 3 reading challenges as nudges to re-engage children and parents with their local library. These ‘re-engagement touchpoints’ would help track a child’s journey and ensure that the scheme doesn’t lose momentum once they leave the early years system. Better data-sharing between library services and schools (subject to safeguarding and privacy protocols) could also help monitor usage patterns, identify drop-offs, and support targeted re-engagement.

A public awareness campaign should accompany the rollout, helping to establish the National Library Card as a national entitlement. Coordination across councils and library authorities would be needed to ensure consistent messaging and visibility but would have to be incentivised and encouraged. There are many celebrated celebrities/writers/artists who would be keen to champion this.

Finally, funding and resourcing will be key. To avoid further strain on overstretched local authority budgets, the programme should seek to secure philanthropic or private sector match-funding to cover the costs of the card and literacy starter packs, alongside funding from the National Lottery Community Fund and government. By combining public leadership with



private investment, the National Library Card could become a high-impact and low-barrier success story for the government.

## Costings

We estimate that the cost for the literacy pack itself would be comparatively low in England. But the National Library Card requires a long-term investment of at least five years to have any material or lasting benefit. It also requires funding for the key partnerships and likely additional training, administrative and infrastructure costs beyond that. The following costings are ballpark and would need to be explored in more detail.

### Issuing Library Cards at Birth:

- Cost per Card: £1, including production and administrative expenses.
- Annual Births in England: Approximately 563,561 (Office for National Statistics, 2023 figures)<sup>24</sup>
- Total Annual Cost: £563,561 [- £1.13 million.]

### Starter Literacy Packs with Books and Information Materials (Based on BookTrust and other library-linked early years schemes):

- Cost per Pack: £10
- Total Annual Cost: £5.64 million.

### Library Infrastructure and Programme Support (Based on per-authority estimates for running early years programming and past library funding bids e.g. Public Libraries Improvement Fund):

- Enhancements: Extending opening hours, staffing and programme development.
- Estimated Annual Cost: £8-£16 million, considering the need for expanded services.

Some practitioner-facing delivery – such as engaging health visitors or integrating with postnatal groups – would be assumed to fall under Family Hub responsibilities, with costs met through the Start for Life infrastructure

rather than new standalone investment.

## Total Estimated Annual Cost:

- Low-End Annual Estimate: **£14.2 million**
- High-End Annual Estimate: **£22.2 million**

Component	Low Estimate (£m)	High Estimate (£m)	5-Year Low Estimate (£m)	5-Year High Estimate (£m)
Library card	0.56	0.56	2.80	2.80
Starter Pack	5.64	5.64	28.20	28.20
Infrastructure and programme support	8.00	16.00	40.00	80.00
Total	14.20	22.20	71.00	111.00

If funded for five years, as we have noted would be a necessity for the scheme to have an impact, then at the lower end it would cost **£71 million** and at the higher end **£111 million**.

Investing in early literacy has demonstrated long-term economic advantages. For instance, research indicates that insufficient early literacy support can cost the economy up to **£830 million** per school year group, equating to £7,800 per child over their lifetime.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the National Library Card could yield significant returns by enhancing literacy outcomes and reducing future economic burdens.

## East Library Region Trailblazer Costing

We have decided to focus initially on one library region that has previously been involved with the pilot schemes and has a track record for innovation. The East Library Region is defined as Bedford Borough, Cambridgeshire, Central Bedfordshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk, Peterborough, Southend-on-Sea, Suffolk and Thurrock. Together these authorities have in the order of 6.3-6.4 million residents (for example, Bedford Borough: ~189,900<sup>26</sup>; Hertfordshire: ~1,215,400<sup>27</sup>, etc.), roughly 11% of England's population. Applying

this to the ~563,561 live births in England in 2023 yields about ~62,900 births per year in the East region (approximately 11.1% of England's births).

Using this birth estimate and the scheme's cost assumptions, the annual costs for the East region are calculated as follows: at £1 per library card, issuing ~62,900 cards costs roughly £0.06 million per year. Providing one starter literacy pack at £10 each for each birth costs about £0.63 million per year (fixed). For, library infrastructure and programme support it is estimated at ≈11.1% of £8-16 million nationally, or £0.89-1.79 million per year. In sum, these components give an annual cost of roughly £1.58-2.48 million for the East region. Over five years, at the low and high ends respectively, this corresponds to about £7.91-12.42 million total regional investment.

These figures model a "trailblazer" regional rollout (East region) ahead of national expansion. The breakdown for the trailblazer scheme is summarised below:

Component	Low Estimate (£m)	High Estimate (£m)	5-Year Low Estimate (£m)	5-Year High Estimate (£m)
Library card	0.06	0.06	0.31	0.31
Starter Pack	0.63	0.63	3.15	3.15
Infrastructure and programme support	0.89	1.79	4.46	8.93
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.58</b>	<b>2.48</b>	<b>7.91</b>	<b>12.42</b>

Each estimate is based on East-region births (using mid-2023/early-2024 population figures as a proxy) and prorating national cost assumptions. For example, Bedford Borough's mid-2023 population was ~189,900 and Hertfordshire's ~1.215 million, contributing to the region's total. This regional costing is intended as a model for the East region pilot which would be conducted before any nationwide rollout.

## Strategic Funding Partnerships

To ensure the National Library Card is both impactful and financially sustainable, a public/private partnership model should be pursued. This

could bring together government, the National Lottery Community Fund, philanthropic foundations, literacy charities, media platforms and technology firms. Such an approach would not only align with the philanthropic purposes and corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies of cultural stakeholders but also offer long-term brand visibility and engagement opportunities. For funders, the National Library Card provides a highly visible and socially resonant investment with a lasting cultural and educational legacy.

Government has an important convening and enabling role in this model. While the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Education (DfE) are the natural policy leads, a wider ministerial coalition should be built to champion and deliver the scheme – including the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).

## Philanthropic Foundations and Agencies

Philanthropic foundations already play a key role in supporting literacy and library projects across the UK. Foundations such as the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Wolfson Foundation, Foyle Foundation (the latter presently spending down through a commitment to a library in every school), and Clore Duffield Foundation have a proven commitment to cultural access, early education and libraries. The Blavatnik Family Foundation has also made transformational gifts to UK education and cultural institutions, including Oxford University, the British Library and Tate.

In addition, there are well-established charities and sector bodies working in the literacy and reading space whose partnership and endorsement would strengthen the scheme. The National Literacy Trust, The Reading Agency, BookTrust, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and Libraries Connected have significant delivery experience and strong networks with schools and local authorities. For example, The Reading Agency initiatives have recently led to projects such as automatically registering every primary school child in Newham Libraries,<sup>28</sup> demonstrating

a firm foothold in policymaking for the sector. These organisations could play a formal advisory or delivery role, especially in shaping the design of literacy packs, supporting community outreach or embedding our evaluation and monitoring frameworks.

A cross-sector National Library Card coalition, coordinated nationally but delivered locally, could therefore unite the strengths of government, philanthropic foundations, publishing and tech industries, broadcasters and literacy charities – a partnership architecture with the capacity to deliver lasting and transformational change in children’s literacy and community engagement.

## Publishing Industry Consortium

There is a long-established precedent for ‘in kind’ support from the publishing industry. Penguin Random House UK has already partnered with the National Literacy Trust to deliver the ‘World of Stories’ programme, contributing the equivalent of £1 million – with in-kind support such as books, training and volunteer time, as well as direct cash funding - to help transform 500 school libraries across the country.<sup>29</sup> Bloomsbury Publishing has supported the Trust’s LitUp programme<sup>30</sup> to increase children’s reading engagement, while HarperCollins UK has partnered with The Reading Agency to promote the Teachers’ Reading Challenge.<sup>31</sup> These efforts show that leading publishers are not only active in early literacy work but are also willing to invest in public-facing reading initiatives. In December 2024, Hachette UK announced the forthcoming launch of its ‘Raising Readers’ initiative, aimed at promoting early literacy among children across the UK.<sup>32</sup>

A cross-publisher consortium could therefore be established to support the National Library Card over a five-year period. In exchange, publishers would benefit from brand placement and direct engagement with young families.

## CBeebies

There is also strong potential for a media partnership with the BBC. CBeebies,

its early years brand, is already well known for combining entertainment with educational value. It has developed apps and resources for children that promote foundational skills, such as turn-taking and recognising emotions.<sup>33</sup> Incorporating CBeebies-branded materials into the National Library Card – whether in printed packs or digital formats – would bring a familiar and trusted voice into the programme. Such a collaboration could include co-branded reading materials, animated content within a future app and promotional campaigns across BBC platforms, boosting the National Library Card's visibility and reach among young families. CBeebies-themed reading corners already exist in selected libraries across the UK. The partnership began with a family Storytime event at Blackpool Central Library, featuring live readings by CBeebies presenters and appearances by popular characters like Bluey and Supertato. These reading corners include the iconic CBeebies Bedtime Stories yellow chair and branded materials,<sup>34</sup> so the National Library Card partnership would be a natural development.

The Reading Agency (TRA) has also launched significant recent partnerships, including with the BBC's Blue Peter Book Club. This initiative, launched in 2023, reaches over 400,000 children through schools and libraries, distributing themed reading packs and linking to national literacy campaigns. An early evaluation found increased voluntary reading engagement among KS2 pupils and greater parental involvement in library use. Incorporating TRA's work into the National Library Card ecosystem – for instance by using Blue Peter Club themes in starter packs or reading challenges – would amplify its impact and tap into an existing national framework for reading promotion.<sup>35</sup>

## Tech Sector Partnerships

Finally, the development of a National Library Card app opens opportunities to engage global tech firms like Google and Apple. Both companies have histories of investing in educational initiatives and could contribute technical expertise or funding through their CSR frameworks. They may also offer promotional support through their app stores, helping to bring the National

Library Card to digital prominence. If the app included reading rewards, interactive story features or local event listings, it would offer a practical and appealing supplement to the physical library card – and one that tech companies could be proud to support. There would also be the prospect of gaining best practice insight for our other library policies as there could be overlap in the service with newscasting and other local library services (see 'Arts for Us All').

## CONCLUSION

# Investing in the Knowledge Economy

The National Library Card represents a strategic investment in the nation's cultural and educational infrastructure. By embedding library membership from birth and ensuring sustained engagement through early years and school practitioners, this policy has the potential to foster a lifelong relationship with learning and community resources. Implementing the National Library Card aligns with broader goals of promoting literacy, providing enrichment, and strengthening public services.

In addition, the National Library Card speaks to Britain's future as a leading knowledge economy. In an age of artificial intelligence and information complexity, the ability to access and engage with trusted sources of knowledge (incorporating digital, verbal and visual literacy), will be a core life skill. By introducing children to public libraries from birth, the National Library Card lays the foundation for a generation that is not only literate, but confident in navigating and exploring a world increasingly shaped by digital lifelong learning, cultural experiences and civic participation. This is a 'growth' policy in its broadest and most inclusive sense: equipping every citizen with the capacity to contribute meaningfully to our shared intellectual and cultural future.

Launched during the National Year of Reading in 2026, the National Library Card could become a flagship example of how cultural and educational

policy can be integrated. It is both a cultural entitlement and an early years intervention: jointly owned by DCMS and DfE, rooted in Britain's library infrastructure while directly advancing the Opportunity Mission and its early development goals. Of course, education, literacy, learning, and experiencing culture and reading for pleasure continue with libraries through adulthood. This scheme would also flag to other libraries, such as university and national libraries, how they too could connect with this lifelong journey.



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# Key Contacts

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