The Pivotal Role of Libraries in Perth and Kinross: A Strategic Roadmap for Community-Centred Transformation

Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive strategic analysis of the Culture Perth and Kinross library service, arguing for its transformation into a proactive and indispensable cornerstone of the community. The evidence indicates that Perth and Kinross faces a distinct set of compounding challenges, including significant rurality, a rapidly aging population, pockets of deep-seated deprivation, and an evolving digital landscape. While the current library network provides a solid foundation of traditional services, a significant opportunity exists to pivot its mission to directly address these pressing local needs. By adopting proven, innovative models from across the United Kingdom, the library service can become a powerful engine for fostering social inclusion, driving economic resilience, and enhancing community wellbeing.

The analysis is founded on an in-depth review of the region's demographic and socio-economic profile, a critical assessment of current library provisions, and a comparative study of best-practice library programs elsewhere. The findings reveal a clear gap between the profound community needs—for connection, digital skills, economic support, and practical resources—and the current, largely passive service offer.

This report puts forward an integrated strategy built on five core recommendations. These are not radical inventions but practical applications of successful models, tailored to the specific context of Perth and Kinross and aligned with the stated strategic priorities of the Perth and Kinross Council. The recommendations are:

Transform Libraries into Hyperlocal Community Hubs: Reposition every library branch and mobile unit as a proactive "Community Living Room" to combat social and rural isolation.
Launch a "Wellbeing for All" Initiative: Formally integrate the library service into the local health ecosystem through social prescribing and targeted wellbeing programs.
Bridge the Digital Divide with a "Connect P&K" Program: Move beyond passive access to become an active hub for digital skills training, connectivity support, and device lending.
Foster Local Prosperity with "Library Enterprise Hubs": Create dedicated co-working spaces and business support services to empower the region's significant self-employed population and local entrepreneurs.
Champion a Circular Economy with a "Perth and Kinross Library of Things": Establish a network for lending practical household items to save residents money, reduce waste, and build a sustainable sharing economy.
Implementing this strategic roadmap will require investment and a reorientation of the library's mission. However, the potential return is immense. A revitalized library service can deliver tangible outcomes against the Council's key objectives, building a more connected, equitable, and resilient Perth and Kinross. This report provides the evidence and the framework to begin that vital transformation.

Section 1: The Perth and Kinross Context: An Environment of Opportunity and Need

To understand the potential role of the library service, it is essential first to establish the unique socio-demographic and strategic landscape of Perth and Kinross. The region's distinct characteristics—its vast rural geography, its aging population, and its specific economic profile—create a complex environment of both significant opportunity and profound need. This context provides a clear and compelling mandate for a revitalized library service, one that is strategically reoriented to meet the specific challenges faced by its communities.

1.1 A Portrait of the Community: Demographics and Socio-Economic Realities

The Perth and Kinross council area is home to a population of between 151,120 and 153,810 people, according to recent census and demographic data.[1] While sharing some characteristics with the rest of Scotland, the region possesses a unique profile that directly informs the requirements for effective public service delivery.

A critical feature of the region's demography is its significantly older population. As of the 2022 Census, 24.7% of the Perth and Kinross population is aged 65 or over, a figure substantially higher than the Scottish national average of 20.1%.[3] This demographic is not static; projections indicate that the number of residents aged 65 and over will increase by a remarkable 37% in the next two decades.[5] The imbalance is stark: there are already over 15,000 more residents aged 65 and older than there are children under the age of 15.[3] This demographic weighting towards older age groups has profound implications for health and social care services, community support networks, and the prevalence of age-related challenges such as mobility issues and loneliness.

Compounding this demographic reality is the region's pronounced rurality. Perth and Kinross is the seventh least densely populated council area in Scotland, with a population density of just 28.5 residents per square kilometre, less than half of the national average of 69.8.[3] A significant majority of the population, 67.8%, resides in rural areas.[7] This combination of an aging population distributed across a wide and sparsely populated geography creates a compounding effect. An older individual living in a remote part of Perth and Kinross faces a dual vulnerability: the natural challenges associated with aging are magnified by the geographical barriers to accessing services, transport, and social opportunities. This dynamic results in a heightened risk of residents becoming disconnected and isolated, a factor explicitly identified by the council as a key consideration for service delivery.[3] It represents a "quiet crisis" that demands proactive, rather than merely reactive, public service design.

Economically, Perth and Kinross presents a mixed picture. On one hand, it demonstrates relative strength, with a higher employment rate (76.8%) and a lower unemployment rate (2.9%) than Scotland as a whole.[8] However, a notable characteristic is its high rate of self-employment. At 12.0%, the proportion of the workforce who are self-employed is significantly greater than the Scottish average of 8.1%, suggesting a vibrant but potentially unsupported entrepreneurial and freelance community.[9]

Despite this overall economic health, there are significant pockets of deprivation and rising financial hardship. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) shows that 11.2% of residents, or nearly 17,000 people, live in areas corresponding to the three most deprived deciles in Scotland.[10] Furthermore, the cost-of-living crisis has exerted immense pressure on households. Pre-COVID figures showed child poverty had already risen to 22.6%.[5] More recently, this pressure has manifested in a 148% increase in applications for crisis loans and substantial demand on the council's Financial Insecurity Fund, which provides emergency support for essentials like fuel and clothing.[5] These statistics reveal that beneath the surface of a generally prosperous region lies a significant and growing cohort of residents facing considerable economic challenges.

The following table provides a snapshot of the key indicators that define the community profile of Perth and Kinross, highlighting the unique pressures that shape the need for innovative and responsive public services.

Table 1: Perth and Kinross Community Profile - Key Indicators

Indicator	Perth and Kinross	Scotland	Source(s)
Population (2022 Census)	151,120	5,418,400	1
Population Density (per sq km)	28.5	69.8	3
Population Aged 65+	24.7%	20.1%	3
Self-Employment Rate (16+)	12.0%	8.1%	9
Residents in 3 Most Deprived Deciles	11.2%	N/A	10
Residents in Access-Deprived Areas	31.6%	15.0%	12
Single Adult Dwellings	34.6%	37.5%	12

1.2 Identifying Core Community Needs: Social Isolation, Digital Exclusion, and Wellbeing

The demographic and economic profile of Perth and Kinross gives rise to a set of interconnected community needs that must be central to any strategic planning. These core challenges—social isolation, digital exclusion, and pressures on mental and physical wellbeing—are not separate issues but a web of related factors that require a holistic response.

Social and rural isolation is explicitly recognized as a critical issue for service delivery within the region.[3] The low population density and dispersed communities mean that a substantial portion of the population faces significant barriers to accessing services. Data from the Scottish Public Health Observatory reveals that nearly a third of the population (31.6%) lives in the 15% most 'access deprived' areas in Scotland, more than double the national figure of 15.0%.[12] This "access deprivation" limits opportunities for social interaction, engagement in community life, and access to essential support. The high proportion of single-adult dwellings, at 34.6%, further elevates the risk of loneliness and isolation across all age groups.[12] In response, the council has acknowledged the importance of funding community-led initiatives specifically designed to reduce social isolation, demonstrating a clear policy focus on this challenge.[13]

Digital exclusion represents another significant barrier. While specific data for Perth and Kinross is limited [14], the broader Scottish context is stark and highly relevant. An estimated 15% of adults in Scotland lack the foundational digital skills needed for everyday life, such as using a web browser or updating a password, and 9% of households have no internet access at all.[15] National data confirms that digital exclusion is most acute among older people, those with disabilities, and individuals living in poverty—all significant demographic groups within Perth and Kinross.[16] The problem extends beyond infrastructure; affordability of devices and data, along with the skills and confidence to get online, are primary barriers.[16] In an increasingly "digital-first" world, where access to banking, benefits, healthcare, and social connection is mediated online, digital exclusion is a direct cause of social and economic exclusion.

These factors contribute to significant pressures on the mental and physical wellbeing of the population. The Perth and Kinross Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) has established a dedicated Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, prioritizing prevention, early intervention, and community-based support.[18] This focus is underpinned by concerning local health indicators. For instance, the rate of psychiatric hospitalizations in Perth and Kinross has been recorded as higher than the Scottish average, and a significant number of residents—over 22,500 in 2014—are prescribed drugs for anxiety, depression, or psychosis.[12]

These core needs are not independent silos. Digital exclusion directly fuels social isolation by cutting people off from online communities and communication. In turn, social isolation is a well-documented contributor to poor mental and physical health outcomes. A lack of access to services, whether due to geographical distance or digital barriers, prevents early and effective intervention in emerging health issues. Underpinning all of this is poverty, which makes it more difficult to afford the data, transport, or social activities that foster connection and wellbeing. This interconnectedness means that any successful intervention must be holistic. A digital skills class is not just about technology; it is also a social event. A community coffee morning can serve as a gateway to vital health information. A "warm space" in winter tackles both fuel poverty and loneliness simultaneously. Public libraries, as trusted, free-to-access community spaces, are uniquely positioned to address these intersecting needs in a single, welcoming environment.

1.3 The Current Landscape: Culture Perth and Kinross Libraries

The library service in Perth and Kinross, managed by the charitable trust Culture Perth and Kinross, operates on a solid foundation of physical and digital infrastructure.[19] The network comprises 13 branch libraries spread across the region, from the main urban centre of Perth to smaller towns like Alyth, Pitlochry, and Comrie.[20] Crucially, this is supplemented by a vital mobile library service consisting of three vehicles that visit nearly 200 different communities, including remote rural locations, schools, and care homes, every two weeks.[22] This mobile service is a lifeline for many, providing access to over 15,000 items and facilitating nearly 100,000 loans annually.[23]

A key strength of the physical network is the co-location of several libraries within multi-purpose community campuses, such as the Breadalbane Community Campus in Aberfeldy, the Loch Leven Community Campus in Kinross, and the Strathearn Community Campus in Crieff.[20] This integration with other public services like schools and leisure facilities presents a significant, though currently under-leveraged, opportunity for partnership and joint programming. The flagship of the service is the AK Bell Library in Perth, a major

cultural hub that houses not only the region's largest community library but also the Perth and Kinross Archive and extensive Local & Family History resources, making it a key destination for residents and researchers alike.[19]

Core services are consistent with national standards. Membership is free and can be completed online.[20] All branches offer free WiFi and access to public computers, which are essential for residents without home internet.[20] The digital library is robust, providing members with free access to e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines, and a wide array of e-newspapers through platforms like BorrowBox and PressReader.[20]

However, an analysis of the current programming reveals a service offer that is largely traditional and has not fully evolved to meet the complex community needs identified previously. The "What's On" calendar is dominated by events for children (e.g., "Cressheads," "Blast Off!"), author talks, and heritage-focused workshops, many of which carry a fee.[20] While valuable, there is little evidence of sustained, strategic programming explicitly designed to tackle social isolation among working-age or older adults, provide structured digital skills training beyond basic access, or offer dedicated support for local enterprise and economic development.

Performance data indicates a clear shift in user behaviour. The 2018/19 annual report showed a slight increase in physical library visits but a dramatic 35.6% increase in online engagement.[22] This surge in digital use signals that residents are ready and willing to engage with the library service through new channels. Yet, the in-person programming and service model have not evolved at a corresponding pace to reflect this change or to address the deeper strategic needs of the community.

This analysis reveals a service with excellent "bones"—a wide physical footprint, co-location in community hubs, a strong digital backbone, and a trusted brand. The challenge is not to build a new service from scratch, but to pivot the existing one. The current infrastructure is a powerful asset that is being under-leveraged. The key opportunity lies in building new, dynamic, and needs-led programs on top of this solid foundation, transforming the library from a passive repository of books into a proactive agent of community change.

1.4 Aligning with Strategic Priorities: The Council's Mandate

The case for transforming the library service is powerfully reinforced by its direct alignment with the official strategic priorities of the Perth and Kinross Council. The Council's Corporate Plan 2022-2028 and the Perth and Kinross Culture Strategy 2023-2028 are not abstract policy documents; they are a clear mandate for action that provides a robust political and financial justification for investing in a modernized library service.[30]

The Corporate Plan sets out a vision for "a Perth and Kinross where everyone can live life well, free from poverty and inequality".[30] It is built upon seven interdependent priorities, nearly all of which can be directly supported by an innovative library service:

Tackling poverty: Libraries can offer access to resources, support for benefit applications, and cost-saving initiatives like a Library of Things.
Supporting and promoting physical and mental wellbeing: Libraries can act as non-clinical "Wellbeing Hubs," offering social connection and access to health information.
Developing a resilient, stronger and greener local economy: Libraries can become "Enterprise Hubs," providing co-working spaces and support for the region's many small businesses and self-employed residents.
Working in partnership with communities: The plan emphasizes a commitment to co-creation and focusing on need informed by data, a model that modern libraries are perfectly suited to deliver.[32]

The Culture Strategy further strengthens this mandate. It explicitly pledges to "make culture in Perth and Kinross accessible for everyone," "make co-creation with local communities central to cultural programs," and "maximise digital participation opportunities".[31] It recognizes the need to remove barriers to participation, particularly those related to cost and geography, and to use data to shape programs that meet community needs.[31]

These strategic documents represent a direct invitation for the library service to evolve. The recommendations proposed in this report should not be viewed as radical or extraneous ideas, but as the most effective and efficient means for the library service to deliver on the Council's existing, stated priorities. By framing the transformation of libraries in this way—as a direct response to the Council's own strategic mandate—a powerful case can be made for reallocating resources and investing in programs that will generate measurable

returns against the Council's most important objectives. The library is not just another service to be funded; it is a critical tool for achieving the Council's core vision for the entire region.

Section 2: Models of Excellence: Reimagining the 21st-Century Public Library

To bridge the gap between the identified needs of Perth and Kinross and the current library offer, it is instructive to examine successful and innovative library programs from other UK communities. These case studies demonstrate the "art of the possible," providing proven, scalable solutions to challenges mirrored in Perth and Kinross. By learning from these models of excellence, the region can adopt and adapt strategies that have already demonstrated their value in transforming libraries into dynamic, essential community assets.

2.1 The Library as a Community Living Room: Tackling Social Isolation and Enhancing Wellbeing

The challenge of tackling social isolation, particularly among Perth and Kinross's aging and rural population, requires a proactive approach that goes beyond traditional library events. Successful models from across the UK show libraries repositioning themselves as "community living rooms"—safe, welcoming spaces dedicated to fostering connection and improving wellbeing.

A leading example is the work undertaken by libraries in **Doncaster, Rochdale, and Durham** as part of the government-funded *Know Your Neighbourhood* initiative.[33] These services moved beyond one-off events to create sustained, co-designed programs explicitly aimed at turning isolation into inclusion. In Rochdale, libraries worked directly with the community to launch a "Friendship Group" for refugees and newcomers and "Therapeutic Thursdays" for those with long-term health conditions.[33] In Doncaster, a volunteer-led art club became a hub for under-25s and those unable to work, providing participants with a sense of purpose and a pathway to new skills and even employment.[33] In Durham, a simple "Tunes & Chat" music group evolved into a powerful therapeutic tool for attendees with dementia, using music to spark memories and conversation.[33] This contrasts sharply with the more conventional event schedule in Perth and Kinross, highlighting a significant opportunity to develop more targeted and impactful social programming.

Norfolk's "Healthy Libraries" scheme offers a model of deep, strategic integration with public health services.[35] Launched in partnership with the local council's public health department, the initiative is comprehensive. It includes training for all library staff in Mental Health First Aid and dementia awareness, ensuring they are equipped to support vulnerable users. Programs are specifically designed to combat loneliness, such as "Just a Cuppa" social groups and a "Read My Mind" project targeting isolated men in rural communities. During the pandemic, the service made over 36,000 welfare calls to elderly residents, demonstrating its role as a core part of the community's support infrastructure.[35]

A further evolution of this concept is the **UK's national social prescribing model**, which is increasingly being adopted by the National Health Service (NHS).[36] Under this model, General Practitioners (GPs) and other health professionals can formally "prescribe" non-clinical interventions, such as participation in a library book group, a walking club, or a craft session, to improve a patient's mental and physical wellbeing. A UK study found that this approach led to a reduction in the need for GP and hospital visits for 80% of patients.[36] By positioning the library as a formal partner within the public health system, this model provides a clear pathway for collaboration with the Perth and Kinross HSCP, elevating the library's role from a community amenity to an essential component of preventative healthcare. These examples collectively show that the most effective programs are not passive but are sustained, co-designed with the community, and deeply integrated with other public services.

2.2 The Library as a Digital Bridge: Fostering Inclusion and Essential Life Skills

To effectively address digital exclusion in Perth and Kinross, the library service must evolve from being a passive provider of PCs and WiFi to an active facilitator of digital skills, confidence, and connectivity. Case studies from other regions demonstrate a multi-faceted approach that combines access to technology with crucial human support.

Cambridgeshire Libraries' "Digital Buddies" program provides a powerful, low-cost, and high-impact model.[37] The service recruits and trains a network of volunteers to offer friendly, informal, one-to-one support sessions for residents who need help with everything from using a tablet to navigating government websites. This approach not only provides tailored assistance but also builds community capacity and fosters intergenerational connections. It recognizes that for many, the primary barrier to getting online is not a lack of equipment but a lack of confidence, which is best addressed through patient, human interaction.

This is complemented by national frameworks and resources that Perth and Kinross can readily adopt. The **Good Things Foundation and Libraries Connected partnership** has produced extensive research and practical toolkits for libraries.[38] Their findings show that 7 in 10 library services in England already use the free "Learn My Way" online platform to help people learn basic digital skills, and 60% are exploring schemes to lend devices and provide free mobile data.[38] By joining the National Digital Inclusion Network and utilizing these free resources, Perth and Kinross libraries could rapidly enhance their digital support offer without needing to develop new programs from scratch.

To make skills training more engaging, **Norfolk County Council's "Digifest"** offers an inspiring model.[40] This month-long, county-wide festival celebrates all things digital, with over 100 events ranging from Code Club tasters and 3D printing workshops for families to sessions on digital parenting and 3D modeling for adults. By framing digital learning as a fun, creative, and family-friendly activity, Digifest successfully attracts a broad audience and helps to demystify technology, inspiring young people to consider careers in digital industries and helping older adults feel more comfortable in an online world.

These models reveal that the most successful digital inclusion strategies are built on three pillars: access to technology (PCs and WiFi), access to connectivity (affordable data and loanable devices), and, most critically, access to human support (skills training, volunteer buddies, and confident staff). Perth and Kinross has the first pillar in place; the opportunity now is to build the other two.

2.3 The Library as an Economic Engine: Supporting Local Enterprise and Skills Development

With its high rate of self-employment and the Council's strategic focus on building a resilient local economy, Perth and Kinross has a clear need for infrastructure that supports freelancers, entrepreneurs, and small businesses. Libraries across the UK are successfully pivoting to meet this need, transforming themselves from places of information consumption to hubs of economic production.

A highly relevant and local model is **The Scottish Coworking Network (SCN)**.[41] Funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC), this initiative establishes professional business hubs within underused library spaces. The SCN provides members with affordable desk space, access to online business resources, professional development workshops, and networking events. It operates in partnership with key enterprise agencies like Business Gateway and the Federation of Small Businesses.[41] As an existing, successful Scottish program, the SCN offers a ready-made framework that Perth and Kinross could join, bringing immediate credibility, resources, and a proven operational model to the region.

In more densely populated urban areas, libraries have demonstrated the commercial viability of this model. **Westminster Business Library** and **Kensington & Chelsea Libraries' "K+C Co-works"** have implemented successful paid co-working spaces.[42] They offer a tiered membership model with options for daily "hot desks" and monthly "fixed desks," providing a cost-effective alternative to commercial office rentals. These hubs are equipped with essential amenities for modern business, including superfast broadband, bookable meeting rooms, kitchen facilities, and lockers, creating a professional and collaborative environment for freelancers, startups, and remote workers. This model not only supports the local economy but also generates a new income stream for the library service, creating a powerful argument for investment.

These case studies demonstrate a fundamental shift in the library's role. By dedicating space and resources to enterprise support, libraries can directly contribute to local economic development, help retain talent in the region, and provide a vital service to the growing number of residents who do not work in a traditional office environment.

2.4 The Library as a Practical Resource: Championing Sustainability and the Circular Economy

Libraries can play a powerful, practical role in addressing two of the Council's top priorities: tackling poverty and supporting environmental sustainability. The rapidly growing **"Library of Things" (LoT) movement** across the UK provides a compelling model for how to achieve this.

The concept is simple: instead of just lending books, libraries lend out useful household items that people may only need occasionally.[44] The inventory at successful LoTs includes everything from power drills and pressure washers to sewing machines, carpet cleaners, projectors, and camping equipment.[45] Residents can borrow these items for a small daily fee, saving them the significant cost of purchasing something they might only use once a year. This model has a direct impact on household budgets—a critical benefit during a cost-of-living crisis—while also promoting a circular economy by reducing consumption and waste.[44]

Flagship examples like **RE:MAKE Newport** in Wales and **SHARE Frome** in England have demonstrated the success of this model.[46] These initiatives often go beyond simple lending, co-locating with "Repair Cafes" where volunteers help residents fix their broken items, teaching valuable skills and diverting even more waste from landfill.

Crucially, this model has already been proven viable within Perth and Kinross. The **Crieff Community Tool Library**, run by the charity Remake Scotland, is a successful, independent tool library that demonstrates local demand for such a service.[46] This existing initiative provides a perfect opportunity for partnership rather than replication. The library service could offer space, administrative support, and help to scale the Crieff model to other towns across the region.

The LoT model represents a profound evolution of the library's core function, moving from lending intellectual property (books and media) to lending physical assets. This provides a tangible, highly visible benefit to the community that powerfully aligns the library with the council's most pressing strategic goals related to poverty alleviation and climate action.

The following table provides a comparative analysis of these innovative models against the current service offer in Perth and Kinross, highlighting the clear gaps and opportunities for transformation.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Innovative Library Programs

Program Area	Innovative Model Example	Key Activities/Features	Current P&K Library Offer	Identified Gap/Opportunity
Wellbeing & Social Inclusion	Norfolk "Healthy Libraries"; Rochdale Friendship Groups [33]	Social prescribing links; volunteer-led, co-designed groups for specific needs (e.g., newcomers, mental health); staff trained in mental health first aid.	Traditional events (e.g., memory groups, children's storytime); Playlist for Life hub.[20]	Lack of proactive health partnerships and formal social prescribing pathways. Programming is not explicitly co-designed to meet the needs of isolated groups.
Digital Skills	Cambridgeshire "Digital Buddies"; Good Things Foundation Network [37]	Volunteer-led 1-to-1 skills support; device and data lending schemes; structured use of platforms like "Learn My Way."	Free public PCs and WiFi; some ad-hoc digital skills events.[20]	Service is passive (providing access) rather than active (building skills). No formal volunteer support network or device/data lending program.
Economic Support	Scottish Coworking Network; Westminster Business Library [41]	Dedicated co-working spaces (hot desks, fixed desks); business support workshops; networking events; partnership with enterprise agencies.	Free WiFi and study spaces; access to some online business databases.[20]	No dedicated enterprise support infrastructure. Under-leveraged potential to support the region's high number of self-employed residents.
Sustainability & Poverty	Library of Things (UK-wide); RE:MAKE Newport [45]	Lending of practical items (tools, appliances); co-located Repair Cafes; promotes circular economy and saves residents money.	Traditional lending of books and media; some craft/upcycling events.[20]	No circular economy initiatives. A significant missed opportunity to provide tangible financial relief and promote sustainability.

Section 3: A Pivotal Future: Strategic Recommendations for Perth and Kinross Libraries

Based on the analysis of local needs and successful models from other communities, this section presents five strategic recommendations designed to transform the Perth and Kinross library service into a pivotal community asset. These recommendations form an integrated roadmap for change, translating the report's findings into a concrete, actionable plan. Each proposal is detailed with a clear vision, rationale, and key actions, and is directly linked to the evidence presented in the preceding sections.

3.1 Recommendation 1: Transforming Libraries into Hyperlocal Community Hubs

The Vision: To reposition every library in the network—from the flagship AK Bell Library to the smallest rural branch and the vital mobile service—as a proactive "Community Living Room." This means evolving from a quiet space for books into a vibrant, welcoming hub for connection, information, and mutual support.

Rationale: This recommendation directly addresses the profound and compounding challenges of rural and social isolation identified as critical issues in Perth and Kinross, particularly affecting the region's large and growing older population.[3] It moves the library from a passive to an active role in building community resilience.

Inspired By: The comprehensive approach of Norfolk's "Healthy Libraries" scheme and the volunteer-led, community-building activities seen in Doncaster and Rochdale.[33]

Key Actions:

Launch "Cuppa & Connect": Evolve the traditional library coffee morning into a structured, regular program of facilitated social groups. Inspired by Norfolk's "Just a Cuppa," these sessions should be run in partnership with or by trained volunteers and could feature themed activities, guest speakers from local services, or simply provide a warm, welcoming space for conversation. This creates a reliable and low-barrier opportunity for social interaction.

Empower the Mobile Library as a "Community Hub on Wheels": The mobile library is a critical asset for reaching the most isolated communities. Its role should be formally expanded beyond book lending. The vehicles should be equipped with information packs on council, health, and third-sector services, addressing a need identified by users in a previous survey.[23] Staff on the mobile units should receive enhanced training in digital help and community signposting, enabling them to act as a trusted, regular point of contact and support for residents who may have few others.

Develop a Formal Volunteer Pathway: Create a structured volunteer program, promoted through the Third Sector Interface (TSI) Perth & Kinross, to empower local residents to run clubs and activities within their libraries.[48] This model, proven effective in Doncaster, not only expands the library's programming capacity at low cost but also gives volunteers a valuable sense of purpose and ownership, strengthening community bonds.[33]

Strengthen Community Campus Integration: For the libraries already co-located within community campuses (e.g., Breadalbane, Loch Leven, North Inch, Strathearn), formal partnerships should be developed with other on-site services.[20] This should include creating joint intergenerational programs with schools, promoting health and activity sessions with leisure services, and establishing clear referral pathways between services to ensure residents can easily access the full range of support available within the campus. This leverages the existing infrastructure to its full potential.[4]

3.2 Recommendation 2: Launching a "Wellbeing for All" Initiative through Social Prescribing

The Vision: To formally integrate the library service into the local health and wellbeing ecosystem, positioning it as a key delivery partner for the Perth and Kinross Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) and a trusted, non-clinical front door for community health support.

Rationale: This recommendation directly aligns with the Perth and Kinross Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Council's core priority of supporting physical and mental wellbeing.[18] It leverages the library's unique position as a safe, accessible, and non-stigmatizing public space to deliver preventative health interventions, a model shown to be effective in reducing the burden on clinical services.[36]

Inspired By: The national UK social prescribing model where libraries are key partners, and the specific health-focused programs developed by Norfolk Libraries and academic libraries.[35]

Key Actions:

Establish a Formal Partnership with P&K HSCP: Initiate high-level discussions with the HSCP and local GP practices to establish a formal social prescribing pathway. This would allow link workers and clinicians to refer individuals to specific library programs—such as a "Cuppa & Connect" group, a craft class, or a digital skills session—as a non-medical intervention to improve their wellbeing.

Develop a "Wellbeing Collection": Curate a dedicated, highly visible, and easily accessible collection of resources focused on mental health, mindfulness, and general wellbeing. Learning from academic library best practice, this should include a mix of professionally endorsed self-help books (such as those on The Reading Agency's "Reading Well" list) and uplifting imaginative literature, including fiction and poetry.[50] The existing "Playlist for Life" information hub at the AK Bell Library is an excellent foundation upon which to build this broader collection.[26]

Host "Wellbeing Workshops": Offer a regular and varied program of free activities that are known to boost wellbeing. This could include introductory sessions on mindfulness and meditation, yoga classes, adult colouring groups, and craft workshops (e.g., knitting, mosaics).[35] These activities provide gentle social interaction and an opportunity to learn new, calming skills.

Train Staff as "Wellbeing Navigators": Build on existing training by providing all frontline library staff with enhanced skills in mental health awareness and community signposting. Staff should be confident in their ability to guide users to the appropriate council, NHS, and third-sector support services for issues ranging from financial hardship to mental health crises, using directories of local support services.[51]

3.3 Recommendation 3: Bridging the Digital Divide with a "Connect P&K" Program

The Vision: To transform the library's role from a passive provider of digital access into an active and essential hub for building digital skills, confidence, and connectivity for all residents.

Rationale: This recommendation directly tackles the critical challenge of digital exclusion, which disproportionately affects key demographic groups in Perth and Kinross, including older adults and those on low incomes.[15] It supports the delivery of the Council's Digital Strategy and ensures that all residents can participate fully in a digital-first society.[53]

Inspired By: The volunteer-led "Digital Buddies" scheme in Cambridgeshire and the national initiatives for data and device lending promoted by the Good Things Foundation.[37]

Key Actions:

Establish a "Digital Buddies" Volunteer Scheme: Following the Cambridgeshire model, recruit, train, and coordinate a network of community volunteers to provide friendly, informal, one-to-one digital support sessions in every library.[37] These "buddies" can help with specific tasks, build users' confidence, and provide patient, tailored assistance that staff often do not have the time to offer.

Partner with the National Databank: Immediately apply to join the Good Things Foundation's National Databank. This will enable the library service to distribute free mobile data SIMs to eligible low-income residents, directly addressing the affordability barrier that prevents many from getting online, even if they have a device.

Pilot a Device Lending Scheme: Seek grant funding or corporate partnerships to establish a pilot library of digital devices (e.g., tablets, Chromebooks). These could be loaned out for short periods to allow residents to try technology at home, complete online courses, or apply for jobs. This removes the upfront cost barrier to digital participation.

Become the Go-To for Government Online Services: Proactively market libraries as the primary, trusted place for residents to get help with essential but often stressful online tasks. This includes navigating GOV.UK, applying for benefits like Universal Credit, renewing a Blue Badge, or accessing other council services. This provides a vital public service and reinforces the library's relevance in modern life.[26]

3.4 Recommendation 4: Fostering Local Prosperity with "Library Enterprise Hubs"

The Vision: To designate and equip space and resources within key library branches to actively support the region's significant population of freelancers, entrepreneurs, home-based workers, and small businesses.

Rationale: This recommendation directly supports the Perth and Kinross Council's strategic priority of "developing a resilient, stronger and greener local economy".[30] It provides much-needed infrastructure for the 12.0% of the local workforce who are self-employed and creates a new, potential income stream for the library service.[9]

Inspired By: The highly successful and relevant Scottish Coworking Network and the commercially astute business library models in Westminster and Kensington & Chelsea.[41]

Key Actions:

Join the Scottish Coworking Network (SCN): The most logical and efficient first step is for Culture Perth and Kinross to apply to join the existing SCN. This Scottish Government-funded program provides a proven operational model, branding, resources, and access to a network of enterprise partners, dramatically reducing the setup cost and risk.[41]

Pilot a Co-working Space: Designate an underused area in a key library, such as the AK Bell Library, as a pilot "Library Enterprise Hub." Following the flexible model of London libraries, offer a mix of free, drop-in "hot desks" and affordable, bookable "fixed desks" or small office pods.[42] Equip the space with high-speed WiFi, secure lockers, printing facilities, and access to bookable meeting rooms.

Curate Business Support Programming: Forge a strong partnership with Business Gateway Scotland (an existing SCN partner) and other local business networks to host a regular program of free workshops and networking events within the library.[41] Topics should be tailored to the needs of startups and freelancers, covering areas like digital marketing, financial management, and intellectual property.

Leverage Existing Library Resources: Proactively promote the library's valuable but often underused digital resources to the local business community. This includes access to market research databases, business journals, company information directories, and online learning platforms.

3.5 Recommendation 5: Championing a Circular Economy with a "Perth and Kinross Library of Things"

The Vision: To establish a network of "Libraries of Things" (LoT) operating from library branches, allowing residents to borrow useful, practical items, thereby saving money, reducing waste, and fostering a local sharing economy.

Rationale: This recommendation provides a tangible, high-impact way for the library service to deliver on two of the Council's most important priorities: tackling poverty and supporting sustainability and climate action.[30] It also aligns with the Culture Strategy's interest in practical making and upcycling.[31]

Inspired By: The flourishing UK-wide Library of Things movement and, crucially, the local success of the Crieff Community Tool Library.[45]

Key Actions:

Partner, Don't Replicate: The existence of the successful Crieff Community Tool Library is a major asset.[46] The first step should be to establish a formal partnership with this existing organization. The library service can offer invaluable support in the form of secure space within library branches, administrative assistance, and integration with the library's membership and booking systems, helping the Crieff model to scale and expand to other towns.

Pilot a Branch LoT: Launch a pilot LoT in a high-footfall library, such as the AK Bell or one of the Community Campus libraries. Begin with a carefully curated inventory of high-demand, high-cost items like carpet cleaners, pressure washers, projectors, sewing machines, and cordless drills, as seen in successful LoTs elsewhere.[45]

Integrate with Repair Cafes: Actively collaborate with local community groups and the Third Sector Interface to host regular Repair Cafe events within libraries. These events, where volunteers help residents fix broken household items, perfectly complement the LoT by teaching valuable skills, building community, and further promoting a culture of reuse and repair.

Use Proven Management Platforms: To ensure the LoT is efficient, scalable, and user-friendly, implement a professional inventory management and booking platform from the outset. Systems like MyTurn or Lend Engine are specifically designed for this purpose and are used by many successful LoTs across the UK.[44]

The following framework outlines a potential implementation plan for these five strategic recommendations, providing a high-level overview of priorities, partners, and success metrics.

Table 3: Proposed Program Implementation Framework

Recommendation	Key Actions	Priority Level	Key Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
1. Hyperlocal Community Hubs	Launch "Cuppa & Connect"; Empower Mobile Library; Develop Volunteer Pathway.	Short-term (1-2 years)	TSI Perth & Kinross; Community Councils; Campus Services.	Council budget alignment; The National Lottery Community Fund.	Number of regular attendees at social groups; Number of volunteer hours; User satisfaction with mobile library services.
2. "Wellbeing for All" Initiative	Establish social prescribing pathway; Curate wellbeing	Short-term (1-2 years)	P&K HSCP; Local GP Practices; NHS Tayside.	Health & Social Care integration funds; Scottish Government grants.	Number of social prescribing referrals received; Loans from wellbeing collection; Attendance at workshops.

	collection; Host wellbeing workshops.			
3. "Connect P&K" Digital Program	Launch "Digital Buddies"; Join National Databank; Pilot device lending.	Short-term (1-2 years)	Good Things Foundation; Local Businesses (for device donation).	Council Digital Strategy funds; UK Government Digital Inclusion Fund.	Number of 1-to-1 support sessions delivered; Number of data SIMs distributed; Number of device loans.
4. Library Enterprise Hubs	Join Scottish Coworking Network; Pilot co-working space; Host business workshops.	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Scottish Library & Information Council (SLIC); Business Gateway; Federation of Small Businesses.	Scottish Government enterprise funding; Generated income from desk rental.	Number of co-working memberships; Attendance at business events; Number of new businesses supported.
5. Library of Things (LoT)	Partner with Crieff Tool Library; Pilot a branch LoT; Integrate with Repair Cafes.	Medium-term (2-4 years)	Crieff Community Tool Library (Remake); Local environmental groups.	Climate Action/Circular Economy grants; Small membership/rental fees.	Number of LoT members; Number of items borrowed; Tonnes of waste diverted from landfill (estimated).

Conclusion: The Library as the Cornerstone of a Resilient Community

The evidence presented in this report leads to an unequivocal conclusion: the modern public library is not a discretionary service or a cultural luxury, but an essential piece of community infrastructure capable of addressing a region's most fundamental challenges. For Perth and Kinross, with its unique combination of rurality, an aging population, and pockets of significant need, the library service holds immense, largely untapped potential. The choice is not whether to fund libraries, but how to leverage them most effectively to build a more connected, prosperous, and resilient community.

The current Culture Perth and Kinross library network provides a solid foundation—a trusted brand, a wide physical footprint, and a robust digital backbone. However, its current service model remains largely traditional, rooted in a 20th-century mission of providing access to information. The strategic imperative now is to pivot this mission to one of active community development. By embracing the multifaceted roles of a **Community Living Room**, a **Digital Bridge**, an **Economic Engine**, and a **Practical Resource**, the libraries of Perth and Kinross can move from being a passive service to a proactive catalyst for positive change.

The five strategic recommendations outlined in this report provide a practical and evidence-based roadmap for this transformation. They are not abstract ideals but are inspired by proven, successful models from across the UK, tailored to the specific context of Perth and Kinross. Crucially, they align directly with the Council's own stated priorities, offering a powerful vehicle for achieving the vision articulated in the Corporate Plan: a Perth and Kinross "where everyone can live life well, free from poverty and inequality".[30]

Implementing this vision will require strategic investment, a commitment to partnership, and a willingness to reimagine what a library can be. The return on that investment will be measured not just in book loans or visitor numbers, but in reduced social isolation, improved digital literacy, stronger local businesses, and more sustainable communities. By making this pivotal shift, the library service can secure its future and rightfully claim its place as the cornerstone of a thriving and equitable Perth and Kinross.

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