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Time to Act? Evaluating the adequacy of the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) through public and stakeholder perspectives

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Time to Act? Evaluating the adequacy of the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) through public and stakeholder perspectives

This paper evaluates the adequacy of the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) for contemporary public library services in England. Drawing on a multi-phase mixed methods study, it compares public (user and non-user) perspectives identified in a Q study in Southeast England with stakeholder perspectives and the legislative framework. Findings show strong alignment between public understandings and the Act's core functions, but significant divergence in expanded roles promoted by stakeholders. The paper argues that the Act is not obsolete but requires a legislative shift to clarify purpose, align expectations, and foreground public needs.

Keywords: public libraries; legislation; public perceptions; stakeholder perceptions

Introduction

Public libraries in England operate within a statutory framework established by the *Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964)* (hereafter, PLMA 1964), which places a duty on local authorities to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service (PLMA 1964, Section 7(1)). While originally intended to ensure equitable access to reading materials and information, public libraries now operate within a more complex landscape characterized by digital provision, diversified services, and evolving community roles (Blanchard et al. 2026).

At the same time, the sector is widely described as operating under sustained pressure. Since the late 2000s, public libraries have experienced significant financial constraints, reductions in service provision, and the adoption of alternative delivery models, including volunteer-run and community-managed libraries. The role of volunteers within public library provision remains contested (Casselden et al. 2019). This has contributed to a persistent crisis narrative across academic, sector, media, and

policy discourse, in which public libraries are framed as a service in decline (Appleton et al. 2018; Casselden et al. 2019; CILIP and The Big Issue Group 2019; Lynch, Tomas, and Hattenstone 2024; Morse 2018; Sanderson 2024; Sieghart 2014). Despite this, public libraries continue to attract substantial levels of use and engagement, suggesting they are still valued (DCMS 2024). This tension between decline and continued relevance reflects broader uncertainty regarding the role and purpose of libraries, particularly as services extend beyond traditional provision to include digital and community functions.

Recent literature highlights this conceptual uncertainty, with ongoing debate about whether libraries should prioritize core functions or expand their remit. As Matthews (2018a; 2018b) argues, uneven patterns of adaptation raise questions not only about how libraries are changing, but what they are changing towards. Policy developments further reinforce the timeliness of this research, for instance, the forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation (hereafter, LGR) is reshaping the structure of local authorities in England (The Local Government Boundary Commission for England 2026). For public library services, this represents a period of uncertainty, requiring decisions about service configuration and delivery within new institutional arrangements (Shared Intelligence n.d.). At the same time, the sector is increasingly seeking to coordinate its voice through initiatives such as the Libraries Alliance, reflecting a need for greater coherence and strategic direction (Libraries Alliance n.d.).

In this context of structural reform, sector realignment, and continued ambiguity surrounding the purpose and scope of public library services, there is a clear need for empirical research that examines both the adequacy of the legislative framework and how public libraries are understood across stakeholder groups.

This paper draws on doctoral research undertaken between 2019 and 2023, which explored the role, purpose, and governance of public library services in England (McKenna-Aspell 2023). An earlier paper reported the methodological development and application of Q methodology within the public-facing phase of the research, demonstrating its novel use for capturing public perceptions in a public library context (McKenna-Aspell and Birdi 2025). The present paper has a different purpose: it reports the findings of the full multi-phase study, incorporating the public perspectives captured in a Q study focused on a county in Southeast England, alongside stakeholder and legislative analyses. The study had two primary aims. First, to evaluate the adequacy of PLMA 1964 in relation to contemporary provision. Second, to examine how the purpose of public libraries is defined across key stakeholder groups, including library users and non-users, central government, local government, and the public library sector. By comparing these perspectives with the content and intention of the legislation, this paper provides an original empirical basis for reassessing PLMA 1964 and informing the future direction of public library services in England.

The research received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield (Ethics Application Reference Number 036453). All participants were anonymized and provided informed consent.

Background and literature

Legislative ambiguity and the “comprehensive and efficient” duty

Central to PLMA 1964 is the statutory duty placed on local authorities to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service (PLMA 1964, Section 7(1)). However, this requirement is not defined within the legislation, and the Department for Digital,

Culture, Media and Sport (hereafter, DCMS) has confirmed that its meaning is for local authorities to determine (DCMS 2013; Woodhouse et al. 2025).

The absence of a definition has been widely criticized within both academic and professional literature. McMenemy (2009, 559) argues that it is “ludicrous” to assume that the meaning of such a phrase has remained stable since 1964, suggesting that the term has become “so meaningless as to be almost redundant” in the context of contemporary service provision. This lack of clarity has practical consequences, enabling local authorities to interpret statutory duties in divergent ways, something that is encouraged in DCMS guidance (2025b). Legal and policy analyses reinforce these concerns, suggesting that the lack of definition creates insufficient legal certainty and limits the ability to challenge local authority decisions in judicial reviews (McKenna-Aspell 2023, 77-78).

In the past, attempts to address the ambiguity have included supplementary frameworks and standards (McKenna-Aspell 2023, 81-82). However, DCMS (2013, 6) has stated there is “no intention of returning to defined Public Library Service Standards” and although Arts Council England (2024) has developed the Libraries Development Framework, it remains an optional evaluation tool. Reid (2020) contrasts the ambiguity of the undefined “comprehensive and efficient” in PLMA 1964 with the similarly vague “adequate library facilities” in Scottish legislation (Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, Section 163(2)). However, Reid (2020) points out that under the leadership of the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC), statutory duties for public libraries in Scotland have been supported by the development of national quality standards and evaluation frameworks. These standards have enabled a clearer assessment of service provision underpinned by national “fundamental principles” (Reid 2020, 657) whilst allowing for a locally responsive library service.

The Scottish model demonstrates that legislative ambiguity can be mitigated through clear strategic alignment and guidance. SLIC's national strategy defines service outcomes and expectations (SLIC 2021, 14-17) while positioning libraries within wider governmental priorities (SLIC 2021, 10–11). This creates a structured basis for accountability that is otherwise absent in England. In contrast, the lack of definition and supporting standards limits the effectiveness of PLMA 1964 as a mechanism for ensuring coherent and equitable public library provision.

Tensions and competing agendas

Alongside legislative ambiguity, the literature identifies significant tensions between key stakeholders in public library provision, including central government, local authorities, and the public library sector. While all share an interest in sustaining services, their priorities diverge in what Fletcher (2019, 579) describes as “a continual flavour of the month policy and funding merry-go-round.”

Policy and sector literature increasingly position public libraries as multifunctional services contributing to a wide range of social and economic objectives (Blanchard et al. 2026). Central and local government frameworks emphasize their role in supporting broader policy agendas (DCMS 2017, 2021; Local Government Association 2017), while sector bodies advocate expanded and diversified provision (Arts Council England 2026; CILIP & The Big Issue Group 2019; Libraries Connected n.d.). Libraries are framed as community hubs within a wider public service infrastructure, with a “libraries first” (DCMS 2017) approach positioning them as a “front door” (Local Government Association 2017, 33) to services including health care, business support, and social care. Sector discourse similarly emphasizes contributions to “place-shaping” (CILIP & The Big Issue 2019, 10), wellbeing, and

inclusion, alongside responsibilities for reading, culture, digital inclusion, and public health (Arts Council England 2024; Libraries Connected n.d.).

Despite the recognition that libraries deliver an “astonishing” and growing range of services (Twycross 2025), local authorities operate within significant financial and political constraints (Woodhouse et al. 2025), which have led to a 47% reduction in net expenditure on public libraries between 2009 and 2023 (DCMS 2024). This has contributed to a broader narrative in which responsibility for service reductions and perceived decline is contested across stakeholder groups. Local authorities attribute reductions in library and cultural provision to funding constraints imposed by central government (County Councils Network 2024), forcing them to focus on acute services over those with “lower political salience” (Hoddinott & Dellar 2025). Sector bodies critique local decision-making and prioritization, warning that under-resourcing library services significantly impacts communities (CILIP 2024). Whilst central government maintains a supervisory role, it insists that public library provision and funding are a local issue (DCMS 2025b).

There is broad agreement that libraries contribute to wider agendas, but there is less consensus on how these roles should be prioritized or resourced. In the absence of a shared understanding of a “comprehensive and efficient” (PLMA 1964, Section 7(1)), stakeholders advance competing interpretations of purpose. As Matthews (2018a; 2018b) observes, patterns of development across the sector are uneven, with some services embracing expanded roles and others remaining aligned with more traditional provision. This variation contributes to a fragmented and inconsistent national landscape.

Overall, the literature depicts a sector shaped by financial constraint, conceptual uncertainty, competing agendas between stakeholders.

Research gap: legislation, stakeholders, and public voice

The literature highlights two interrelated gaps in current research and understanding of public library provision in England.

First, there is limited research examining how different stakeholder groups define the purpose and scope of public libraries. While tensions between central government, local authorities, and the public library sector are well documented, these perspectives are rarely analyzed comparatively. Consequently, there is no comprehensive account of how these interpretations align or diverge, nor how they relate to PLMA 1964.

Second, there is a lack of consistent and comprehensive empirical engagement with public perspectives. Policy and professional discourse have been criticized for being distanced from public perspectives (Coates 2019). This is significant when considering whether public libraries are demonstrating democratic responsiveness, through a “dynamic and causal relationship” between public opinion and policy or service delivery (Beyer and Hänni 2018, S15). Existing studies tend to focus on specific services or local contexts (e.g., Appleton et al. 2018; Black 2011; McCahill, Birdi and Jones 2020; Hariff and Rowley 2011). Moreover, they often exclude non-user perspectives, which are critical to understanding issues of purpose and perceived value. In 2024, DCMS commissioned research exploring barriers and enablers to library use in which non-user perspectives were captured (IPSOS 2024), and where McKenna-Aspell’s 2023 doctoral research focused on what library users, non-users and stakeholders think library services *should deliver*, IPSOS (2024) examined what the public think about what library services *currently deliver*.

It is clear that there is no holistic, empirically grounded understanding of how public libraries are defined across stakeholders, nor how these definitions relate to the legislative framework. The doctoral research addressed these gaps through a multi-

phase, comparative design to juxtapose public, institutional, and legislative perspectives. By examining how public libraries are viewed by users, non-users, central government, local government, and the public library sector, and comparing these perspectives to PLMA 1964, this work makes a novel empirical contribution to debates on legislative adequacy and the future direction of public library services in England.

Methods

Philosophical positioning and research design

This study adopted a multi-phase, mixed methods design in which each stage informed the next (Creswell 2015). The research focused on the period 2009–2021, a timeframe which begins with the only example of central government using its superintendence powers to assess statutory compliance of a local authority (Charteris 2009) and concludes with the final stage of doctoral data collection.

Phase One involved a review of academic, policy, and sector literature to establish the contemporary public library landscape in England and identify gaps in existing research. This phase deliberately incorporated grey literature to include stakeholder perspectives not fully represented in academic outputs. Sources were identified and evaluated using Tyndall's (2010) framework to ensure systematic and transparent inclusion. This exploratory phase informed the research questions and subsequent design. Phase Two employed Q methodology (hereafter, Q) to capture public viewpoints in the Southeast of England. Phase Three used qualitative coding to analyze stakeholder definitions, and Phase Four applied an adapted framework analysis to compare these perspectives with PLMA 1964. This staged design (Figure 1) enabled a direct comparison between public, stakeholder, and legislative perspectives.

Figure 1. The overall research design

Phase	1. Establishing the public library landscape	2. Capturing public perceptions of public libraries	3. Exploring the core purpose of public libraries	4. Comparing perceptions to legislation
Aims	Aim 1: To identify public perceptions of public libraries in England and the services they provide. Aim 2: To establish whether the current legislation is adequate for a 21 st century service.	Aim 1: To identify public perceptions of public libraries in England and the services they provide.	Aim 2: To establish whether the current legislation is adequate for a 21 st century service.	Aim 2: To establish whether the current legislation is adequate for a 21 st century service.
Research questions	The literature review helped to generate the first iteration of research questions, which were later refined.	RQ1: What are public perceptions of public library services in England, both user and non-user? RQ2: How do different stakeholder groups define public libraries: the public, central government, local government and the public library sector?	RQ2: How do different stakeholder groups define public libraries: the public, central government, local government and the public library sector? RQ3: How do these different stakeholder definitions compare?	RQ4: To what extent do the public and stakeholder views of public libraries correspond to PLMA 1964?
Process & analysis	Narrative literature review, using both exploratory and more structured search	Q methodology: participants sorted library services and characteristics on a	A corpus of materials established for each stakeholder group, to	Outputs from Phase 3 used to conduct a bi-directional framework analysis.

methods. Academic and grey literature included.

distribution scale to demonstrate the relative value of each. Participants answered post-sort questions.

Factor analysis applied to the outputs to create factors (shared views) which were subsequently interpreted.

demonstrate their current perceptions of public libraries.

A multi-cycle of qualitative coding (descriptive coding and pattern coding) undertaken of each corpus.

Each stakeholder corpus indexed against PLMA 1964.

The legislation then indexed against each stakeholder corpus.

Outcomes	Identification of key themes and topics to illustrate the public library landscape since 2009. Understanding the research gaps. Generation of research questions to refine the research aims and guide Phase 2 and Phase 3.	Interpreted factors presenting different public perspectives of public libraries. Comparison of library user and non-user perspectives. Creation of material to use in Phase 3. Revised research	Understanding of how each stakeholder group defines public libraries. Comparison of the different definitions.	Evaluation of the definitions in relation to the legislation.
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Phase Two: Q methodology

Phase Two addressed the first research question: *What are public perceptions of public library services in England, both user and non-user?* Q was selected because it is designed to capture and analyze subjectivity (Brown 1980; Watts and Stenner 2012), enabling the identification of shared viewpoints without reducing them to simple attitudinal averages. It is well suited to research concerned with viewpoint and priority, recognizing that individuals hold patterned but diverse understandings of a topic (McKenna-Aspell and Birdi 2025; Watts and Stenner 2012). The philosophical foundations, full design process, and detailed findings are reported in McKenna-Aspell and Birdi (2025) but are synthesized here.

Participants were people aged over 18 who lived, worked, or studied in a county in Southeast England. Two parallel Q studies were conducted: Q Study 1 with library users (n=27) and Q Study 2 with library non-users (n=41). In Q, participants are referred to as the P set and are not considered a sample, because Q identifies the existence of viewpoints rather than their prevalence (Watts and Stenner 2012). Guidance suggests a range of 40–60 participants is “adequate” (Watts and Stenner 2012, 73). This was considered alongside deliberate recruitment to reflect the national ratio of users and non-users (DCMS 2020), with the studies including 40% users and 60% non-users. Separating the studies also foregrounded non-user perspectives, which are largely absent from public library research.

Q begins by establishing a concourse before constructing a Q set. In this study, the concourse was developed from literature produced by and about the public library sector post-2009, comprising 46 sources and over 500 statements (McKenna-Aspell 2023; McKenna-Aspell and Birdi 2025). The final Q set of 45 statements was a representative sample thereof (Figure 2).

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graph TD; A[508 concourse statements extracted from the literature.] --> B[Statements grouped together based on similar content and intention, thus creating 57 categories.]; B --> C[Categories given draft titles.]; C --> D[57 categories refined to 50, after researcher review.]; D --> E[50 categories refined again to a final Q set of 45 items, following feedback from 14 pilot participants.];
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Figure 3. The distribution model

[illegible]

Following the sorting task, participants answered two questions relating to their most disagreed (-5) and most agreed (+5) statements. The second question (*What is the core purpose of a public library?*) generated qualitative data later used in Phases Three and Four. Of 68 participants, 49 provided responses (Q Study 1, n=21; Q Study 2, n=28).

Q sorts were then factor analyzed (Watts and Stenner 2012) to identify clusters of shared viewpoints (Brown 1980). Factors are presented as factor arrays, either as composite Q sorts or as a table. Both Q studies were separately analyzed and the final outcomes yielded two factors for Q Study 1 and three factors for Q Study 2. Full analytical outputs are presented in McKenna-Aspell and Birdi (2025).

The final process in Q is the interpretation of the factors, using ranked statements in each factor array, distinguishing and consensus items, and participants' post-sort comments (Watts and Stenner 2012). The full factor interpretations are presented in McKenna-Aspell and Birdi (2025) but their titles and summaries are presented in the findings section of this paper.

Inter-study comparison explored similarities and differences between library user and non-user perceptions, using a coefficient correlation matrix to identify points for further comparison (reported in McKenna-Aspell 2023).

Phase Three: qualitative coding of stakeholder corpora

Phase Three addressed the second and third research questions: how different stakeholder groups define public libraries, and how those definitions compare. Four stakeholder corpora were established from publications by central government, local government, and the public library sector, alongside the public perspectives generated in Phase Two. These groups were selected to represent the principal positions involved in the definition and delivery of public library services: central and local government as

decision-makers, the public library sector as service providers, and public participants as users and non-users.

Qualitative coding was used to catalogue, interpret, and compare how public libraries were defined across the four corpora (Saldaña 2016). This approach was well suited to identifying patterns across varied sources and building a structured basis for comparison (Miles et al. 2014).

The sources in the central government, local government, and public library sector corpora were purposively selected to capture the most contemporary authoritative articulations of each stakeholder group's perspective on public libraries within the study period. Although the sources varied in format, they served one or more of three functions: describing the activities of public libraries in England, providing guidance about the delivery of public library services, and/or planning for their future. Sources were therefore selected not because they explicitly defined public libraries, but because they described what stakeholder groups had most recently published about the role, values, priorities and development of public libraries.

The public corpus was constructed using material generated in Phase Two. It included participants' free-text responses to the post Q-sort question: *What is the core purpose of a public library?* Of the 68 participants, 49 provided responses (Q Study 1, n=21; Q Study 2, n=28). In addition, the two most valued items from each factor across both Q studies (ranked at +5 in the factor arrays) were included. While the wording of the post Q-sort question may have encouraged participants to foreground core public-facing functions, the Q set exposed participants to a broader range of library functions, including those related to governance, sustainability, service evaluation, and strategic activity. These functions did not emerge among the *most agree* (+5) items in the factor

arrays. The free-text responses and +5 factor array items were combined and treated as the corpus representing the public perspective.

Full explanations of the choice of sources for the corpora are presented in McKenna-Aspell (2023), but the corpora are summarized in Table 1. The four corpora differed in size, format, purpose, and mode of production. As a result, they were treated as distinct bodies of material and analyzed separately before comparison. The analysis sought to identify how each corpus conceived the purpose and priorities of public libraries, rather than how ideas were expressed. For instance, whilst both the public and public library sector corpora use language pertaining to helping the public, the intention was not the same. The public corpus expresses the notion that libraries should “help people to read” (Q Study 2 participant) or “help people to find the books and info they need” (Q Study 2 participant). This idea of help is linked to information access. Conversely, the public library corpus discusses how libraries “help create better places to live, work and prosper” (CILIP & The Big Issue, 2019, 2).

Table 1: stakeholder group corpora details

Stakeholder group	Details of the corpora
Central government	“Report pursuant to Section 17 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 for 2021/2022” – published by DCMS (2022) “Report pursuant to Section 17 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 for 2020/2021” – published by DCMS (2021) “Guidance: libraries as a statutory service” – published by DCMS (originally 2015 but now updated, DCMS 2025) “Strategic planning of library services: longer-term, evidence-based sustainable planning toolkit” – published by DCMS (2017)
Local government	“Delivering local solutions for public library services: a guide for councillors” – published by the Local Government Association (2017)
Public library sector	“Public libraries: the case for support” – published by CILIP and The Big Issue (2019) “Universal Library Offer Handbook” – published by Libraries Connected (no longer available) “Public library service accreditation: consultation and scoping programme interim report” – published by Libraries Connected (2020) “Scoping towards a blueprint for public library development and sustainability in England” – published by Independent Mind (2019) for Libraries Connected and CILIP
The public	Responses to the post Q-sort question <i>What is the core purpose of a public library?</i> (n=49) The two statements ranked +5 for Factors A - E

Coding proceeded in cycles. The first used descriptive coding to identify broad topics (Saldaña 2016). The second used pattern coding to refine and group the first cycle codes into higher-order categories and themes (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014). During this second cycle, it became apparent that all corpora contained material addressing three questions: what public libraries should *be*, what they should *provide* for the public, and what else they should *do*. As a result, initial codes were thus grouped creating three categories (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Public libraries should *be*, should *provide*, and should *do*

BE	values public libraries should uphold or demonstrate
PROVIDE	services provided to the public and community and/or actions directly involving the public and community
DO	actions public library services should undertake which are not directly focused on interactions with or services for the public

The resulting codebooks for each stakeholder group formed the main outputs of Phase Three and the basis for comparison in Phase Four. To ensure reflexive and rigorous coding, three additional steps were taken. First, code frequencies were recorded to monitor potential significance and support comparisons across corpora and the three categories. Second, time was inserted between coding each corpus so that each was approached with fresh eyes. Finally, coding was reviewed at four separate points: after the descriptive cycle; after the pattern cycle; when documenting textual references; and when comparing the corpora coding outputs.

Phase Four: bi-directional framework analysis

Phase Four addressed the final research question: to what extent do the public and stakeholder views of public libraries correspond to PLMA 1964? Framework analysis was selected for its suitability in comparing policy-related texts, synthesizing large datasets, and supporting transparent comparison (Goldsmith 2021).

In its conventional form, framework analysis involves familiarization, identifying an analytic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping or interpretation (Goldsmith 2021). However, this research adapted the method because the data did not consist of a single corpus to be indexed against one framework. Instead, the purpose was comparative and reciprocal: to assess how stakeholder definitions map onto the

legislation, and how the legislation maps onto stakeholder definitions. This resulted in a bi-directional adaptation of the steps of framework analysis presented by Goldsmith (2021) (Table 2).

Table 2. Application and adaptation of framework analysis used in Phase Four

The five steps of framework analysis	Application and adaptation of framework analysis used in this thesis
1. Become familiar with the data	First cycle of coding, descriptive coding, was applied to the materials representing each of the four stakeholder groups. This occurred during Phase Three. In Phase Four, the process was also applied to PLMA 1964.
2. Identify an analytic framework, through concrete themes and abstract concepts	Second cycle of coding (pattern coding) was used to generate concepts and themes. In Phase Three, a structured codebook was created for each stakeholder group, which denoted how each group defines public libraries. This process was replicated in Phase Four for PLMA 1964.
3. Index all data against the framework, systematically	The thesis used a bidirectional approach. First, rather than a single framework, the four codebooks were each used as a distinct framework during Phase Four. PLMA 1964 was then indexed against each framework in turn. Second, the four stakeholder groups' corpora were then each indexed, separately, against the PLMA 1964 framework.
4. Chart and present the indexed data in a matrix format	The indexed data was presented in two formats. First, an intensity chart to show how the stakeholder groups indexed onto PLMA 1964. Second, a comparison table to show how PLMA 1964 indexed onto the four stakeholder groups' frameworks.
5. Map and interpret patterns, to draw comparisons	The comparison was multifaceted. Each stakeholder group's definition of public libraries was compared to the other groups' definitions, as well as separately compared to the legislation.

The methodological innovation lay in the indexing process. The bi-directional approach meant each stakeholder codebook was first used as a framework against which

PLMA 1964 was indexed. Thereafter, each stakeholder corpus was indexed against the PLMA 1964 framework. This enabled identification of both where stakeholder definitions extended beyond the legislation and where the legislation failed to reflect contemporary perspectives.

To ensure transparency and manage researcher bias during indexing, the researcher undertook three actions. First, the researcher did not solely rely on the framework or the corpora codebooks but also cross-referenced the original text. This avoided surface level interpretations or misrepresentations of the original sources. Second, the researcher documented indexing decisions to help inform interpretations. Finally, the researcher checked and reviewed outcomes by returning to the indexing process multiple times. The indexing and mapping were undertaken by the doctoral researcher. Analytical decisions and evidence for interpretations throughout Phases Two to Four were discussed with the doctoral supervisory team, providing opportunities for these to be questioned and challenged. In addition, Grant (2019, 133) recommends an intermediary stage between indexing and charting, whereby all textual references for each category or theme are collated to ensure the researcher is not “unduly influenced by the more extreme or interesting examples”. This was carried out for each stakeholder group indexed against the framework and then repeated for PLMA 1964 four times, because it was indexed separately against each stakeholder group’s codebook.

The indexed data were then charted in multiple formats: an intensity chart showing how stakeholder groups indexed onto PLMA 1964; comparison figures showing how the legislation indexed onto each stakeholder framework; figures to map patterns of alignment and divergence across the dataset.

The PLMA 1964 framework consisted of extracts relating to actions undertaken by, controlled by, or involving public libraries (Figure 5). These extracts were coded

using the same two-cycle process applied in Phase Three. Many legislative codes remained ungrouped during pattern coding, reflecting the concise and non-repetitive nature of statutory language. However, the three-category model established in Phase Three (*be*, *provide*, and *do*) was still applicable.

Figure 5. Sections of the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) used to create the framework

Section 1	Section 8
• (2)	• (1)
Section 3	• (2)(a)
• (2)(a)	• (2)(b)
• (2)(b)	• (3)(a)
• (3)	• (3)(b)
• (5)	• (3)(c)
Section 7	• (3)(d)
• (1)	• (4)(a)
• (2)(a)	• (4)(b)
• (2)(b)	• (5)(a)
• (2)(c)	• (5)(b)
Section 9	• (5)(c)
• (1)	• (5)(d)
• (2)	• (5)(e)
Section 20	

The PLMA 1964 framework and outcomes from steps 3 to 5 (see Table 2) are reported later in this paper.

Rigor and limitations

Transparency was prioritized across all methods. Researcher subjectivity was acknowledged as inherent, but managed through reflexivity, documentation, and clear decision trails. For the qualitative coding and framework analysis, consistency was supported through iterative coding cycles. For the Q studies, transparency was ensured through reporting factor extraction trials, final solutions, and the use of participant comments alongside factor arrays.

A key limitation is that the study represents a contextualized snapshot. The stakeholder corpora were bounded to a specific timeframe (2009-2021) and the public corpus to a single local authority context, meaning subsequent publications or policy developments may reflect evolving priorities. Whilst the local authority reflected in the study features rural and urban communities, the participants' views cannot be generalized to other types of communities across England. However, the value of the study lies in its comparative approach. By systematically examining stakeholder perspectives alongside public views and the content of PLMA 1964, the outcomes provide a basis for ongoing evaluation of alignment between policy, practice, and public expectation. Moreover, the Q studies in Phase Two can be replicated in other regions of England to enable other local authorities to consider how their communities prioritize the services delivered by their public libraries.

Findings

Public perceptions

This phase used Q to capture the viewpoints of library users and non-users in the aforementioned county in Southeast England. The full findings are reported in McKenna-Aspell and Birdi (2025). As such, the findings presented here are necessarily summarized, focusing on the paper's aim of evaluating the adequacy of PLMA 1964 in relation to stakeholder views of public library services in England.

The Q studies identified five distinct viewpoints across both library users and non-users, reflecting diverse perceptions of the role and purpose of public libraries. The factor titles and summaries are presented in Table 3. More detailed interpretations are found in McKenna-Aspell and Birdi (2025) with the full interpretations reported in McKenna-Aspell (2023).

Table 3: overview of the factor solutions from Q Study 1 and 2

	Factor	Title	Summary	Statements ranked +5	Statements ranked -5
Q study 1 (library users)	A	A public library service “can’t be all things to all people”	Public library services should provide a refined service true to the perceived core purpose of public libraries, which meets the needs of individuals specifically in relation to that core purpose.	...loan physical print items. ...link people to information.	...support the health and wellbeing of the public. ...promote prosperity.
	B	Public libraries help “people to meet and connect, and get assistance”	Public library services should address social isolation, providing a space to help individuals to feel connected.	...be inclusive and support social justice. ...address social isolation.	...provide information, advice and guidance. ...loan physical print items.
Q Study 2 (library non-users)	C	“Books stuffed into phone boxes are cute but they’re not libraries”	Public library services should provide a professional service focused on linking people to the information they need.	...employ and develop professional staff. ...link people to information.	...involve volunteers. ...promote prosperity.
	D	“The more accessible a library is, the more people will use” it	Public library services should focus on connecting people to information through digital inclusion and accessible, trustworthy practice.	...be trustworthy. ...support digital inclusion.	...offer leisure-based services. ... work with families.
	E	“Amazon vs. the library – Amazon is going to win”	Public library services should innovate and modernize their offering to better link people to the information they need.	...innovate and modernize the library. ...deliver some services digitally.	...support democracy. ...support the health and wellbeing of the public.

Within Q Study 1, Factor A library users focused on tangible and traditional aspects of public library services: the primacy of print, the necessity for a high-quality collection, and linking people to information. In comparison, Factor B library users focused on more intangible or ideological qualities of public libraries, such as supporting social justice, addressing social isolation, and being inclusive. Table 4 presents the distinguishing statements (ranked significantly differently at $p < 0.1$) in Q Study 1 to illustrate the key differences between the factors' viewpoints.

Table 4. The distinguishing statements in Q Study 1

	Factor A	Factor B
Stronger agree value (ranked +2 to +5)	...loan physical print items. link people to information. ...provide free services. deliver core services. ...provide high quality stock. loan a range of physical items.	...be inclusive and support social justice. ...address social isolation. ...work with families. ...encourage the public to connect with others. ...provide services to support employment. ...support the health and wellbeing of the public. ...support digital inclusion.
Stronger disagree value (ranked -2 to -5)	...address social isolation. ...support democracy. ...provide services to support employment. ...support the health and wellbeing of the public. promote prosperity.	...demonstrate good customer service. ...innovate and modernize the service. ...loan a range of physical items. ...provide high quality stock. ...provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. ...loan physical print items.

Despite variation across the factors, there was a strong degree of consensus regarding the core purpose of public libraries. Consensus statements are those which are ranked similarly by factors within a study, established through total weighted scores

(Watts and Stenner 2012). Both Q Study 1 factors agreed that public libraries should not have to demonstrate impact and value because they “are a statutory right” (Q Study 1 Participant). Moreover, they agreed that public libraries should prioritize reading and literacy-focused services rather than leisure activities and alternative service models. Table 5 demonstrates where the Q Study 1 views were aligned.

Table 5. Consensus statements in Q Study 1

	Statement
Stronger agree value (ranked +2 to +5)	...meet the needs of children and young people.
	...focus on reading as their core purpose.
	...employ and develop professional staff.
	...be accessible.
	...be people-focused.
Neutral value (ranked -1 to +1)	...offer outreach services.
	...offer a range of facilities.
	...comply with relevant laws.
	...provide pleasant environments.
	...work with the community.
	...provide spaces for different needs.
	...arrange events and activities.
Stronger disagree value (ranked -2 to -5)	...provide learning and education opportunities.
	...involve volunteers.
	...work with other organizations and services.
	...offer leisure based services.
	...provide alternative service models.
	...provide information, advice and guidance.
	...demonstrate impact and value.

Within Q Study 2, the difference between the library non-user perceptions of public libraries was clear in three distinct ways: how a public library should approach service delivery; what they *should* deliver; and what they *should not* deliver (Table 6).

Table 6. The distinctions between Q Study 2 factors

Factor	Approach	Public libraries should focus on...	Public libraries should not...
Factor C	professional	supporting people by focusing on reading.	involve volunteers.
Factor D	trustworthy & accessible	supporting people by focusing on digital inclusion.	work with families or provide leisure-based services.
Factor E	modern	staying relevant by offering digital services.	promote literacy.

The distinguishing statements across Q Study 2 are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. The distinguishing statements in Q Study 2

	Factor C	Factor D	Factor E
Stronger agree value (ranked +2 to +5)	...employ and develop professional staff. ...provide high quality stock. ...focus on reading as their core service. ...be people-focused.	...be trustworthy support digital inclusion. ...be accessible. ...provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. ...comply with relevant laws.	...innovate and modernize the library. ...deliver some services digitally. ...provide alternative service models. ...demonstrate impact and value. ...involve volunteers.
Stronger disagree value (ranked -2 to -5)	...innovate and modernize the library service. ...work with other organizations and services. ...demonstrate impact and value. ...provide alternative service models involve volunteers.	...loan a range of physical items. ...offer outreach service. ...provide information, advice and guidance. ...offer leisure based services. ...work with families.	...focus on reading as their core purpose. ...work with the community. ...be trustworthy. ...promote literacy. ...address social isolation.

Most clear was the difference in opinion about the involvement of volunteers in public libraries. Factor E considered them beneficial for the service, Factor D was

neutral about their potential function, whilst Factor C was adamant that volunteers should “not be used as replacements for paid staff” (Q Study 2 Participant). The divergence over volunteers is notable given that their role remains contested within public library provision (Casselden et al. 2019), suggesting that this wider sectoral tension is also reflected in public perspectives.

Despite the difference of perceptions related to the importance of books and reading, Q Study 2 factors shared the view that the role of public libraries is to connect people to information. There was also a consensus that public libraries should promote their services and ensure that they provide positive experiences in pleasant environments. All three factors agreed it is “not the job of the library” (Q Study 2 Participant) to support the health, wellbeing, prosperity, or employment prospects of the public. The consensus statements between the Q Study 2 factors are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Consensus statements in Q Study 2

	Statement
Stronger agree value (ranked +2 to +5)	...link people to information. ...promote the library service.
Neutral value (ranked -1 to +1)	...be inclusive and support social justice. ...meet the needs of children and young people. ...offer a range of facilities. ...provide clear guidance about the library service. ...arrange events and activities.
Stronger disagree value (ranked -2 to -5)	...promote prosperity. ...provide services to support employment. ...support the health and wellbeing of the public.

A cross-study comparison was undertaken to identify similarities and differences between the five factors across both Q studies. Correlation analysis was used to identify

points of interest for further comparison using the factor arrays, distinguishing and consensus statements, participant comments, and factor interpretations. Full details of the correlation analysis are reported in McKenna-Aspell (2023).

The greatest similarity between library user and non-user viewpoints was evident between Factor A (Q Study 1) and Factor C (Q Study 2). They agreed that public libraries should be staffed by professionals and focused on core services such as linking the public to information and providing physical and print items to borrow. Both factors also perceived that public libraries should not be tasked with addressing wider social issues, such as social isolation, employment, health, welfare or democracy. Both factors were clear that a public library should not have to “defend itself” (Q Study 2 Participant) or “prove the value of [its] existence” (Q Study 2 participant) to receive funding. Across both studies, there were a limited number of shared views across all five factors. These are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. Similar viewpoints across all factors in both Q studies

Statement	Factor and rank				
	A	B	C	D	E
...employ and develop professional staff.	+3	+2	+5	+3	+1
...provide cultural opportunities.	-2	0	-2	-1	-3
...work with the community.	0	-1	+1	+1	-2
...provide clear guidance about the library service.	+1	-1	0	0	+1
...provide spaces for different needs.	-1	0	0	-2	0
...provide specialist services.	-3	-1	-3	-2	-1
...offer a range of facilities.	-1	+1	0	0	-1
...arrange events and activities.	-1	-1	0	+1	0
...operate effectively and viably.	0	-2	-2	-1	+1

With the exception of the role of employing and developing professional staff, shared perceptions across the library user and non-user studies did not relate to what public libraries should actively do. Instead, consensus was found in areas of neutrality or disagreement. This suggests that participants have a collective understanding of what public libraries should not be. For example, both user and non-user factors agreed that public libraries should not prioritize specialist services or cultural provision.

While not universal, some dominant views are evident across both Q studies. Across Factors A (Q Study 1) C, D, and E (Q Study 2), a strong emphasis is placed on the role of libraries in linking people to information. The same factors also indicate that libraries should not be responsible for supporting employment, health, wellbeing or economic prosperity.

Stakeholder definitions of public libraries

Phase Three considered how the different stakeholder groups define public libraries. The resulting codebooks for each stakeholder group are reported in McKenna-Aspell (2023). For the purpose of this paper, a synthesis of each group's definition is presented below, structured around the three categories of what public libraries should be, provide and do. Particular attention is given to the dominant and distinctive features of each definition, before similarities and differences across the four stakeholder groups are considered.

The central government corpus defines public libraries primarily in terms of the actions they should undertake beyond directly serving the public, emphasizing strategic, organizational, and system-level functions rather than direct service interactions. Libraries are expected to develop sustainable services and demonstrate “how well the strategy meets local needs, now and in the future” (DCMS 2015) through evidence-based decision making and long-term planning.

Central government positions libraries as dynamic and adaptive services, expected to respond to “financial, technological and demographic challenges” (DCMS 2017) and “provide modern services and facilities” (DCMS 2021, 9). A library should also be inclusive and accessible, operating as “a safe, trusted environment open to all” (DCMS 2021, 3). Public libraries are framed as services that must meet local needs while extending beyond their traditional scope. They are described as “more than bricks and mortar” (DCMS 2017), with a “vital role” (DCMS 2022, 1) in improving life chances and supporting wider agendas such as education and economic development.

The local government corpus defines public libraries through a balance of what they should provide for communities and how they should operate within constrained systems. Libraries should respond directly to local population needs while remaining viable and effective within wider local authority priorities. Public libraries are expected to be adaptive and inclusive, particularly in response to “unprecedented pressures” and “changing customer need” (Local Government Association 2017, 4 - 6). They must be “open to all” (Local Government Association 2017, 4) and “maximise accessibility for everyone” (Local Government Association 2017, 14) by ensuring equitable access to services and resources.

To local governments, libraries are “much more than a depository for books” (Local Government Association 2017, 12). They should operate as community hubs, bringing people together and connecting them to a wide range of services and opportunities. Libraries are expected to be “shaped by local needs” (Local Government Association 2017, 15) and informed through consultation and engagement. Moreover, they should be sustainable through strategic planning. Local governments want libraries to be “fit for the future” (Local Government Association 2017, 41), by aligning with

local priorities as both a community asset and a mechanism for delivering wider council objectives.

The public library sector defines public libraries through a near-equal emphasis on the services they provide and how they operate within a changing and challenging environment. This is reflected in the distribution of references in the *provide* and *do* categories. Libraries are both service providers and agents of social impact. According to the sector, public libraries are dynamic and adaptable. The sector corpus argues that libraries must “future proof against the scale of change” they face (Libraries Connected 2020, 11) and continue to evolve through innovation and development.

The public library sector maintains that public libraries should be inclusive and accessible institutions, reaching “all sections and demographics of the community” (CILIP & The Big Issue 2019, 10). They should promote equality through welcoming, supportive environments. The sector emphasizes the role of libraries in improving lives by helping people to “prosper and flourish” (CILIP & The Big Issue 2019, 3) through information access, reading, and a wide range of digital services and activities. Externally, libraries are expected to contribute to local and national priorities, forming partnerships and supporting wider agendas related to wellbeing, economic development, and social cohesion. Internally, they are expected to demonstrate their impact, evaluate services, and develop the workforce.

The public corpus defines public libraries predominantly through the services they should provide, with considerably less emphasis on the values they should embody and very limited attention to what they should do beyond direct service provision. This emphasis reflects a clear expectation among participants that libraries deliver tangible, user-facing services centered on reading and information access. Public libraries are understood to “spread information and literature for free” (Q Study 1 Participant).

Reading is positioned as the core purpose above all other activities; libraries should “help people to find the books and info they need” (Q Study 2 Participant).

The participants place importance on the values that libraries embody. Public libraries are expected to be inclusive and “free and for everyone” (Q Study 2 Participant). They should offer spaces where “everyone is welcome” (Q Study 1 Participant). They are also seen as “safe, neutral and trustworthy” (Q Study 2 Participant), providing “impartial information” (Q Study 1 Participant) in environments which are supportive and accessible. While there is some recognition that libraries should operate within statutory frameworks, this is a minor concern. Overall, the participants emphasize core services, accessibility, and trust, with limited focus on broader strategic or policy roles.

Comparing stakeholder perceptions of public libraries

The stakeholder definitions reveal both areas of alignment and divergence in how public libraries are conceptualized.

Although the four stakeholder corpora included documents with different purposes, the three categories (*be, provide, do*) show a consensus that public libraries should uphold values, provide services to the public and perform other actions beyond directly serving the public. However, the prioritization of categories is different for each stakeholder group. The public and local government corpora are most similar, with almost half of the textual references describing public libraries through services they should deliver directly to the public. By comparison, the central government corpus is overwhelmingly focused on what else public libraries should be doing, beyond public-facing services.

The similarities between the stakeholder groups are presented in Figure 6, which depicts the codes shared by three or more stakeholder groups.

Figure 6: similar coding outcomes for stakeholder groups

		Central government	Local government	Public library sector	The public
BE	be dynamic	✓	✓	✓	✓
	be inclusive	✓	✓	✓	✓
	be trustworthy	✓	✓	✓	✓
PROVIDE	be free to use	✓	✓	✓	✓
	be more than a loaning service	✓	✓	✓	
	deliver digital services	✓	✓	✓	✓
	focus on reading	✓	✓	✓	✓
	provide library buildings/space	✓	✓	✓	✓
	promote libraries	✓	✓		✓
	provide access to information		✓	✓	✓
	provide access to skilled staff	✓	✓	✓	✓
	provide services for children/young people	✓		✓	✓
	achieve a consistent library offer	✓	✓	✓	
DO	be sustainable	✓	✓	✓	
	demonstrate impact and/or value	✓	✓	✓	
	evaluate the service	✓	✓	✓	
	meet legal requirements	✓	✓	✓	✓
	plan strategically	✓	✓	✓	
	recognize local role	✓	✓	✓	
	value staff	✓	✓	✓	

All four stakeholder groups concur that public libraries should be dynamic, inclusive, and trustworthy, but the meaning and emphasis of these values differ. The public library sector and central and local government frame dynamism as

organizational adaptation to external pressures, including financial constraints and changing demand. Within the public corpus, dynamism is associated with maintaining relevance. Equally, all stakeholders recognize inclusivity and accessibility, but the public corpus places greater emphasis on the role of libraries as safe, neutral, and supportive spaces.

Greater divergence emerges in relation to service provision. Central and local government describe libraries as multifunctional. They are community-level assets, designed to meet local needs and contribute to wider policy agendas. In contrast, the public corpus shows a strong focus on core functions, particularly reading, literacy and information access. The public library sector occupies a middle position, combining an emphasis on reading with a broader focus on social impact, digital provision and improving lives. This implies a clear distinction between institutionally driven expansion of services and a more bounded public understanding of purpose. Moreover, while all groups agree that services should be free and accessible, this is more strongly prioritized by the public.

The most pronounced differences are evident in relation to what libraries should do beyond direct service provision. The sector, central and local government all emphasize sustainability, strategic planning, and demonstrating impact. Operationally and in terms of policy, these stakeholder groups position libraries as contributors to local priorities. In addition, central government and the sector recognize their national role. By contrast, the public corpus makes almost no reference to “bells and whistles” functions (Q Study 2 Participant), focusing instead on the free services libraries provide relating to reading and information.

The limited attention to the *do* category in the public corpus is unlikely to be caused by a lack of awareness as participants were exposed to these ideas during Phase

Two. Instead, it could reflect the framing of the question they were posed around core purpose, which prompted a focus on what libraries deliver for users. The stronger emphasis placed on values, approximately double that of other stakeholder groups, suggests the public are more inclined to define libraries through the values they embody than through strategic or operational functions.

Mapping stakeholder views onto the legislation

Phase Four applied a bi-directional framework analysis to examine the relationship between stakeholder definitions of public libraries and the statutory requirements in PLMA 1964. This involved both indexing stakeholder definitions against the legislative framework and then indexing the legislation against stakeholder-defined functions. The legislative framework derived from PLMA 1964 is presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) framework

BE	PROVIDE	DO
Public library services in England should: • be flexible • be helpful	Public library services in England should: • provide a loaning service • adequate stock • other resources • (printed) books and reading material • quality loanable stock • range of loanable resources • provide free services • provide guidance about how to use the library • provide a catalogue • provide library premises • meet children’s needs • provide access to educational and cultural events • communicate charges to the public • encourage people to use the library service • provide services to local people	Public library services in England should: • engage in intra-sector collaboration • collaborate to improve public library services • regional council • help fund regional council • work / co-operate with other organizations • provide a comprehensive and efficient library service • record and share data about the service • work / communicate with central government • meet legal requirements

The bi-directional analysis first considered the stakeholder definitions in relation to PLMA 1964. Figure 8 presents the results of indexing each stakeholder group’s codebook to the PLMA 1964 framework. The intensity chart (Goldsmith 2021) indicates the extent to which each stakeholder group’s viewpoints could be mapped against PLMA 1964; the bracketed numbers indicate how many references to each code were evident in the legislation.

Figure 8. Intensity chart to map stakeholder views against public library legislation

	Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964)	Central government	Local government	Public library sector	The public
BE	be flexible (1)	●	◐	◐	⊖
	be helpful (1)	⊖	◐	⊖	●
PROVIDE	provide a loaning service (11)	●●	●●	●●	●●●
	provide library premises (5)	●	●●	●●	●
	provide free services (4)	◐	●	◐	●●
	provide guidance about how to use the library (4)	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖
	meet children's needs (2)	●	⊖	●	◐
	provide access to educational and cultural events (2)	◐	◐	●	⊖
	communicate charges to the public (1)	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖
	encourage people to use the library service (1)	●	●	◐	◐
	provide services to local people (1)	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖
	engage in intra-sector collaboration (7)	●●	●	●	⊖
DO	work/co-operate with other organizations (4)	●●	●●●	●	⊖
	provide a comprehensive and efficient library service (2)	●●●	●●	◐	⊖
	record and share data about the service (1)	●	●	●	⊖
	work/communicate with central government (1)	●	◐	◐	⊖
	meet legal requirements	●●●	●●	●	◐

Key: how many references are found in each corpus

⊖ = none ◐ = very few ● = some ●● = several ●●● = many

In terms of core library functions, the intensity chart demonstrates a strong degree of alignment between stakeholder definitions and PLMA 1964. Public libraries

are consistently associated with access to books, reading and information. These functions correspond directly to the legislative framework, indicating that PLMA 1964 reflects a widely shared understanding of the fundamental purpose of public libraries. Had the framework analysis ended at this point, the results would imply that the governmental stakeholder groups and PLMA 1964 are aligned, particularly when compared to the public library sector and public corpora. However, the bi-directional approach demonstrated a different consideration of the full picture, depicted in Figure 9. This figure maps all the codes, organized by category, which are present in the stakeholder corpora but missing from the Act. The tick indicates a code is present in the stakeholder group corpus but absent from PLMA 1964.

Figure 9. Codes from the four stakeholder groups which are absent from the legislation

		Central government	Local government	Public library sector	The public
BE	be dynamic	✓*	✓*	✓*	✓
	be inclusive	✓	✓	✓	✓
	be trustworthy	✓	✓	✓	✓
	be true to core purpose and values	✓			✓
	be welcoming			✓	
	be enduring				✓
	be empowering				✓
PROVIDE	deliver digital services	✓	✓	✓	✓
	employ professional staff	✓	✓	✓	✓
	meet local and community needs	✓	✓		✓
	be more than a loaning service	✓	✓***	✓	
	deliver a high-quality service	✓	✓	✓	
	foster human connection				✓
	help improve lives			✓	
	promote social cohesion			✓	
	be a hub			✓	
	provide a coffee shop			✓	
DO	value and train staff	✓	✓	✓	
	plan strategically	✓	✓	✓	
	recognize national role	✓****		✓	
	recognize local role	✓	✓	✓	
	evaluate the service	✓	✓	✓	
	demonstrate impact and/or value	✓	✓	✓	
	achieve a consistent library offer		✓	✓	
	be governed effectively		✓		
	* with the exception: <i>alternative service models</i>				
	** with the exception: <i>access to cultural events</i>				
	*** with the exception: <i>communicating with DCMS</i>				

By applying a bi-directional approach, the analysis identified a range of functions present within stakeholder definitions which extend beyond those explicitly articulated in PLMA 1964. These include services relating to digital access and skills, health, wellbeing, social connection, and wider community support. Figure 9 shows these functions are consistently represented across central government, local government, and sector definitions, but are not directly reflected within the legislative framework.

There is variation in how different stakeholder groups map onto the legislation. Central government definitions extend significantly beyond the legislative framework, incorporating a wide range of policy-driven functions. Local government definitions demonstrate partial alignment, reflecting both statutory obligations and the practical realities of service delivery within constrained contexts. Sector definitions similarly extend beyond the Act, more strongly oriented towards social value and community outcomes. In contrast, the public views identified in this study show the closest alignment with PLMA 1964, focusing primarily on core service provision with limited emphasis on additional roles.

The bi-directional nature of the analysis also highlights areas in which the legislation does not fully capture contemporary understandings of public library provision. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate that while stakeholder definitions can be partially indexed onto the legislative framework, several themes present across stakeholder groups are missing from PLMA 1964. These absences are further detailed in Figure 10, which provides a synthesized overview of the correlation between the legislation and the stakeholder groups.

Figure 10. Comparing the content of the legislation with the views of all stakeholder groups

	Present in PLMA 1964 but not clearly evident in the stakeholder perceptions	Present in the stakeholder perceptions but not evident in PLMA 1964
BE	N/A	be enduring be empowering be inclusive be trustworthy be true to core purpose and values be welcoming
PROVIDE	provide guidance about how to use the library communicate charges to the public provide services to local people only	be a hub deliver a high-quality service deliver digital services employ professional staff foster human connection help improve lives meet local and community needs promote social cohesion provide a coffee shop
DO	N/A	achieve a consistent library offer be governed effectively demonstrate impact and/or value evaluate the service plan strategically recognize local role recognize national role* value and train staff
* with the exception: <i>work / communicate with central government</i>		

Overall, the framework analysis demonstrates that PLMA 1964 continues to capture the core functions of public libraries, but it does not fully reflect the expanded roles articulated across three of the stakeholder groups. This results in a partial alignment between legislative provision and contemporary understanding of the service. The strongest correspondence is observed in relation to core functions, and the public corpus is most aligned with PLMA 1964.

Discussion

What the Act actually captures

The findings demonstrate that PLMA 1964 continues to reflect a clear and widely shared understanding of the core business of public libraries. Across both the library user and non-user groups, there is consistent emphasis on access to books, information, and learning. Phase Three outcomes further show that all stakeholder groups also include these core functions within their definitions.

This suggests that the Act captures a stable baseline for public library provision. Its focus on access to reading and information aligns with how public libraries are understood by the public in this study, indicating that the legislation remains relevant in defining core purpose. Importantly, this shared understanding extends beyond active users, suggesting that the Act reflects a broader societal expectation of what public libraries are for. However, the findings also show that this shared view only represents part of the contemporary definition of public libraries. While the Act aligns with foundational expectations, it does not fully capture the wider range of roles now attributed to public libraries by the sector and central and local government.

Is it time to Act?

Beyond this shared core, the findings reveal significant divergence in how public libraries are defined. On one hand, central government, local government, and the public library sector all articulate expanded roles, including digital provision, contributions to wider policy agendas, and social and community functions. These roles are embedded within policy and professional discourse, but they are not consistently defined or prioritized across stakeholder groups. On the other hand, the nature of the expansion varies. Central government emphasizes alignment with national policy

objectives. Local government frames libraries in terms of local delivery, performing as the front door to other local services. The public library sector foregrounds social value and community impact. These perspectives overlap but do not converge into a single, coherent definition. Instead, they represent different extensions of the core, shaped by differing priorities.

The public perspectives identified in this study remain more bounded. While participants recognized libraries offer some additional functions, they consistently prioritize core services centered on free access to information and reading materials. Participants expressed more agreement on what libraries should not do, particularly in relation to specialist or non-core provision. This results in a layered structure: strong consensus at the core, with increasing divergence as definitions extend beyond it.

The Act provides a foundation which mirrors public perceptions. The other stakeholder definitions align closely with PLMA 1964 but only where they relate to core functions. The legislation does not fully map onto stakeholder definitions in relation to contemporary service diversification. It could be argued that the legislative ambiguity of what a “comprehensive and efficient” library service should look like (PLMA 1964, Section 7(1)), beyond a loaning service, has permitted the sector, central and local government to diverge from what public libraries are statutorily expected to deliver.

In the absence of defined standards, stakeholder groups have been able to extend the scope of public libraries in different ways without a shared point of reference. These interpretations are not inherently contradictory, but they are not coordinated. As a result, public libraries are simultaneously conceptualized as core reading services, community hubs, social infrastructure, and policy delivery mechanisms, without a single agreed

definition of how these roles relate and without standardized or centralized funding models.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the issue is not that PLMA 1964 is outdated, but that it is incomplete. It continues to define the core purpose of public libraries, but it does not provide sufficient clarity about how expanded roles should be understood, prioritized, funded or evaluated. This creates a gap between the statutory framework, stakeholder definitions, and public expectations. Unlike the Scottish model (SLIC 2021), there is no supporting guidance for PLMA 1964 to consistently articulate how additional roles fit within the overall purpose of public libraries. Therefore, it is unclear which functions are essential, which are supplementary, and how services should balance competing priorities.

The findings suggest that reform need not begin from the assumption that PLMA 1964 is obsolete or requires wholesale replacement. Its alignment with the public perspectives identified in this study indicates that its core provisions could still be relevant, although greater clarity is needed around how contemporary and expanded roles relate to that statutory core. The shared core perceptions identified across all stakeholder groups suggest a stable basis for defining purpose. Without this clarity, and the continuous involvement of public voice, divergence is likely to persist. Stakeholder groups will continue to extend the role of public libraries in different directions, with implications for consistency, accountability, and the coherence of service provision across England.

The significance of this study: foregrounding the public

This study has evidenced the importance of public perspectives in defining public libraries. Whilst varied in some regards (Phase Two findings), public views captured in this study show substantial alignment with PLMA 1964 in relation to core functions of

public libraries (Phase Three and Four findings). Indeed, the public corpus and PLMA 1964 share most expectations of public library services. However, the public voice is less visible in research and sector outputs, meaning that stakeholder definitions dominate service delivery.

The research does not suggest that expanded roles are inappropriate, but it does highlight the need to anchor them more clearly in public understanding. Where service development moves beyond what the participants recognized as core purpose, there is a risk of disconnect between how libraries are defined and how they are experienced. An absence of public involvement in decisions about public libraries means they are at risk of being provided with a “service that it has been decided they need, rather than that they want” (Boughey and Cooper 2010, 197). The findings do not imply that public preferences should determine the entirety of library provision or that expanded roles should be withdrawn wholesale. However, they do suggest that institutional and professional assessments of public need should not be substitutes for direct engagement with communities. On one hand, Matthews (2018b) argues that attachment to established conceptions of public libraries can inhibit their evolution. On the other hand, expansion is not inherently synonymous with progress where it is a “mission drift” (Goulding 2013, 482) or the delivery of “designated needs, rather than realised demands” (Boughey and Cooper 2010, 197). The findings here complicate this tension. Preference for core functions cannot simply be attributed to unfamiliarity with wider library roles: participants encountered these functions through the Q set, and library users as well as non-users questioned whether some wider social functions properly belonged within the library remit. These findings therefore reinforce the need for public perspectives to inform how libraries and their professionals negotiate core purpose alongside expanding policy.

The study therefore supports the need for more systematic and ongoing engagement with both users and non-users, building on the recent work by DCMS (IPSOS 2024). This reflects the principle of democratic responsiveness, whereby public policy should maintain a “dynamic” relationship with public opinion rather than treating consultation as a singular exercise (Beyer and Hänni 2018, S15). Public perspectives should provide the reference point for defining core purpose, informing how additional roles are developed and communicated. By integrating these public views more explicitly and frequently, particularly during the forthcoming changes related to LGR, it may be possible to reduce fragmentation and strengthen alignment across stakeholder groups.

The need for a legislative shift

PLMA 1964 continues to capture the core purpose of public libraries, but does not provide sufficient clarity for how services are defined, delivered, or evaluated in contemporary contexts. The authors recommend a shift in focus from questioning the relevance of the legislation to strengthening how it is interpreted and operationalized.

First, there is a clear need to establish a more explicit definition of “comprehensive and efficient” (PLMA 1964, Section 7(1)). The lack of definition permits divergent interpretations across stakeholder groups, resulting in inconsistency in service provision and accountability. A revised definition should be grounded in responsiveness to public need, at both local and national levels, providing a clear baseline while allowing for adaptation over time. How this clarification is achieved requires further policy consideration. It could involve an explicit amendment of the wording of Section 7(1), or supporting national guidance could be developed to support PLMA 1964, in the style of the SLIC model (2021). The findings do not provide a basis for determining which mechanism would be most appropriate; rather, they indicate the

need for greater clarity around statutory purpose and its relationship with expanded roles. Whichever approach is pursued, public perspectives should inform its development and ongoing review.

Second, greater clarity is required in distinguishing between core statutory provision and expanded roles. While libraries are increasingly positioned as contributors to wider policy agendas, these functions are not consistently defined or prioritized. Establishing a clearer relationship between core services and additional roles would support coherence across the sector, particularly as services continue to evolve.

Third, public perspectives should be more systematically embedded within decision-making, including both library users and non-users. Library services should adopt more consistent and iterative approaches to gathering and applying public evidence, ensuring that service design reflects both expressed needs and patterns of disengagement.

These priorities are particularly significant in the context of LGR, which is reshaping governance structures and decision-making responsibilities across England. The implications for public library provision remain uncertain and will vary according to the structures adopted locally, with current guidance identifying multiple possible configurations for services (Shared Intelligence n.d.). Without clearer national expectations, LGR risks further entrenching inconsistency in how public library services are defined and delivered. While organizational structures may change, new authorities will remain responsible for fulfilling statutory library functions and maintaining continuity for residents (Shared Intelligence n.d.). The authors argue this should be a priority for the public library sector and advocacy groups, such as Libraries Alliance. The sector needs to be more aligned with public views which could be achieved through stronger coordination and improved data collection.

Overall, future policy development, including any national library strategy, should prioritize clarity, coordination and public voice. This may be achieved through legislative revision or through supplementary national guidance. In either case, the objective should be the same: to align statutory duty, stakeholder expectations, and public need within a coherent and accountable framework for public library provision in England.

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Figure captions (as a list)

Figure 1. The overall research design.

Figure 1 Alt text. Figure 1 presents the research design phases, including the methods and outcomes. It also explains how each phase relates to the research aims and research questions.

Figure 2. Process of creating the Q set from the concourse

Figure 2 Alt text. Figure 2 describes the process of creating and testing the final Q set used by participants in the Q sorting task

Figure 3. The distribution model

Figure 3 Alt text. Figure 3 depicts the distribution model used by participants to relatively rank the Q set statements

Figure 4. Public libraries should be, should provide, and should do

Figure 4 Alt text. Figure 4 depicts the three categories derived from the qualitative coding: be, provide and do.

Figure 5. Sections of the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) used to create the framework

Figure 5 Alt text. Figure 5 lists all the sections taken from the legislation to form the legislative framework used in Phase 4 of the research

Figure 6. Similar coding outcomes for stakeholder groups

Figure 6 Alt text. Figure 6 indicates where the four stakeholder groups shared similar views in their corpora, across the three categories of be, provide and do. Views shared between three or more of the stakeholder groups are included.

Figure 7. Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964) framework

Figure 7 Alt text. Figure 7 presents the coding summary of the sections taken from the legislation, presented across the three categories: be, provide, do.

Figure 8. Intensity chart to map stakeholder views against public libraries legislation

Figure 8 Alt text. Figure 8 is an intensity chart which shows how closely each of the four stakeholder groups are indexed onto the legislation framework.

Figure 9. Codes from the four stakeholder groups which are absent from the legislation

Figure 9 Alt text. Figure 9 indicates all of the codes which were present in the stakeholder groups' corpora but absent in the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964).

Figure 10. Comparing the content of the legislation with the views of all stakeholder groups

Figure 10 Alt text. Figure 10 synthesizes the comparison between the stakeholder groups and the legislation by listing the elements of the Act which are lacking in the stakeholder corpora, and the elements of the stakeholder corpora which are lacking in the Act.