

Hertfordshire Bookstart

Annual Report

April 2023 – March 2024



**Izzy Martin and Margaret Street
Early Years Librarians
Libraries and Heritage Services**

Introduction and background to BookTrust

BookTrust are the UK's largest reading charity, reaching millions of children every year with books, resources, and support to get every child reading, regularly and by choice.

BookTrust's new strategy 'Reading Together, Changing Children's Lives' (<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/about-us/strategy/reading-together/>) was launched in January 2024 and is based on decades of experience of working with millions of families and thousands of local partners, including Health Visitors, nurseries, schools, libraries and food banks. Research shows children facing disadvantage are more likely to start school with lower developmental skills, including language, than their more affluent peers. Therefore BookTrust's action plan is to support these families to become regular reading families in the early stages of their child's life.

The four proposals are:

- To embed reading in the life of every low-income family
- Use shared reading to bring enjoyment and stability to vulnerable children
- Help antenatal and early years practitioners promote shared family reading
- Support primary school teachers to cultivate a love of reading



Funding and delivery of Bookstart in Hertfordshire

BookTrust provide the Bookstart resources to local authorities free of charge. Local authorities are then responsible for the cost of onward delivery to their partners and then to families.

Hertfordshire Bookstart is funded jointly by Libraries and Heritage Services and Family and Health Services Commissioning, Children's Services. This joint funding provides the post of Early Years Librarian (job-share), responsible for co-ordinating the programme in Hertfordshire. It also funds the purchase of additional dual language books and delivery of the packs to Health Visitors, Family Centres and Early Years settings.

The Bookstart programme succeeds because of its strong partnerships. Health Visitors gift the Baby packs at a baby's new birth check, and Family Centre colleagues and Early Years settings use the Bookstart Toddler and Pre-Schooler packs to encourage targeted families to share books and to join the library. Hertfordshire Libraries offer families the opportunity to borrow from a wide collection of quality and inclusive books to read for pleasure.

BookTrust Pack gifting 2023/24

Universal gifting



103%

of predicted birth rate
12,810 packs
gifted by Health
Visitors

Targeted gifting



1,633

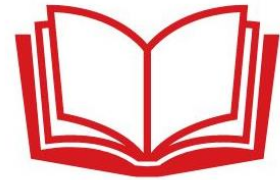
packs gifted by
Family Centres
and partners



2,746

packs gifted by Family
Centres, Early Years
settings and partners

Dual language



750

dual language picture
books gifted

Bookstart packs for children with additional needs

Gifting figures vary each year, according to the needs of the children



258

packs gifted to
children with
conditions affecting
their fine motor skills



7

packs gifted to
children who
are blind or
partially sighted



56

packs gifted
to children
who are
deaf

BookTrust Offers

Bookstart Baby (0–12 months)



The Bookstart Baby pack is available for all babies across Hertfordshire and is gifted as part of the core 'new baby' health check. The new pack for 2023-24 contains a felt flap book, a black & white card finger puppet and books-sharing guidance for caregivers.

This replaces the previous cloth bag which contained two board books. The feedback from families and Health Visitors about the new style is mixed, as you can see from the comments below.

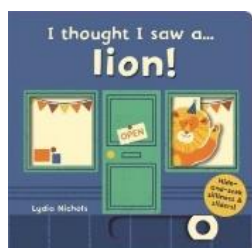
“Thank you for the Bookstart packs. They are lovely and gifting the packs is my favourite part of the visit. The families are usually delighted to receive a book. (Health Visitor, East Herts)

“I use the resources to talk about reading with baby, baby’s brain development, bonding, libraries and speech development. I have noticed that families that know about the previous bag are disappointed that it is not a cloth bag as they loved these, and they do notice that there is only 1 book now.” (Health Visitor, Watford and Three Rivers)

“I recently undertook a new birth visit in which I presented a pack to parents. They had a previous child under the age of 2 and commented positively on the visual impact of the updated pack and the quality of the book. It also helped with the inclusion of the older child in the visit and as to how they could support her transition into becoming the older sibling.” (Student Health Visitor).

Supporting children with additional needs – Bookstart Star

Bookstart provide specially designed packs to support children with additional needs, with sensory books that enable children to access stories in different ways according to their abilities. One of these packs is Bookstart Star for children with conditions affecting their fine motor skills, these are given out by Family Centres at their Early Adventurer courses. Packs are also sent to Hertfordshire Special Schools.



“Thank you for the Bookstart Star packs. The books are very engaging for our students. One of the children previously in my class particularly enjoyed the Lion book. She would consistently find it in the book box and then crouch on the floor looking at it. She would touch it and then move the lion back and forth watching him move. She could repeat this four or five times. She never tired of the book in the 2 years she was with me.” (Teacher, Breakspeare School)

Dual Language Packs

Dual language books are offered to families as part of the Bookstart Toddler and Pre-Schooler pack gifting. This year 750 packs were gifted. The most requested languages were Romanian, Turkish and Albanian.

Staff at the Hertsmere InspireAll Family Centre gave this feedback explaining how valuable they have found the dual language resources:

“We have taken advantage of ordering dual language books to supplement the Bookstart packs for our families where English is an additional language (EAL). This includes books for our Pre-Schooler project and our Young Explorers course. We will definitely continue ordering dual language books to support our EAL families on our courses as we can see how much the families appreciate these. One family on our Young Explorers course said: “Thank you so much, I can now read to my child at bedtime as I have this book in my language”.”

BookTrust Early Years Targeted Offer

BookTrust launched their Early Years Targeted Offer (EYTO) as a pilot in September 2022 in line with their new book gifting strategy to target resources to those families facing most disadvantage. The two packs (Bookstart Toddler and Bookstart Pre-Schooler) have been co-designed with families. The books have been specifically chosen to appeal to and engage those who may need additional support to enjoy regular reading as a family and the success of these choices is showcased in the feedback and case studies below.

Bookstart Toddler – for children aged 1-2 years



This pack is gifted mainly through the Family Centres as part of their emerging needs and family support offers. In January 2024 we also received an additional allocation of packs which were distributed to the Public Health Nursing teams to use with families at the 1- and 2-year developmental checks. Feedback from families includes:

“I didn’t realise we could start reading the story from any part that my child wants to. My son is now engaging more with books as I follow his lead.” (Parent who received a pack via an Early Talk Family Centre course)

“My son is nearly two and he loves the books from the Toddler pack, especially the dinosaur one. He takes it to bed with him each night and it is getting tattered because he has read it so much but he doesn’t want to be separated from it!” (Parent who received a pack via a Little Learners Family Centre course)



Case Study 1 - Bookstart Toddler pack

A family (Dad, Mum and 12-month-old daughter) attended a 5-week Little Learners course run by Dacorum Family Centre. This course is for targeted families, helping to support the child’s development needs and ensure their best start for life.

The family were gifted a Bookstart Toddler pack and staff gave the family ideas to encourage and enthuse their child with reading and enjoying stories.

Mum shared to a team member: *“The pack has help me to engage my daughter with different stories, especially the lift the flap ones. She has enjoyed joining in with both these books. We use the books after bath time and before bedtime. They are helpful for a chilled evening routine. They are good books for my child and engaging stories. We have now worked more books into our daytime routine. We will continue to use more age- appropriate books as she grows and develops.”*

Case Study 2 – gifting the Bookstart Early Years offer resources at a Home-Start family group

At a visit to a Home-Start family stay and play group to gift the Bookstart packs, the perception from most families was their children needed to sit still and be fully focused when they looked at books together. Many of the families explained how their little ones were busy toddlers and therefore “very active and not usually wanting to sit quietly on the sofa and listen to stories”. Once it was modelled how to have fun with the board books interactively; by making the noises, doing the actions, pretending to be the different dinosaurs etc, parents became excited to try this approach and explore the packs with their children.

Bookstart Pre-Schooler – for children aged 3-4 years



The Bookstart Pre-Schooler packs are given to families through Early Years settings. To maximise the impact of our limited allocation of these resources we identify settings using Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) funding data to reach low-income families.

Case study 3 - Bookstart Pre-Schooler feedback from a nursery setting in Dacorum

The books have had a positive impact and encouraged families to spend more quality time together, some families shared photos enjoying the books together at home. The nursery planned their activities in the setting to link with the books the children had taken home. The minibeasts book was perfect for creating lots of interest with the children and some lovely creative language development.

Case study 4 - Bookstart Pre-Schooler feedback from a nursery setting in Broxbourne

The children were excited to receive their book packs and show them to their parents. The nursery observed some parents showing lots of enthusiasm and other parents not so much. The minibeasts book had the most positive impact as the nursery then extended the children's learning with activities based on insects. Some children were able to talk about the books during circle time, highlighting where the books had been shared and enjoyed at home. One parent said that now, whenever their child is outside, they are looking for ladybirds and bugs (summer term) and show lots more interest when outside.

Highlights from Hertfordshire Libraries



99,270

Baby Rhyme Time
visits



29,100

Storytime
visits



1,277,102

Picture books
issued



7,948

New borrowers
aged 0-5

Early Years activities in libraries

Baby Rhyme Time and Storytime



All Tier 1 and 2 Libraries (and some Community Libraries) offer weekly Baby Rhyme Time and Storytime sessions, enabling families with young children to socialise, develop early language skills and have fun together. These activities are valued by families as demonstrated by a significant increase in attendance at both activities in 2023/24, Baby Rhyme Time saw a 33% increase and Storytime a 27% increase.

"We absolutely love the library. It's one of the nicest we've ever been to. The staff are amazing, helpful and kind. My daughter (2) comes regularly and it is her happy place" (Stevenage Library Storytime attendee)

Bilingual Cantonese Storytime at Harpenden Library

To engage the local Hong Kong community, a Cantonese speaking member of staff has launched a monthly Bilingual Storytime at Harpenden Library. Attendees have shared how these sessions are a lovely opportunity for the children to share and celebrate Cantonese language and heritage.

One parent shared that the sessions “give my daughters an awareness and appreciation of Cantonese. Their grandparents speak Cantonese but the girls only know a couple of words, this provides them with an additional motivation to learn it”



BookTrust Storytime



This is an annual promotion by BookTrust celebrating the best picture books of the year for sharing, with an aim to inspire families who currently do not engage with their local libraries to develop an ongoing library visiting habit. This year we used the promotion to connect with partners including Home-Start and Early Years settings (particularly those receiving the Bookstart Pre-Schooler packs) offering them outreach sessions. These visits enabled us to reach an additional 566 children and their caregivers across 29 sessions.

BookTrust provided every library with copies of the shortlist, as well as other promotional resources including a very popular sticker book which encouraged repeat attendance.

- 36 libraries ran BookTrust Storytime sessions during their usual Storytime
- 5,350 children and caregivers attended this seven-week programme of sessions, enjoying the books and voting for their favourite. These votes counted towards BookTrust's national winner. We saw a 16% increase on last years' attendees
- 47% of attendees came to more than one session
- Libraries saw a 30% increase in session attendance during the promotion comparing Storytime attendance during February 2024 (BookTrust Storytime) with November 2023 (a standard Storytime)

This year's winning title was 'Are you a Monster?' by Guilherme Karsten, which also won the Hertfordshire families' vote.



Feedback from library staff and families

“Engaging with the Home-Start group with BookTrust Storytime, and then with the Bookstart pack gifting, enabled us to welcome new families into the library environment. Seeing families engage with our services and become familiar with what we can offer has been so rewarding. We look forward to continuing to develop our relationship with Home-Start in the future.” (Library Assistant at Buntingford Library)

"My Grandson really likes Storytime. He used to be very shy but now joins in with the actions, age 4. Nana enjoys Storytime too!" (Royston Library)

"Very nice to have a place we can go to socialise so we don't have to stay at home". (Cheshunt Library)

"The format works well with stories, songs and the activity with stickers. I find my daughter is engaged. A highlight is the relaxed environment that's suitable for her, and the way the leader interacts with the children - big thumbs up, thank you." (Bishop's Stortford Library)

My Firsts – Hertfordshire Libraries' early years library joining incentive



The My Firsts promotion, featuring the character 'Tala the Storyteller', was launched in September 2022 with a bespoke library card for children aged 0-5 years and a series of My First certificates to collect. To build on the branding a Tala soft toy was created and is now being used at early years activities to demonstrate songs and rhymes. The toy is capturing the children's imagination and families have commented how colourful and engaging the toy is, with children wanting to say 'hello' as they come into the library. Staff from one of our libraries observed that when they first introduced Tala at Baby Rhyme Time, a little boy (who normally finds it hard to join in calmly) was so transfixed with Tala he was able to stay focused and to join in the whole session.

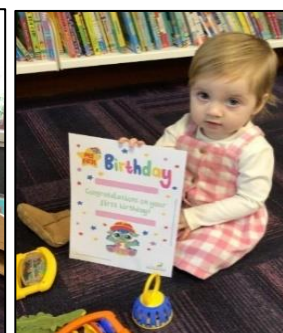
Inspiring families with My Firsts

My Firsts' ongoing success as a joining incentive is down to front line library staff engaging with customers, partners and communities. The high-quality early years activities offered by libraries are valued by families, along with the friendly conversations staff have around the joys of book sharing and the benefits of being a coveted owner of a 'My First library card'. A new Mum told staff at Hemel Hempstead Library:



"My friend introduced me to Rhyme Time. She has now moved away but I still come. It's nice for me to get out and talk to people. Coming here has helped build my confidence and I've made friends too. A few of us now go out to other activities together. When I first came here I was very nervous, but everyone put me at ease.

I have joined both myself and my daughter to the library. A member of staff said about reading to her even though I thought she would be too young. My daughter loves to look at books and to babble back. We now have three certificates and I was excited to send photos of her with them to family. My friend is going to come back especially in May so both our little ones can get their My First Birthday certificates." (Mum to six-month-old baby)



My First Library Adventure promotion for Reception children

The new 'My First Library Adventure' promotion, ran throughout autumn, to encourage all Reception children to visit, explore, join, and regularly use their local library. Promotional bookmarks, along with information on how libraries can support the transition to starting school, were sent to 370 schools reaching 15,000 children.

The promotion saw a significant rise in library engagement from the target age group:

- New borrowers aged 4-5 increased from 71 new joiners in May 2023 to 347 children in September (489% increase) and a further 227 children in October (320% increase)
- The promotion saw a 472% increase in children aged 4-5 borrowing at least one item from the library (comparing 1,339 active library borrowers in May 2023 with 6,320 in November 2023)

To incentivise schools to engage with the promotion, we offered a chance to win two special class visits with Alex Willmore, author and illustrator of 'I did see a Mammoth!' and 'Spyceratops'. Sixty excited Reception children from Green Lanes School (at Hatfield Library) and a further sixty children from Applecroft School (at Welwyn Garden City Library) enjoyed lively events with Alex as he gave a very interactive reading of his picture book "I did see a Mammoth!" with the children's loud shouts of "Mammoth" reverberating around both libraries. The children then helped Alex create a large mammoth picture with their imaginative design ideas, before drawing their own mini mammoths. The excitement of these visits is captured in our promotional video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9r92o6xdBT4>



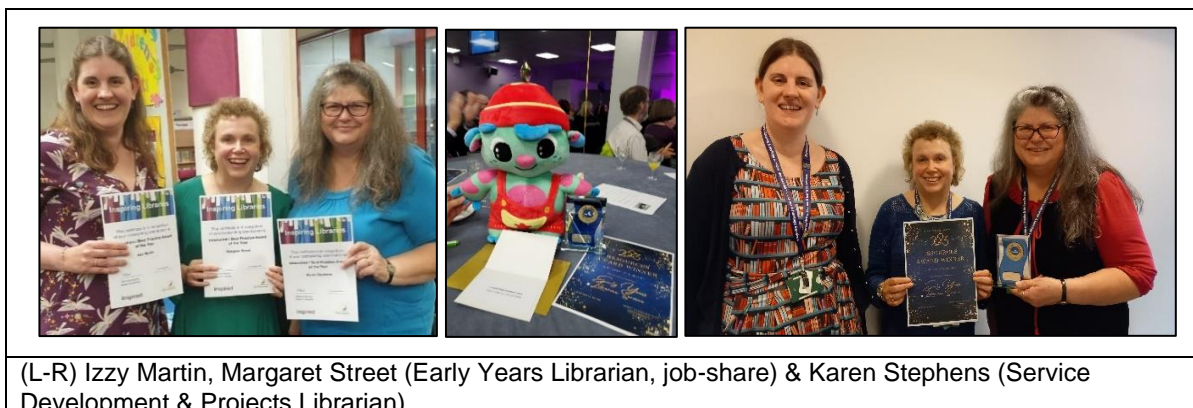
Fifty children from across Hertfordshire won personalised signed copies of the story.



My Firsts – an award-winning promotion

The Inspiring Libraries Awards celebrate best practise across Hertfordshire Libraries. Izzy Martin, Margaret Street, and Karen Stephens won the 2023 award for Innovation/Best Practise for the creation and design of the My Firsts initiative which captures the imagination of children aged 0-5 with visually appealing materials, aiming to embed a lifelong library habit.

My Firsts then went on to win 'Most Innovative Project' at Hertfordshire County Council's inaugural Resources awards in December 2023. These awards celebrate the work of Resources staff who go above and beyond - showing dedication and commitment in their role, to HCC and to the people of Hertfordshire.



(L-R) Izzy Martin, Margaret Street (Early Years Librarian, job-share) & Karen Stephens (Service Development & Projects Librarian)

In their role as Early Years Librarian (job-share), Izzy and Margaret were nominated for, and reached the national shortlist of the Libraries Connected awards. These are prestigious awards in the library world, and they are one of six shortlisted nominees in the 'Children's Promise' category. The nomination was in recognition of their dedication and tireless efforts in promoting the importance of library membership, the love of books and book sharing from the earliest age to families and Early Years partners across Hertfordshire.

<https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/libraries-connected-awards-shortlist-2024>

Libraries supporting community and partner initiatives

CBeebies' Tiny Happy People event in North Watford

North Watford Library staff attended CBeebies' Tiny Happy People Storytime event at the Watford Asda superstore. They were invited to showcase how they support families to develop their children's language and communication skills, alongside other local Early Years professionals including the Family Centre. It was an excellent opportunity to promote the library service to a new audience of families, with the team performing several Baby Rhyme Time sessions, singing to over 75 people each time.



Breastfeeding friendlies



All Hertfordshire Libraries are signed up to HCC's new 'Breastfeeding Friendly' scheme to support and encourage Mums to feel confident about breastfeeding in public. As Hertfordshire Libraries have always been breastfeeding friendly, with many Mums feeling comfortable to feed their baby during our Early Years Activities, Hemel Hempstead Library was chosen as a location to film the new promotional video:

<https://healthforunder5s.co.uk/hertfordshire/services/specialist-support/breastfeeding-out-about-in-public/>

Supporting the Healthy Mouths initiative in Hertfordshire

The Healthy Mouths programme is a partnership with the Hertfordshire Family Centre Service and Public Health Nursing with the aim of improving the oral health of vulnerable under 5s through distribution of an oral pack to encourage tooth brushing and healthy eating. The Early Years Librarians are represented on the working group sharing their knowledge of picture books to help source a suitable story to include in the pack.

To support the campaign, Hertfordshire Libraries' My First promotion includes a 'My First Tooth' certificate with a rhyme on the reverse, especially created to share key oral health messages. At Early Years Activities staff regularly share a lively and easy to remember toothbrushing song. This feedback was shared from Abbots Langley Library:

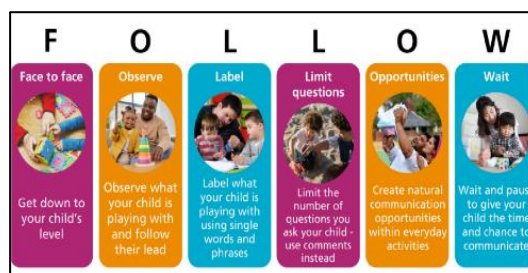
"Halfway through our BRT we did the toothbrush song and Tala was taken away from us by one of the children who promptly started brushing Tala's teeth. It was delightful to see. The parents are also reacting positively to having a song to encourage their little one to clean their teeth and I regularly overhear people say they will try it out at home." - Library Manager



FOLLOW - Speech, Language and Communication campaign

The Early Years Librarians have been part of a working group to develop HCC's new Speech, Language and Communication campaign, using their professional knowledge to contribute ideas, collaborate on the design of materials and provide themed booklists. 'FOLLOW' launched in Spring 2024 and gives caregivers fun ideas and top tips on using the key strategies through everyday activities.

The campaign can be found at: <https://linktr.ee/EYFOLLOW>



Supporting Early Years Service's consultation work with Dads

HCC's Early Years Service have been looking to improve services for dads in Hertfordshire, including running consultation groups at Family Centres to gather feedback on how they can better support dads. The Early Years Librarians have been supporting this work by running their black and white book making activity at the groups to act as an ice breaker. Attending these groups was also a great opportunity to promote the library and the benefits of reading together from birth, as well as to gather the dads' feedback on our services.

Working with the Ohana family group for care experienced young parents



Ohana is a newly created HCC support / friendship group for care experienced young parents. In November 2023 Early Years Librarian, Margaret Street, went along to meet the families at their regular gatherings, firstly in Stevenage and then the following week in St. Albans. It was an opportunity to promote the library and the benefits of sharing books with young children, while gifting Bookstart Toddler and Pre-Schooler packs for the families to enjoy at home.

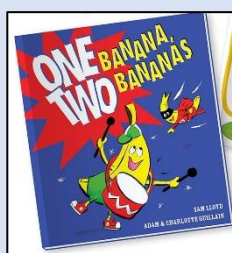
Case study 5 – Developing new language through an interactive board book.

Family 1 took home ‘First words with a ladybird’ – an interactive board book with finger trails and lots of objects to spot in the pictures. Mum explained how it was very much enjoyed by her son who is nearly 2 years old.

“Since we got the ladybird book he has been really excited by it, wanting to look at it every day. He will pass me the book and sit there and let me read it to him. He likes doing the finger trails and at the end there is a big page showing pictures of all the different things in the book. He likes to point to the pictures and tell you what they are and then find them on the other pages. It is helping with his talking and he has learnt lots of new words. Before he was given this book he wasn’t interested in me reading to him at all. This one appeals to him because it’s interactive and there is lots to look at and now he happily looks at it by himself too.”



Case study 6 – The right book for the right child, with all the things he loves to do!



Family 2 took home The Bookstart Pre-Schooler pack which includes the ‘One Banana, Two Bananas’ picture book. Mum was really excited to explain the fun she had had with her very active 3-year-old son as they enjoyed the book together:

“When we got home we looked inside the book pack together. He loves the ‘One Banana, Two Bananas’ story. He really likes counting the bananas and having fun copying the dancing. He has wanted me to read it to him every night. It makes him very happy as counting and dancing are his most favourite things to do. Thank you so much”

For further information on Bookstart in Hertfordshire please contact:

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For national information on Bookstart please visit: www.booktrust.org.uk