

British Library Research Strategy

2024–2030

Context

The British Library is the national library of the UK and one of the world's greatest research libraries. We make our intellectual heritage accessible to everyone, for research, inspiration and enjoyment.

This vision is central to *Knowledge Matters*, the Library's strategy for growth, innovation and development for 2023 to 2030. It is underpinned by six purposes defining what we do as the UK national library: research, custodianship, culture, learning, business and international engagement.

A core purpose is to support and stimulate research of all kinds. This reflects our role as an indispensable resource for researchers, as well as our capacity as an Independent Research Organisation (IRO). As an IRO, Library staff conduct research and collaborate with other researchers to create new knowledge, with a particular focus on the Library's collection, services and infrastructure.

Purpose of this strategy

This strategy sets out the overarching principles for our research in the coming 6 years, how we will use our expertise and collections to generate new knowledge and understanding, and support the delivery of *Knowledge Matters*. It is designed to inform decision-making, resource allocation and income generation.

Scope of this strategy

This strategy is concerned with research undertaken by Library staff and affiliated researchers only. 'Affiliated researchers' are those with whom the Library has a formal relationship, such as Fellows and postgraduate research (PGR) students, and does not cover external partners and collaborators, or our Readers. We expect that the majority of research undertaken by our staff will result in outputs which are directly connected to answering the Library's strategic needs.

We define research, for the purpose of this strategy, as any form of sustained, disciplined and replicable inquiry, using appropriate research methodologies (theoretical or practise-based), that aims to generate original knowledge about our collection and practices. This definition of research also includes the training and supervision of PGR students.

We aim to support high quality research of publishable standard, which is of institutional, national and international significance, and is shared openly and accessibly. Although a peer-reviewed journal may not always be the most appropriate form of research sharing, we believe that knowledge exchange is a key component of the research we conduct.

Many staff have the knowledge and skills to conduct independent, rigorous research, regardless of previous academic research experience. We aim to create an inclusive, supportive and ethical research culture where colleagues can gain the necessary skills and experience to contribute to, and ultimately lead, a strategically-relevant research project, such as curating an exhibition, developing and testing a new service or working on an externally-funded collaborative research project.

Benefits of staff-led research

Research conducted by Library staff and affiliated researchers, often in collaboration with external experts, underpins the understanding of collections in our care and the services the Library develops to make these materials available to users, thus enhancing the quality of the UK's research information and infrastructure.

Applied and practice-based research about user needs, digital technologies and infrastructure underpins the development of our own services and collections. It helps us to better understand how different audiences could use our content

now and in the future, both onsite and online. Research also plays a key role in the development of our exhibitions, cultural offerings and learning programme.

IRO status

The Library's internal capacity to carry out research that substantially extends and enhances the national research base, and our independent capability to undertake and lead research programmes, is recognised by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through our designation as an Independent Research Organisation. As an IRO we can lead on UKRI-funded research projects and receive research funding. The IRO status is a mark of excellence which attracts greater recognition for our research activities, brings in financial resources, signals our standing in the academic community, helps attract international funding and collaboration, and improves our engagement with research organisations around the world.

In order to retain our IRO status, which we have held since 2006, the Library is required to maintain research processes and standards which uphold the quality and integrity of the research it undertakes. The Research Development department is responsible for maintaining our IRO status.

Objectives

1 Build staff research capacity

People are at the heart of discovery and innovation. Ensuring that our researchers have the infrastructure and skills needed to deliver world-class research will therefore be central to realising this strategy's vision. In order to maximise the benefits of research, we need to utilise and develop staff research expertise. We will build the capacity of existing staff and also develop the next-generation of researchers through our PhD programmes. We will facilitate Library staff in their roles as researchers by supporting their continual involvement in embedded research initiatives offered both centrally and locally, and enhancing the intellectual and supervisory capabilities of the Library. We will continue to nurture doctoral research and will develop new opportunities for early career researchers across the Library.

2 Develop an inclusive research culture

We believe it is important that a range of staff at different levels should have research skills and should be able to use them when appropriate opportunities arise in the course of their work. We will support innovative practice-based research methods and reflective practices for Library professionals, and showcase and enable access to diverse research approaches within the Library. In line with the British Library's People Strategy, we will work with our staff to identify and deliver activities to build our organisational research capacity and support networks.

3 Grow the impact of research both internally and externally

We will increase the visibility of our research activities and disseminate our research effectively, sharing our research outcomes and publicising our ongoing work creatively and engagingly, including through our annual Research Report. We will continue to work with colleagues across the sector, both nationally and internationally, to research, develop and disseminate best-practice through our work with bodies aimed at improving research infrastructures and cultures, such as AI4LAM (Artificial Intelligence for Libraries, Archives and Museums), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships (CDP) Consortium.

4 Develop opportunities for internal and external research collaboration

We will continue to lead and participate in externally funded research projects, securing income from research councils and philanthropic funders. We will create opportunities for research across the breadth of the Library's work. We will enable internal cooperation, as well as strengthen and develop new external partnerships, and provide opportunities for collaboration and access to our broad range of expertise, to help the Library address current and future challenges. In line with our International Strategy, we will explore opportunities for research collaborations with new and existing international partners.

5 Maintain the Library's IRO status

We will review and strengthen our research processes and standards to uphold the quality and integrity of the research we undertake, and to comply with the requirements of our funders.

Research priorities

Acknowledging the key strategic priority areas for the Library as set out in *Knowledge Matters*, including the particular focus on science and AI, the following cross-departmental and multidisciplinary themes offer a structured approach for research activity within the Library. Through these priorities we will also inform the key enabling strands which underpin the priorities in *Knowledge Matters*: for example, research will support staff development and wellbeing; will inform the delivery of the Race Equality Action Plan; will contribute to the transformation of the Library's digital collections; will secure research and philanthropic funding; and will help the Library meet its sustainability goals.

Each of the following priorities is grounded in research relating to the collection and the delivery of Library services, with digital being fundamental across all of them. While research throughout the Library will not be limited to these themes, significant emphasis and resources will be allocated to advancing exploration and initiatives within these areas.

- **Collection histories** – Research into the histories of our collection enhances and develops our understanding, informing how we manage and present them as a keeper of national memory. Projects in this area may include provenance research; investigating the lives and legacies of collectors and institutions; histories of curation; conservation and dispersal.
- **New narratives** – Our collection is full of stories that are relevant to contemporary issues and have the potential to engage new audiences, which need to be surfaced through high-quality research. Such projects will inform many aspects of our long-term public programming, including exhibitions, live events, broadcasts, digital resources, events and publications.
- **Innovations in library services** – Libraries are research infrastructure, and as the national library, we must continue to adapt and improve how we provide national infrastructure and services across disciplines in response to changing needs and opportunities.
- **Policy and practice** – Our practice-based research engages with areas including cultural and heritage policy and practice; sustainability; issues of access, equality, diversity, and inclusion in libraries; co-collecting and co-curation; learning programmes; information literacy; libraries' engagement with creative industries and their social, cultural and economic value.

Governance

The British Library Research Strategy Group is an internal group responsible for providing strategic oversight, advice and steerage for the Library's research priorities and behaviours, and how they support the Library's wider purposes as set out in *Knowledge Matters*. A sub-committee of the Research Strategy Group manages the Library's research ethics approvals processes and governance. Research Strategy Group provides assurance for UKRI and its constituent funding bodies that research activity at the British Library is conducted in line with appropriate standards befitting an Independent Research Organisation.

Research Strategy Group will provide guidance and devolve approvals for smaller-scale research activity to local areas and managers as appropriate to help develop a vibrant research culture across the organisation.

The Library's Research Development team develops the Library's research profile, funding, governance and capacity through engagement with staff and the external research community across all disciplines. The team's remit includes coordination of internal Library processes to ensure new research projects and collaborations have appropriate approval and support.

Funding

Research across the Library is supported by a range of funding sources. Research which takes place in the regular course of work, such as exhibition research or supervision, is paid for by central (grant-in-aid) funds; this is also true of contributions to external research collaborations which are provided in-kind. Other research is funded by Research Council or philanthropic funding. Research Strategy Group recognises the range of ways in which our research is funded, ensuring that the delivery of the Objectives, through the Research Priorities, maintains value for money and demonstrates effective use of Library resources.

Delivering the Strategy

Delivery of this Strategy will be guided by an implementation plan, with yearly deliverables. This will be a live document, capable of adapting to changing circumstances and evidence needs. Responsibility for delivering this plan and related activities will sit with Research Strategy Group, with different areas of implementation devolved to the Research Development team as well as local areas as appropriate. The Research Strategy Group will work with teams across the Library to collate yearly research plans, based on existing directorate and team plans. This will help us to monitor activity against our priorities and demonstrate success in meeting our evidence needs. Alongside the annual review of the implementation plan, this Strategy will be reviewed in 2026–27, at the half-way point, to ensure it is still providing a suitable framework for our research ambitions.