
Vääna Library

Vääna Library is more than a hundred years old. Before the renovation it sat on the second floor of a manor building, up a narrow staircase, and one librarian ran the entire service. Today the library is on the ground floor and is the most accessible in the municipality. It hosts concerts, exhibitions and workshops, and the number of book lending is growing.

Together with the community we defined the library's new role. On that basis we designed the services and the space plan, which became the brief for the construction tender.



Client

Harku Municipality Libraries

Service design

Velvet

Design process

April – August 2024

Library opened

7 October 2025

The project was supported by the Public Libraries Accelerator programme

What we remembered most was how out of breath they were

At the start of the project the same scene kept repeating in Vääna. An elderly woman climbed the narrow stairs of the manor house to the second floor. At the top she had to catch her breath, and only then went to talk with the librarian. She had come as much for the conversation as for the books.

The library mattered most to the very people who found it hardest to reach. From the outside there was no sign that the building held a library at all.

The Vääna area is changing fast: more than 5000 people live in its fourteen villages and young families keep arriving. A library approaching its hundredth birthday was carried by one much-loved librarian. Opening hours were short and unpredictable. Because the room sat next to the school, it was seen as a place for children, so adults did not feel it was for them. The team saw a bigger role for the library but had no framework to start from.

Earlier fixes — a better sign, a small renovation — did not answer the core question: **what is this library for?**



The old library was cosy but cramped: the librarian's desk was buried under books, the entrance was shared with the school gym, and shoes were left at the door.

14

villages in the service area

5000+

residents

1

librarian

Services start with a role

The client asked us to use service design to develop Vääna Library's services and to propose a space plan. Our research quickly showed that the question was not only how to make lending books smoother. First we had to rethink what the library is for in a changing community.

What was missing was a shared basis for decision-making: who the library is for, what value it creates, and how services, programming, space, communication and staff work should support that role. We looked for the answer together with the community.

Our task was to create a concept that guides both everyday choices and long-term decisions about space. We started with the role, not the room. Otherwise we would simply have rebuilt the old assumption in a new space.

PROJECT GOAL, AS WE REFRAMED IT

Rethink the library's services and experience around being the heart of the community, in order to broaden the readership and be an inviting place for locals and visitors alike.

Four sub-goals

- Increase the library's visibility in the community
- Improve access and availability
- Speak to different user groups
- Give the library the role of a community leader

Before we drew anything, we listened to seven villages

We did not want to rely only on what the team already knew. We ran **seven semi-structured in-depth interviews** with residents of Vääna, Viti, Vahi, Vaila, Adra, Liikva and Sõrve, aged 17 to 85, both users and non-users. We also ran **community focus groups, talked with the team** and carried out **observations** at the library at different times of day.

We also studied libraries that let people create rather than only consume: the Oslo library of things, Oodi in Helsinki, maker spaces. Using the Golden Circle we articulated **the value proposition**. Separately we **mapped services, alternatives and barriers to access**.

It turned out that even inside the team there were several understandings of the library's value. A shared answer still had to be found.

Around the table were the library, the municipality and the county library, with the school, kindergarten, youth centre and Vääna Society as stakeholders.

"A library is also a place that brings people together — without it we would not have met you at all, yet here we all are because of the library."

Interviewee, user research 2024

The research distinguished **six user profiles**. From these we built six personas with experience journeys: a pupil, a remote worker, a culture enthusiast, a teacher, a parent of a small child and an avid reader. For each persona we articulated a value proposition against which later ideas could be tested.



Joosep



Toomas



Eevi



Aivi



Loore



Karin

Three things the research brought to light

Accessibility was not a question of ramps

The stairs were a real problem, but not the only one. People also stayed away because of unpredictable opening hours and unclear information, and because the room did not feel like it was for them unless they had a small child with them.

So we recommended **solutions that do not depend on one person's working hours**: ID-card entry, a self-service kiosk, an outdoor returns locker and room booking.

The community wanted two opposite things

Opinions in the focus groups diverged. Some wanted a place to work and to meet as citizens. Others feared the new role would pull the library away from literature, and that a small team could not keep new promises.

We did not pick a side. **Literature and local history stayed as important as the new services**. A volunteer network was there to extend what a small team could do.

The skills were there, the infrastructure was not

People had plenty to teach and share — from gardening to handicraft. What was missing was the space, the time and the organising to make it happen. Nobody expected the library to do everything itself.

The library's role was not to provide everything, but **to give the community space and support**: a volunteer network, "Friends of the Library", community-led workshops and a library of things.

None of the three was in the initial brief. All three came from what people told us. Some of the findings ran directly against the initial expectation.

Five pillars that also let us say “no”

In two co-creation workshops we defined the library's new role together with the team: **Vääna Library becomes a flexibly open community space that connects people with literature and with each other, while keeping local history alive.**

At first there were four pillars. The research showed one was missing: community builder. **The community is not this library's target group, but its co-author.**

We added six experience principles to the pillars: **accessible, informed, personal, collaborative, visible and reaching beyond the walls.** For each principle we wrote control questions for judging new ideas. That turned the framework into a tool for deciding what to do — and what to say “no” to.

Supporter of culture

Brings diverse cultural experiences to Vääna.

Connector through literature

Connects people of every age with reading that matters to them.

Keeper of local history

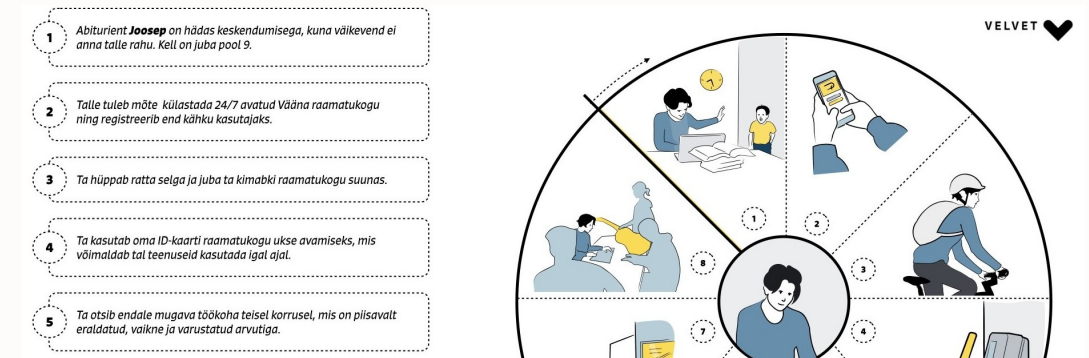
Preserves local heritage and helps share it.

Lifelong learning partner

Offers learning based on the community's real needs.

Community builder

Creates space and programming that bring people together.



The experience journeys tested what each pillar actually changes in a real person's day. Here Joosep, a final-year student, needs a quiet place after school. Journey diagram from the Estonian project report.

We did not stop at a workshop. We invited the authors in.

In a workshop we heard what people think, but that does not show whether they actually turn up. So we staged **Vääna's first author festival as a living prototype**: two authors, a mini book fair and three research activities woven into it. Then we watched who came.

People who did not normally use the library turned up. We observed which formats spoke to people, how the space works with a crowd in it, and whether the community is ready to contribute when given the room. The results fed into the service portfolio and the space plan.

We also **tested the concept with a written survey**. There were 33 respondents. We deliberately asked about the ideas that departed most from the library's existing role. The feedback was largely positive. Only after these tests did we make the final choices about the space.



Vääna's first author festival, summer 2024. A living prototype created as part of the project.

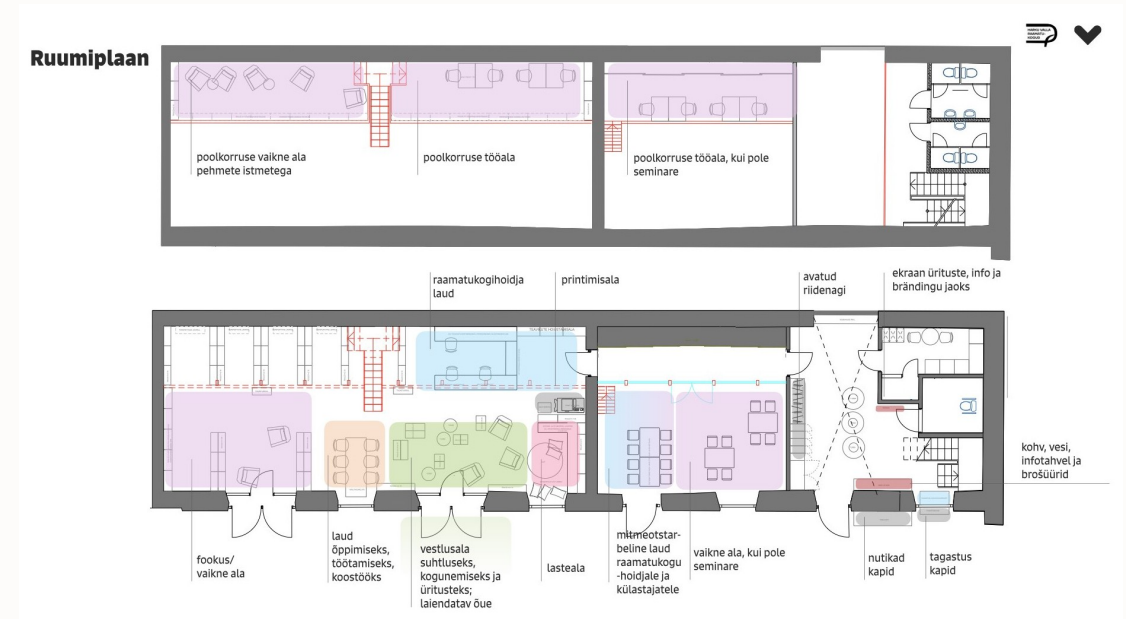
The space plan became the tender brief

What we handed over was the **value proposition, the experience principles, six personas and journeys, a service portfolio in five parts, three iterations of the space layout, mood boards and material recommendations.** The accessibility recommendations reached from the interior to the paving from the car park to the door. All of it came together in an 80-page Estonian-language report.

The space plan became the basis for the renovation tender. The library was rebuilt in two stages and reopened in October 2025. The municipality invested over 830 000 euros; the Ministry of Culture added 92 127 euros.

"The space plan was realised fairly close to what the service design report proposed."

Director, Harku Municipality Libraries, August 2026



The space plan from the report: zones, shelf heights, self-service, returns lockers, kitchen, seminar room, children's area and the mezzanine work area. Drawing from the Estonian report.

300 m²

three times the previous floor area

18 200

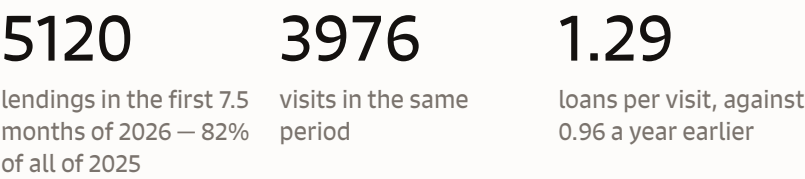
books, capacity 25 000 items

5 years

of renovation in total

Not all of it is done yet

Some recommendations have been carried out, some start this autumn and some wait for the third stage. So we show separately what is done and what is still planned.



The 2025 comparison covers a full year including the construction period. The renewed library has been open for ten months, so the comparison is still preliminary. The growth in loans is clear all the same.

“The space flows nicely — there is room for children and for adults. Feedback from users is always positive. The words that come up are beautiful, warm, inviting.”

Director, Harku Municipality Libraries, August 2026

Done	The space plan and zones — built from the report
Done	Moved to an accessible floor; the building is wheelchair-accessible
Done	Children’s and adults’ areas form one continuous space
Done	Technical readiness for ID-card access
Done	RFID self-service lending and automatic returns, integrated with URRAM
Done	Outdoor parcel locker for collecting and returning books, 24/7
Done	Community kitchen and coffee corner
Done	Seminar and exhibition room, work pods for focused work
Done	Music collection and listening area, vinyl, restored piano
Done	Concerts, exhibitions, author meetings, workshops from cooking to history
Done	Museum Night with the manor school, closer work with village leaders
Done	New roles: library teacher, curator, head of audience programmes
In autumn	24/7 access goes live; Saturday opening from September
Stage III	Collecting and exhibiting local history as a hub for ideas
Pending	Outdoor area, hard paving from car park to door, library of things

Status confirmed by the director in August 2026.

One room for working, reading and meeting



The same room holds literary evenings, a quiet reading corner and a work area on the mezzanine. Flexible zones and movable shelving made that possible — two central principles of the space plan.



A meeting with an author.



Story time for children, on cushions.



A workshop families do together.



Night library instructions on the wall.

The people changed. The work stayed.

The project ended in August 2024. **After that the director, the librarian and the team all changed.** In that situation design work easily disappears into a drawer.

In Vääna it did not. The report stayed on the municipality's website, and the new director read it while applying for the job. The finished space follows the plan. The director's own plans — extended access, Saturday opening, a local history centre, work with the school — largely overlap with our recommendations. At the opening, the mayor called the library the heart of the community.

"A library is not merely a place where books are kept. It is the heart of the community, a store of knowledge, a quiet refuge for reflection and a meeting place for ideas."

Erik Sandla, Mayor of Harku Municipality, at the opening on 7 October 2025

For users

A library you can enter in a wheelchair and without getting out of breath on the stairs. The service is more than lending: concerts, exhibitions and workshops, and a community kitchen to use. Loans are growing. Users describe the space as "beautiful, warm, inviting" — exactly the experience the project set out to create.

For the organisation

The decision framework survived a change of leadership. New roles shared out work that had rested on one person and gave the municipality a clearer basis for planning resources.

Economically

An investment of 830 000 euros had a clear concept and space plan in place before the tender. Self-service allows opening hours to be extended without staff hours growing at the same rate.

For the community and the environment

No new building was put up. The floor area in use in the century-old manor house tripled, and the space gained flexible furniture and movable shelving. Vääna is now visited on professional study trips. Its starting point is familiar to many village libraries in Estonia.

Before we designed the space, we agreed on the library's role. That order is what keeps the work alive even when the people change.