

The Ministry of Culture  
The Ministry of Education and Research

Strategy

# A space for democracy and self-cultivation

National strategy for libraries 2020–2023

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## Libraries, public enlightenment and self-cultivation

Libraries are houses of democracy: from the National Library of Norway to public libraries, school libraries, special libraries and research libraries. Together, they constitute an important part of the democratic infrastructure and are one of the cornerstones of democracy. The Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Research are therefore joining forces to present the new national strategy for libraries.

Throughout Norway, libraries are successfully serving the nation as relevant cultural arenas, learning arenas and meeting places. The libraries are, and should be, open, inclusive and accessible places for recreation, debate, knowledge and enlightenment. What was relevant yesterday will not necessarily be relevant tomorrow. Democracy cannot be taken for granted. The national strategy for libraries must therefore empower libraries to act as knowledge arenas, where users can access quality-assured information and research.

In the four years since the last national strategy for libraries was published, visitor numbers at public libraries in Norway have increased considerably. A survey conducted in 2018 showed that as much as 54 per cent of the population had visited a library during the preceding year. This is the highest figure since records began. Much of the increase is a result of the focus on libraries as an arena for debate, dissemination and cultural experiences in the *National strategy for libraries 2015–2018*. Measures were implemented that saw the reversal of a long-standing negative trend. However, we should be proud, but never satisfied. The fact that 54 per cent of the population visited a library in 2018 means that almost half did not.

Public enlightenment relates to the library's role as an arena for knowledge, where the public can access research and sources, and the library can facilitate the development of critical thinking and digital judgment in the population. Ever since the first public book collections were established in Norway almost 200 years ago, the library has served as an institution for self-cultivation. Library staff have worked to ensure that the public can read and access knowledge and culture. The role of disseminator and provider of access to book collections and research is just as relevant today, and can be strengthened by expanding the cooperation between public libraries and libraries in the university and university college sector.

Modern libraries shall be relevant institutions in local communities, schools and other learning arenas. They offer a haven with access to knowledge and culture. As a meeting place, libraries play a key role in integration and training, and as a service institution in the municipality. Local authorities that develop good and accessible libraries promote democracy and create a sense of community.

The population's interest in literature and reading is historically strong, but is constantly being challenged by other forms of entertainment and new platforms. This does not diminish the importance of libraries; literature, reading and access to knowledge are just as important in today's society. Access to knowledge is essential for participating in society and helps counteract inequalities among the population.

Applying this strategy will enable the government to develop the libraries as visible institutions in municipalities, schools and learning institutions. The goal is for libraries to introduce new users to literature and reading, facilitate knowledge dissemination and expand digital collections. The government will implement strategic measures that support libraries and librarians in attracting more users, including those who do not visit libraries.

In recent decades, the framework conditions in the cultural and knowledge sector have changed considerably. Music, film, newspapers and much of our acquisition of knowledge have been digitalized. Knowledge and culture that were previously only accessible by visiting large institutions, cinemas, universities or libraries can now be accessed at home on computers, tablets and mobile phones. Anyone can now carry out online searches in large knowledge bases that were previously

only available to a select few researchers. Knowledge and culture are more accessible than ever before. However, just because we are able to access an almost infinite amount of knowledge does not mean that we seek it out or use it. On the contrary, online knowledge and information are actually competing with – and often losing out to – ‘fake news’, rumours and propaganda. The government wants libraries to serve as a counterforce to this.

We need libraries that are relevant. In order to achieve this, we need to join forces and ensure that our libraries are moving in the same direction and successfully attracting new user groups. We are pleased to present this national strategy for libraries, which seeks to help libraries serve as inclusive cultural arenas, today and in the future. Libraries should be a base for both knowledge and cultural experiences; accessible to all.

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## PART I – BACKGROUND

### 1 The government's library policy

Report to the Storting No. 8 (2018–2019), *Kulturens kraft – Kulturpolitikk for framtida* (The Power of Culture – Cultural Policy for the Future) sets out the overarching political direction for the cultural policy. The white paper describes priorities and presents new national cultural policy goals. The main message is that art and culture are expressions that build society, and that a rich and varied cultural life is crucial to freedom of expression and a well-functioning democracy. Libraries are part of the core infrastructure in society that is needed to achieve several of the cultural policy goals set out in the white paper. A focus on libraries is particularly relevant to facilitating a free and independent cultural life that:

- fosters self-cultivation and critical reflection,
- safeguards and disseminates cultural heritage,
- is accessible to all and encourages the individual to experience and participate in cultural activities,
- provides meeting places and brings people together,
- is innovative and adaptable, and
- strengthens the Norwegian language, the Sami languages, the national minority languages and Norwegian sign language as fundamental bearers of culture.

The white paper states: 'A democratic society with an open and enlightened public discourse is based on people having knowledge about and an understanding of the society they are part of. Today's information society makes great demands on people, asking them to develop critical reasoning and expand their horizon of understanding in order to be able to evaluate sources, examine what is true and false, and make independent decisions.'

On this basis, the government presents the *National strategy for libraries 2020–2023*, with reference to the central government's responsibilities and tasks for the development of a future-oriented library sector, where public libraries, school libraries and university and university college libraries are viewed in conjunction with each other. The aim is to further develop the libraries as relevant and important institutions in the future, in a way that will contribute to public enlightenment and self-cultivation.

The strategy builds on the *National strategy for libraries 2015–2018* and details the government's library policy for the period 2020–2023. The Granavold political platform stipulates the following in relation to libraries: 'The government will invest in public and school libraries, partly by strengthening the work on digital platforms and new models for operating libraries' and further that 'The government will strengthen the national reading projects'. In order to improve cooperation and foster opportunities for the further development of libraries in a broader sense, it is appropriate to include libraries in higher education in the national strategy for libraries.

Public and school libraries are owned by the local authorities, while most special libraries and research libraries are owned by universities and university colleges. The bulk of the development work must be driven by the library owners themselves, but the central government shall facilitate cooperation in a national library system, good framework conditions and the scope for testing new services and operating models. The strategy specifies what measures the central government will take to stimulate this development. We have received a range of proposals and input regarding specific measures that the central government can take to help strengthen the libraries. The Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Research have considered the proposals, and set out clearly in the *National strategy for libraries 2020–2023* what responsibilities and tasks the central government will assume vis-à-vis the libraries. The Ministries also describe how, through the National Library of Norway, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, education institutions and UNIT (Norwegian Directorate for ICT and Joint Services in Higher Education and Research), the central government can best facilitate and contribute to innovation, capacity building and development throughout the library sector. This applies both to the development and operation of shared services and to the allocation of project and development funding. To this end, the National Library of Norway administers NOK 48.5