



# Northumberland

## County Council

### **CABINET**

**DATE: 09 MARCH 2021**

### **Northumberland Public Library Service Consultation**

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**Cabinet Member:** Cllr Jeff Watson, Portfolio Holder for Healthy Lives

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#### **Purpose of report**

To provide members with an overview of the key findings from the Library Service public consultation completed in June 2020. The report also identifies the capacity and accessibility improvement measures introduced to the Service during 2020 and outlines a three-stage approach to Service redesign based on evident need.

#### **Recommendations**

Cabinet is recommended to:

- Note the completion of the Library Service consultation in accordance with the project brief and to consider the findings of the study
- Agree a three-phase approach for redesign of the Library Service based on:
  - (A) Strengthening the core service
  - (B) Establishment of Library Hubs within each Locality area
  - (C) Extending reach and partnerships
- Note the capacity and accessibility improvement measures introduced to the Service during 2020
- Note progress on the development of a Library Service Strategy 2021-2026

#### **Link to Corporate Plan**

This report is relevant to the following priorities in the Corporate Plan:

- *Health and Wellbeing* - Libraries offer a wide range of information which support public health and wellbeing activities including social activities to be active and well
- *Stronger Communities and Families* - Libraries offer social support networks and information to support residents of Northumberland to seek advice/support within our communities
- *Economic Growth* - Libraries provide a hub for individuals to seek support and access with employment and skills which directly contributes to economic growth and regeneration of communities and development.
- *Education and Skills* - Libraries provide a significant role in the development of literacy skills across Northumberland with local activities such as the summer reading challenge being an established initiative across the county for young people and families.

## **Key issues**

### **National Context**

Library Authorities have a statutory duty under the [Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964](#) 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons' for all those who live, work or study in the area (section 7). In providing this service, councils must, among other things:

- encourage both adults and children to make full use of the Library Service
- lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area

The DCMS report 'Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021' (section 2.2) states 'Libraries are vital community hubs - bringing people together and giving them access to the services and support they need to help them live better. Our ambition is for everyone to; choose to use Libraries, because they see clear benefits and positive outcomes from doing so, understand what Library Services offer and how they can make the most of what's available to them, be introduced to new ideas and opportunities, then given confidence and quick and easy access to tools, skills and information they need to improve their quality of life, and receive trusted guidance through the evolving information landscape and build the skills needed to thrive in a changing world'.

The DCMS also highlight that Library Services contribute to seven outcomes critical to the individuals and communities in their areas:

- cultural and creative enrichment
- increased reading and literacy
- improved digital access and literacy
- helping everyone achieve their full potential
- healthier and happier lives
- greater prosperity
- stronger, more resilient communities

### **The Northumberland Library Service**

Library Services within Northumberland have previously been subject to significant structural and leadership changes. This included the transfer of the complete Service to a charitable Leisure Trust in 2015 and a phased return to NCC from 2016. Following the

return to County Council management, an internal review was carried out in late 2017. The review identified some examples of innovative engagement, but also opportunities to reinvigorate and improve the Service whilst considering the financial impact and ongoing issues of continuing the current model of provision.

The significant structural and operational changes introduced since the 2017 review have stabilised and improved the service, however it was acknowledged that detailed insight was required to design a Library Service to effectively meet the current and future needs of our residents and communities. In September 2019 Cabinet agreed the proposed methodology and timeline for an extensive consultation exercise, the findings from which would be used to inform future Library Service provision, and Strategy development, for Northumberland based on evident and agreed need.

### **The Library Service Consultation**

DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) advice, and recent court rulings, suggests that if an Authority has not consulted on proposed significant changes to its Library Service, this would be a predominant factor in considering whether to hold an enquiry. Decisions on new Service delivery models are open to challenge through the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, both from the Secretary of State and from the public, on whether the changes offer a comprehensive and efficient Library Service.

In order to ensure the Northumberland consultation would stand up to scrutiny and produce a robust report, the exercise was undertaken by an independent commercial company CIPFA C.Co following a competitive procurement process. The Brief informing the consultation is attached to this report.

In addition to the self-completion survey aimed at residents, the consultation originally planned to include face-to-face workshops with groups of residents, staff members and key stakeholders. The workshops were planned to take place during late March/early April 2020. However, given the impact of COVID-19, the decision was taken to replace these sessions with remote methods of engagement. The consultation and engagement activities that took place therefore included:

- A self-completion survey for individuals (including children and young people aged under 16 who could take part with parental permission). The survey was made available in both online and paper formats and ran for 12 weeks (closing on 16th March). The consultation was widely publicised in Libraries, via council channels, media and social media and youth council etc. A total of 5,068 respondents completed the self-completion survey; of these over 1,400 responses were received as paper copies, with the rest online.
- Information drop-in sessions were held at all 30 Libraries across the County for people to find out more about the consultation.
- Telephone interviews conducted with residents to provide more in-depth views on factors driving some of the key findings from the self-completion survey. Twenty interviews, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, were completed between Tuesday, 31st March and Friday, 17th April 2020.
- Self-completion booklets were circulated to staff members in early April to gather their views and opinions with 47 booklets being completed. Self-completion booklets were also circulated to 18 key stakeholders in late April to gather their views and opinions with six completed booklets received.

- Formal responses to the consultation were received from various organisations, including several Parish and Town Councils

## Consultation Findings

The results from the different consultation exercises across all audiences demonstrate the important role the Library Service plays in the lives of the Northumberland residents, in particular amongst the county's population of older persons and those who use the Service regularly.

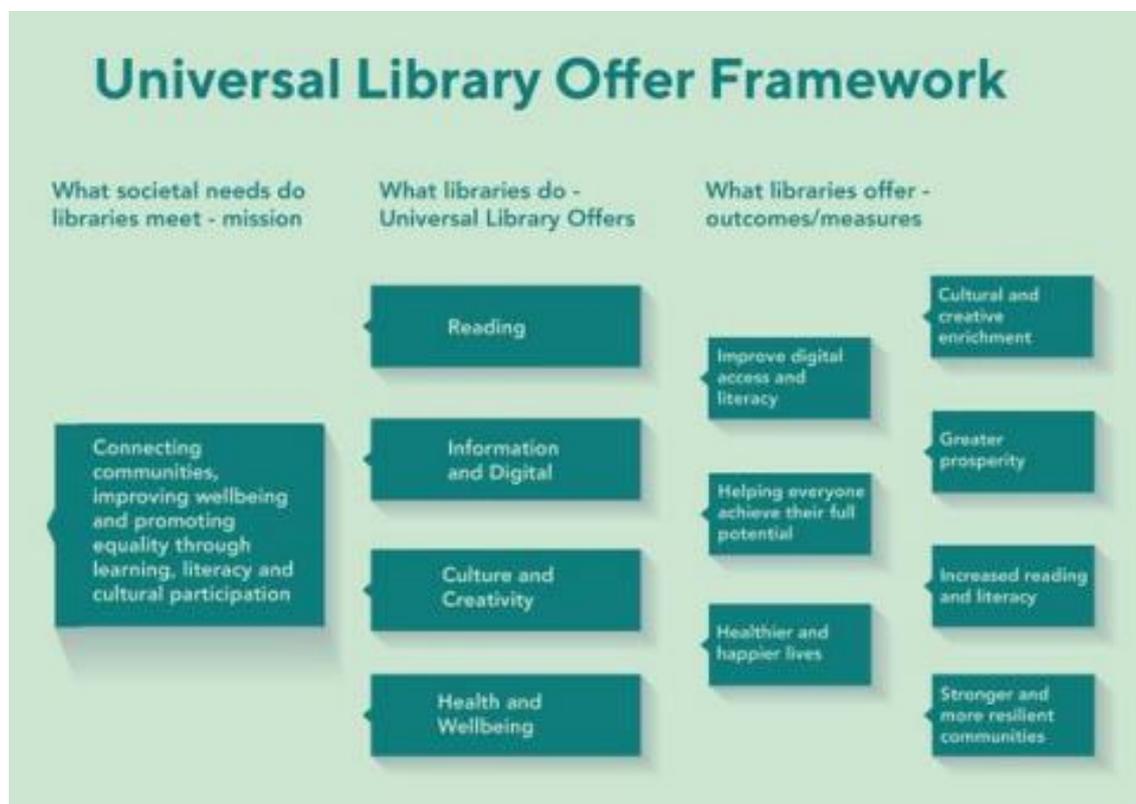
In addition to the provision of books, computers and resources, the value of the Library Service is that it provides a safe, inclusive, social space for its community members.

The full Libraries Consultation Report is attached and the background to this Report provides a summary of the key findings.

## Performance across The Universal Offers

*Libraries Connected*, the Arts Council Sector Support Organisation for libraries, has developed a framework of four Universal Offers that support the core public Library offer and drive library innovation and development. The Universal Offers, as shown in the diagram below, are:

- Reading
- Digital and Information
- Health and Wellbeing
- Culture and Creativity



From the consultation findings, it appears that whilst the Northumberland Library Service appears to be achieving reasonably well across all four offers there is room for improvement.

### ***Reading***

The borrowing of physical copies of books is the most used Library service and the Service is achieving on this Offer in respect that it does offer free access to books and reading resources. However, there is much evidence that the physical stock of books offered by the Northumberland Library Service is considered insufficient and too narrow. Residents, staff and stakeholders would all like to see more investment in the book stock and better rotation of stock between libraries.

### ***Information and Digital***

After borrowing books, using IT facilities is the next most popular service used and is particularly for those who are out of work and looking for work. Residents and staff would like to see an increase in the provision of IT facilities, and for facilities to be modernised (such as providing wireless printing, tablets and more up-to-date software). The digital lending service is not particularly well used (although use is increasing during lockdown); however awareness of this service is generally low. Some users reported that the lending services are not user-friendly.

### ***Culture and Creativity***

Events and activities run by local libraries are well liked and appreciated. Whilst residents, staff and stakeholders would all like to see Libraries hold more cultural and creative events and activities, this is hindered by a lack of funding, insufficient staff and insufficient space in some libraries.

### ***Health and Wellbeing***

Libraries in Northumberland appear to play an important role in improving the mental health of Library users, in particular through providing a safe and welcoming space for people to visit and through providing a space for the community to use. However, Library users do not generally access their local Library for self-help information or information on healthy living, and most are not aware that Libraries offer this type of information.

### **Taking the Northumberland Library Service Forward**

The extensive consultation has provided a clear insight into the views and opinions of residents, staff and stakeholders on the strengths and of the service, and areas for improvement. The Council is determined to incorporate the learning from this robust consultation to build a comprehensive and efficient Library Service based on evident and agreed need. Three interrelated phases will provide a framework in which a detailed Service Strategy can be produced and delivered. The three phases will be:

- (A) Strengthening the core service
- (B) Establishment of Library Hubs within each Locality Area
- (C) Extending reach and partnerships

## **(A) Strengthening the Core Service - Underway**

### **Digital Offer**

Development of the digital aspects of the Service is taking place in the context of feedback from the consultation, suggestions from individual customers and the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Access to resources through *RB digital* has been discontinued in favour of a single provider with more user-friendly access, *Borrowbox*. This has been well received across a wide variety of users.

In response to the closure of Libraries across the County as part of the national lockdown, the Services' digital offer was reinforced and has continued to develop at pace. The number and range of titles licensed has increased significantly. In March 2020, the Service offered 1,637 ebook titles and 505 eaudiobooks, this has increased to 3,747 and 1,485 respectively by January 2021.

The Service has taken advantage of special offers brokered nationally (a £1,000 grant from ACE in recognition of the high cost of licences was match funded by Borrowbox). The loan period was reduced to maximise availability. (This creates a ghost copy for the existing reader but releases the title for loan). As with physical books, waiting lists have built up so the wait times are monitored, and duplicate titles bought sparingly to maintain a wide range of reading options.

*Pressreader* has also been introduced which offers access to over 6,000 magazines and newspapers from over 100 countries in 60+ languages.

Service delivery of the Universal Offers moved online too, including:

- an online book chat group
- a creative writing group established
- a family history chat group established
- Access to Ancestry and Find My Past extended to home use
- Story time and craft sessions for pre-schoolers
- Curated websites to give access to a wide range of information and activities to support homeschooling and those unable to access interest groups and cultural events in person
- Summer Reading Challenge for primary age children
- Series of live streamed events to support national, regional and local initiatives e.g. Big Green Draw, author talks

The Service has established a Digital Helpline to provide support by phone to residents experiencing problems with computers, websites, tablets and phones. This is being promoted to partners as well as through mainstream media channels, our latest referral received from CNTW colleague. A pilot is currently in progress to explore the best way the Service can offer support to individuals who are loaned or gifted devices by Northumberland Communities Together (NCT).

### **Staffing Structure**

The appointment of an experienced Library Service Manager has driven a renewed, nationally aligned, focus on the delivery of the Universal Offers and enabled improved

coordination between the strategic and operational areas of the Service. An 'Operations Manager, Libraries & Integrated Services' position has been introduced, through realignment of existing resources, to ensure there is a consistent and robust approach to all operational procedures, systems and policies.

The frontline staff are now assimilated into a common job description and work continues to reduce the number of temporary arrangements that have resulted from the previous structural and leadership changes.

The staffing structure being created will support the establishment of Library Hubs, designed to address the evidenced priorities and needs of each Locality Area. The new structure will also enable a renewed focus on providing more accessible contacts for colleagues and partner organisations across the County. This approach enables the Librarian team to lead on strategic service development relating to the Universal Offers through working in a dynamic outreach role to promote and support use of the service in collaboration with the front-line staff.

## **Resources**

In September 2019, Elected Members agreed the proposal for a County wide consultation and an allocation of up to £100,000 non recurrently from the Strategic Management Reserve to support the accelerated transformation of the service over the next 12 months. This allocation has enabled the Service to enhance available stock in the Libraries at Alnwick and Ponteland as they reopened in their new locations.

Further planned Service developments have been delayed due to the impact of the pandemic but these now form part of the Service Recovery Plan. The Desk Top Refresh project has been completed during 2020, reducing the number of traditional public workstations, but the introduction of other devices e.g., tablets for public use has been delayed due to the issues presented by Covid-19.

The pandemic significantly accelerated reinforcement of the County's digital Library offer to help mitigate the physical access issues. The number of digital titles issued since March 2020 has increased by 186% and the number of visits to the library website have averaged over 25,500 per month during the same period, compared with an average of 9,000 per month during the same period in 2019.

Covid-19 has also delayed the planned replacement of the self-service kiosks. The kiosks enable customers to issue and return their books independently, which means they can use library resources outside staffed hours, which is particularly valuable where libraries are co-located with which can offer extended access to premises. The kiosks allow staff to focus on higher value interactions with customers who need them. The new model kiosks will develop the service by taking card payments rather than cash and offering:

- self-service print – a user can print, pay for and release their desktop print jobs without any staff intervention
- self-service PC booking – a user can review PC availability and reserve a PC for immediate or future use
- self-service guest sign up – a visitor can sign up as a guest to use the PCs. A receipt can be printed with their username and password
- the ability to top up their *netloan* account – users can top up their account via the kiosk to use the credit at a later date for paying for their prints

The delay has allowed consultation feedback to be considered e.g. user demand for wifi printing both as part of the kiosk replacement within the context of the council's print management contract renewal. Self-service wi-fi printing allows a user to print, pay for and release their wi-fi print jobs without any staff intervention.

### **Capacity**

The capacity of the Service has been increased through the appointment of one part time Local Studies Librarian, and one full time Librarian based in Berwick upon Tweed to support the North area. These appointments of staff have made an immediate impact, bringing fresh ideas, enhancing social media presence and, despite Covid-19, connecting with partner organisations to plan and deliver promotional activity.

The majority of Service volunteers are in the age vulnerable category and have consequently been isolating since the first lockdown. With the advent of vaccination, plans are being made to reintroduce those who wish to return to the service and provide orientation on the changes that have taken place since e.g. the library management system (LMS) upgrade, enhanced digital offer, staffing changes and the move to 365. The individuals who expressed interest in supporting the Service as part of their response to the consultation are currently being contacted.

### **Service Improvement / New Ways of Working**

A new Library Management System was introduced in 2018. This enabled the service to create a dedicated website for libraries that is easily updated; to provide an app for library members to use and to create one catalogue of Library stock including all formats in one place.

The co-location of Visitor Information within Libraries has been accomplished at five sites in the County. This has benefitted customers, visitors and increased the resources available to staff across the Service.

New ways of working are being introduced gradually and are being adapted to take account of the restrictions in place to control the pandemic. The Librarian team, in the process of revising their work to focus on face-to-face outreach, have adapted to work on virtual outreach to library users and non-users alike. Partnerships with Leading Link and Children's Centres in particular have raised awareness of the service in the wider community. Adapted ways of working in response to Covid-19 have highlighted the role of Library staff in supporting access to the resources and support the Service can provide.

The Select and Collect service has given staff the opportunity to provide customers with books by new authors and cultivate discussions about reading likes and dislikes. From a position of no issues during April 2020, the staff selected over 16000 titles for customers during November 2020. Library staff have encouraged young readers with lucky dip selections of books and craft activities in Hallowe'en and Christmas bags

The enhanced digital Libraries resources and events combined with the Service's Digital Helpline now offer a holistic approach to supporting people to get online. This assists residents to gain confidence in using virtual Services and IT for other day to day purposes.

The Services response to Covid-19 has included promoting the service via the 'pop up' sessions initiated by Northumberland Communities Together. The contacts made in these communities will be maintained and fostered as part of the service's recovery plan.

## **Marketing / Awareness**

The need for more general information and awareness about the Service was identified in 2019 prompting the production of 'Rediscover your Northumberland Library' materials. This requirement was also reinforced through the consultation. The distribution of the material through key locations and organisations has been hampered by the pandemic but will be used as part of Service recovery and outreach work in due course.

The Service now produces a regular monthly newsletter that is distributed by email to Library users. The weekly publication began in April 2020 and has been an effective method of alerting Service users to the changes in provision and promoting the increasing range of digital Services available. It is currently distributed to 3,106 Library members.

The Service's presence on social media has also been reinvigorated, including the introduction of Family History Chat and Online Book Chat groups on Facebook (over 170 members of each) and campaigns such as Countdown to Christmas on Instagram.

An average of 340 new members have joined the Service each month since March 2020 with the vast majority engaging digitally.

### ***(B) The Establishment of Library Hubs Within Each Locality Area***

As England's largest and most sparsely populated County, providing an effective and sustainable Library Service for Northumberland cannot be achieved through a standardised model of operation. Building on the findings of the consultation, and considering the learning from operating during the pandemic, it is proposed to establish a series of Hub Libraries serving each of the diverse Locality Areas. The designated Hub Library would provide coordination of the wider network of smaller 'Satellite Libraries' and other forms of provision available throughout the Locality. The Universal Offers will remain central to the overall provision however their delivery in each Locality would be programmed according to known local needs and ambition. This approach will give capacity at an area level to enable the service to prioritise different aspects of the Service at a local level with a strong central digital core.

It is necessary to begin the establishment of the Hub libraries to support the further steps in Service redesign. This phased approach to redesign of the Service will enable coordination with the evolving Community Hub initiative led through Northumberland Communities Together (NCT).

Each Library Hub will offer:

- Flexible and welcoming community spaces for group and individual activities such as storytimes, family learning, group and individual study, reading and writing groups
- Wider community activity determined in collaboration with local residents and joint activities with partners to meet common objectives e.g. health, education and skills
- Convenient town centre positioning with convenient access from a local transport hub
- Access to IT offering support to use different devices, including their own, to residents who have little/no IT skills and/or no access to IT at home for their own

purposes including job searching, benefit applications and keeping in touch. Where feasible this will extend to a wider range of services, such as 3D printing, to support building digital confidence, education, economic recovery and the delivery of the Universal Offers

- An events and activities programme that supports the delivery of the Universal Offers in line with local priorities and national initiatives
- A variety of study spaces for those who lack the space and resources at home
- Local studies resources for loan and reference with a focus on the specific local area
- The full range of books and resources for loan
- Facilities sited on one floor where possible to ensure the most efficient delivery of service

Based on these criteria it is proposed that the designated Hub Libraries for each Locality will be:

- Berwick upon Tweed
- Morpeth
- Cramlington
- Blyth
- Hexham

A summary of the rationale for designation of the proposed Hub sites is considered below.

### ***North Area Locality***

The North Area Locality encompasses the Libraries in Alnwick, Berwick, Amble, Rothbury and Wooler.

- Amble, Rothbury and Wooler cannot provide sufficient space for the provision of the full range of resources and activity described above.
- Alnwick has the potential to provide a strong Culture and Creativity offer through co-location with the Playhouse however it does not provide sufficient space for the full range of resources and the development of the digital offer would be restricted.
- The Alnwick Library space is not large enough to accommodate group sessions during regular opening hours and use of the studio space is shared with the Playhouse.
- Berwick is proposed as the Hub Library as it is central, has a high volume of use, has a large flexible space for events and activities, has space for the development of the digital offer and the Library is co-located with complimentary NCC Services.

### ***Ashington and Blyth Locality***

The Ashington and Blyth Area Locality also includes the Libraries at Newbiggin, South Beach and Hirst.

- Newbiggin, South Beach and Hirst do not provide adequate space for the provision of the full range of resources and activity described above.

- Ashington is a co-location over two floors with an open environment to the whole of the atrium space. Neither floor is conducive to quiet study and the acoustic issues can have a negative impact on the delivery of activities on either floor. The use of additional space in the building is severely restricted through the intensity of leisure use. The ground floor being open to access during all building opening hours presents a risk to resources in that area. Improvements to the local collection and development of the digital offer would have to be on the first floor thereby reducing capacity for other aspects of the Service.
- It is proposed that Blyth should be the Hub Library as it is centrally located in its own building, has a high volume of use, has an established local history provision, can provide study space and flexible space to run activities, work with partner organisations and accommodate digital developments.

### ***Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley Locality***

The Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley Locality also includes Libraries at Bedlington, Bedlington Station, Seaton Sluice and Seaton Valley (Seaton Delaval)

- The Libraries in Bedlington, Seaton Sluice and Seaton Valley would not provide sufficient space. At Bedlington, even though the Service has control of the complete building, the space is not flexible enough to meet the criteria
- Bedlington Station does have sufficient flexible space but is in a very poor state of repair
- Cramlington Library will be relocated into the planned Community Hub. This provides an unprecedented opportunity to design flexible provision which meets the demands of delivering the Universal Offers with codesign at its core.

### ***Castle Morpeth Locality***

The Castle Morpeth Locality encompasses Morpeth, Guidepost, Heddon, Lynemouth, Ponteland and Widdrington Libraries.

- Morpeth will be the only option in terms of available space to satisfactorily deliver the full range of Universal Offers. The new Library within the Sports Centre development has been designed from the outset with input from the Library team ensuring flexibility, versatility, capacity and access are optimised.

### ***Tynedale Locality***

The Tynedale locality includes Libraries in Allendale, Bellingham, Corbridge, Haltwhistle, Haydon Bridge, Hexham, Kielder, Prudhoe and Wylam.

- Most of the current facilities do not offer adequate space to accommodate the requirements of a Hub Library. Haltwhistle and Prudhoe may be considered to have adequate space, but neither is very flexible and they are located at either extreme of the Locality.
- At Prudhoe the use of additional space is restricted by cost

- The long-term future of the Haltwhistle building is the subject of discussion with various potential partners but is unlikely to result in an adequate space to accommodate a hub library as described above
- Hexham is intensively used, is central, has adequate flexible space and an established local studies provision. There is already established onsite partnership working with Queens Hall and Hexham Book Festival. The Library could also accommodate future digital developments.

### ***(C) Extending Reach and Partnerships***

It must be emphasised that the potential designation of the five 'Hub Libraries' is not intended to be in anyway reduce the significance of the Services provided through the smaller stand alone, or collocated Libraries. To plan for a sustainable and flexible Service it is necessary to seek new ways of working, develop new partnerships and increase collaboration with strong central support and coordination. During this phase the Libraries Team will work closely with Northumberland Communities Together to develop a network of needs led, locally facilitated opportunities.

During this phase opportunities will be investigated to work more closely in partnership with communities to secure support for those Libraries that may become satellites supported by the Hub libraries. Models of delivery will be explored which aim to more effectively, and sustainably, meet the needs and aspirations of communities.

One of the key tasks for the Library Service Manager has been the establishment of links with colleagues in Council departments and other organisations who have aims in common with those of the Universal Offers. This combined with the county's response to Covid has resulted in some heightened awareness of the library service and the development of significantly increased partnership working.

There will be a particular focus on developing partnerships with the Health sector such as the Reading Coach project funded by Ann Cleaves, which is bringing additional capacity to provide focused reading support. The Service is also working with the NHS Trust and the Glendale Trust to introduce the *Attend Anywhere* Service at the Cheviot Centre in Wooler. The Service will also continue to work with Advance Northumberland on the development of satellite Business and Intellectual Property Centres supported by the regional centre in Newcastle, funded by the British Library. Partnership development work will continue to be developed by the Librarian team, both at Locality level and as part of Countywide initiatives, such as the *Thriving Communities* bid.

### ***Development of a Library Strategy***

A Library Service Strategy is being developed to support the findings and recommendations arising from the consultation which will provide a clear vision and identify the key ambitions for delivery within the context of the consultation findings, and

the Universal Offers framework. The consultation was the crucial first stage in creating this Strategy and provides robust evidence to inform future direction in terms of accessibility, quality and sustainability. Approval of the model for the creation of Northumberland's Hub Libraries is the next stage in Service redesign.

The Strategy will be guided by to the seven principles endorsed as good practice by the library sector as detailed in the DCMS report 'Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021' (section 6.1) The Strategy will:

- Meet legal requirements
- Be shaped by local needs
- Focus on public benefit and deliver a high-quality user experience
- Make decisions informed by evidence, building on success across the sector
- Support the delivery of consistent England wide core offers (the Universal Offers)
- Promote partnership working, innovation and enterprise
- Use public funds effectively and efficiently

## **Background**

### **Key findings from resident engagement**

#### ***The role of the library service***

Survey respondents are very aware that many local library services have been much reduced over recent years and are concerned that changes may involve reducing the service further, in particular through the closure of smaller libraries.

Respondents feel libraries are more than just a place to pick up or drop off books, and should be:

- A place to introduce children to books and encourage reading
- A place of learning
- Somewhere safe to go/a place of sanctuary
- A place to work or study
- A community space for groups and events
- A place to access technology
- A place to meet people

In order to meet these needs, residents feel the library service needs to provide physical spaces that are local, have sufficient space, have access to modern technology and are run by council staff.

There is evidence from resident engagement that the library plays an important role in the mental health and wellbeing of library users:

- For a third (34%) visiting the library is part of their daily/weekly routine
- 3 in 10 visit the library because it is a quiet place to visit, a quarter visit as it is a safe place to go, and 18% go as it is somewhere to pass time

- A fifth of library users find visiting the library helps them to feel less lonely or isolated, and 15% feel it is an important place to socialise.

Amongst users of the mobile library service, almost all (98%) look forward to the visit and 77% agree that the visit helps them to feel less lonely or isolated.

Other areas where the library plays an important role in residents' lives include:

- Accessing technology: For 1 in 10 library users, the library is the main way that they access computers or the internet, and this rises to 46% of those who are out of work and looking for work.
- Spending quality time with children: three-quarters of library users with a child under the age of 11 visit the library to spend quality time with their children.

Amongst all respondents, 6 in 10 use the library at least once a month, and this rises to almost three quarters of library users. However, this does not appear to reflect the wider usage in the county amongst all residents: the 2015 residents' survey showed that 30% had used a local library in the past 3 months.

Many library users (those that have used a Northumberland library service in the past 12 months) use more than one library in the region, potentially more so if the nearest library to them is very small and/or doesn't offer a full range of services. However, library users still value having a library that is local to them, i.e. within walking distance.

### ***The library service offer***

Whilst lending physical copies of books is both the most important service and most used service amongst library users, all other services offered by libraries are considered important. Library users feel it is particularly important that the library offers:

- A space that the community can use (85%)
- Local history or local studies resources (83%)
- Computers/internet access (80%)

Services that are considered less important and that less well used are:

- Offer information on healthy living - Considered important that this is offered by 57% of library users, but only used by 5% in the past 12 months
- Digital skills courses - Considered important by 61% of library users, but only used by 2% in the past 12 months

However, when looking at the awareness of the services offered by their local library, there is low awareness of the provision of both digital skills courses and information on healthy living.

### ***Strengths of the Library Service***

The local library is rated very highly by library users, with 88% rating the service as either 'excellent' or 'good'. Unprompted, the key strengths of the service are perceived to be:

- The library staff
- Free access to books and resources
- Reservation service

The library is performing particularly strongly on the following attributes (over 90% of library users agree with all these statements):

- The library staff are helpful
- I feel welcome in my local library
- My local library is a pleasant place to visit
- The staff at the library are knowledgeable
- It is easy to access my local library

### ***Areas for improvement***

Unprompted, the key areas for improvement are perceived to be:

- Range of books offered
- Size of library, the layout or the library environment
- Longer opening hours

Amongst the prompted areas, the library service is either not perceived to be performing well, or awareness is particularly low on:

- The libraries in the local area offer similar levels of service (26% agree; 49% don't know)
- My local library offers a good range of events/groups (49% agree; 37% don't know)
- The local libraries have modern IT facilities (65% agree; 25% don't know)

Awareness of digital services is also fairly low: only half (51%) of library users are aware that their library lends digital books (ebooks), and only 1 in 10 (11%) of library users say they have borrowed an ebook in the past 12 months. Similarly, only 6 in 10 library users are aware that the library lends audio books, and 1 in 10 have borrowed an audio book in the past 12 months.

There is some evidence from the telephone interviews that the ebook online lending service is not particularly user-friendly, and some residents have tried to use both BorrowBox and the RB Digital and have given up either as it is too difficult to use, that they have not been able to browse through books, or that waiting times for ebooks are too long.

### ***Barriers to use***

From the survey results, the most common library user is female and older (aged 55 and over). Libraries do not appear to be appealing to the younger sections of the population in the same way that they do older residents; a problem that exists nationwide. There is some evidence from the consultation that younger people in the region would like to use the libraries as places to go and as places to work/study, but that many of the current library spaces do not have the required facilities for this to be a valid option and that the environment in which some libraries are situated are not conducive to quiet study.

The survey has identified the following key barriers amongst those that have not used the library in the past 12 months ('non-users') and those that do not use the library frequently:

- Too busy/opening hours of libraries are not convenient
- Buy own books/ebooks instead of borrowing (or use other online borrowing service)
- Poor range of books/resources in libraries
- Reduced service in libraries and environment is not appropriate/pleasant

This is reinforced by other findings from the consultation that suggests residents no longer use the library as frequently since their local service has reduced or changed, particularly since some services have been co-located.

In addition, there is some evidence that library users and non-users would use the service more if services were improved and certain changes were made, such as:

- Opening hours: 31% of users and 27% of non-users say they would use the libraries more frequently if they were open at different times, particularly if they were open weekday evenings.
- Increasing awareness of services: The awareness of the wider services offered by the library service is low, and in particular the awareness of the ebook lending service is low.
- Issues with ebook borrowing: There is some strong evidence from the telephone interviews that the ebook borrowing service is not user-friendly.

### ***Mobile Library Service***

Library users who use the mobile library service most frequently are more likely than the average survey respondent to; be older (aged 65 and above); have no children living at home; or have a physical disability or impairment.

Mobile library users rate the service very highly, with 9 in 10 giving it an 'excellent' or 'good' rating overall. Unprompted, the key strengths of the service are perceived to be:

- The staff
- Good selection of books
- Provides access to books
- Regular, reliable service

From the prompted statements, the mobile library service performs well on practical aspects such as stopping close to users' homes, stopping for a long enough time, visiting at convenient times and being reliable.

Unprompted, mobile library users feel the service could improve on:

- Selection of books offered
- The van is not suitable
- Frequency of visits

### ***Potential new ways of working***

There is overwhelming support from the survey respondents for the library service to remain council-run.

The potential new ways of working were covered briefly in the in-depth telephone interviews. The key themes from these discussions are:

- Hub libraries with smaller satellite libraries and co-locations are already models that the library service have adopted.
- There is concern that the hub library model will simply mean the closure of smaller libraries.
- Co-locating libraries can work if they are planned well, in particular if libraries are given dedicated rooms away from other services.

- Volunteers helping to run the library service is welcomed but only if it is in addition to paid staff, or if volunteers are used to either allow for extended opening hours or prevent a library from closure. The preference is for the service to be run by trained, paid professionals.
- People would like to see more investment in the digital offer, but not at the expense of the physical library service. The digital offer should be an addition to library buildings and physical resources.

### **Staff engagement**

Many staff members felt that the reductions in budgets, staffing and changes prior to 2017 had a serious detrimental impact on the service and that in future both customers and staff should be consulted before significant changes are made. Staff felt that, decreased budgets have led to:

- Poor book stocks
- Low staffing levels and reduced opening hours
- Lack of resources to put on events and activities
- Lack of investment in modern technology
- Poor buildings/lack of space in new locations

### **Key challenges**

For staff, the key challenge for the service going forward is balancing the needs of existing (often older) customers and innovating to attract new (potentially younger) customers; and to do both within an environment of funding pressures.

Additionally, staff feel the service faces the challenge of remaining relevant in an increasingly digital world, and there were also some comments from staff around the lack of awareness of the library offer and the need to market the service more effectively.

When asked how well they feel the library service is equipped to meet these challenges, many feel that although the lack of funding and reduction of service in recent years have left them in a poor position to be able to do so, staff are still passionate and resilient and will try to rise to this challenge as best they can. Other staff members feel the service is fairly well equipped to meet these challenges due to the digital service already in place and feel positive about the direction from the new management over the past year.

### **Staff know their community**

Perceptions of staff around what their core customers and what their community values and needs from the library service are similar to those expressed by residents themselves. In line with the findings from the resident consultation, staff feel that the community most value the fact that a local library service exists, providing not only access to books but also a safe space to visit, and the attitude and support from staff members. Other key aspects staff feel the community value are:

- The inclusive, welcoming and safe space the service provides
- Access to computers and printing facilities
- Activities and events, both for children and adults
- Reservation service

- Mobile and home library services

### ***Current gaps in provision***

The staff essentially feel the community would like to see an investment in the library service, and in particular in a better range of books. Aside from improving the book stock, staff suggested many areas that they feel the community would like to see improved within libraries. These include:

- Improving library environments, particularly providing more space
- More groups and activities
- More staff
- More computer access and better IT facilities, such as wireless printing
- Free newspapers and journals in seating areas
- Longer/different/standardised opening hours
- Tea/coffee facilities
- More local information
- A better equipped mobile library service

In addition to the above, staff have many ideas and views on how the service could be improved and better meet the needs of the community. Staff feel the service could be better managed through:

- Listening to the residents more
- Increasing awareness of its services
- Engaging more/better with other organisations
- Less top-down management
- Increasing staff training, such as on newer technologies
- Opening hours that better fit the needs of individual areas
- New/improved stock management system
- Providing new mobile library vans that are fit for purpose and reliable

### ***The need for a clear vision***

In order to continue to provide the best service they can and potentially to fill the identified gaps in provision, staff feel the service not only needs more funding but also stable management that understands the true nature and value of the service and a clear strategy informed by views of front line staff. Staff feel that if their vision for the library service could be realised, the service could be:

- Modern, vibrant and dynamic
- Innovative and responsive to the changing needs of the community
- A truly inclusive community hub and meeting place
- Integral to the health of the community
- Valued and supported by the local authority

- A place where staff feel confident and secure in their role, challenged, supported, respected and part of the local authority

Staff were asked what they would include in the vision and values of the library service going forward, and whether these fit with the council wide values and vision. The most commonly used word to include in the values of and vision for the library service was 'inclusive'. Other often mentioned words or phrases include:

- Accessible for all
- Professional/efficient
- Respectful • Reliable • Community
- Knowledge and learning
- Safe and welcoming
- Well-resourced
- Interesting/exciting/inspiring
- Modern/progressive/innovative
- Digital/connected

### ***Views on change***

The majority of staff members feel that change is needed and that they are committed to changes to the service. Of those that are less sure, the majority would like further clarity on potential changes, and assurances that changes will improve the service and not simply involve further cuts. Key concerns amongst the staff about future changes include:

- Increasingly squeezed public budgets, particularly post Covid-19 will mean further reductions in spending on the library service
- The changes will simply be about saving money and reducing costs and will involve job losses and library closures
- A move towards an over-reliance on a digital service and the marginalisation of older or nontechnological customers
- changes will not be well managed or well communicated to customers

### ***Views on potential new models***

Staff were presented with some potential models (as suggested in a government report on libraries) and asked for their views on how these could work in Northumberland.

### ***Focussing the service into a number of hub libraries***

The majority of staff members are largely in favour of this model, and many feel the service is already provided in this way. The key positive aspects of this potential model are that it frees up resources to better deliver services in the hub libraries and focuses on the needs of individual communities. Staff do have concerns about adopting this model even further in Northumberland, in particular on the potential detrimental effect on rural communities where smaller libraries may be closed, that it may result in job losses and that offering too many services in one space can dilute the library offer.

### ***Improving and increasing the digital offer***

Many staff feel that improving and increasing the digital offer is a much needed and natural way forward, and could encourage increased usage of library services, but that the digital service should be an additional service not a replacement for physical services.

Within the library buildings, staff would like to see more public access computers, more reliable wifi and the provision of tablets (both for adults and children, with book and literacy related apps).

With regard to the remote digital offer, staff recommend the development of an NCC library app and a focus on upskilling elderly or technologically reluctant customers to enable more use of the digital services, potentially introducing a tablet lending service.

The key concern is that investment in the digital offer will be at the expense of the physical offer, and that this would disadvantage many elderly or non-digital customers as well as those who rely on the free access to technology.

### ***More co-locations (and less stand-alone libraries)***

Again, many staff feel that the Northumberland library service already works in this way, with many libraries located alongside other services. Overall, co-location is seen as a positive move, as long as it is done well and with consideration for the staff, customers and different services involved. Staff appreciate that co-locating services allows cost savings, the potential for increased footfall and potentially easier access to the public to both services.

It appears that the one key aspect to ensure co-location is a positive experience for both staff and customers is for the library to have its own dedicated self-contained space. In addition, staff experiences suggest that co-location works best when the library is co-located with complementary services, such as the arts centres or tourist information, and that all services are respectful of each other, considered equal partners and work well together.

However, not all current experiences of co-locating have been positive so far. Learnings that can be taken from current experiences, or suggested improvements to current co-locations include:

- The lack of privacy is creating potential data protection issues and making customers of both services uncomfortable
- Being aware of different customers when choosing co-locating services, i.e. that the customers of some services are vulnerable and often challenging
- Leisure centre environments can be intimidating places for some people, and the hot and noisy environment is not always suitable for a library

### ***Increasing the number of volunteers helping to run the service***

Perhaps not surprisingly, the key feedback from staff over the potential to increase the number of volunteers to help run the service is perceived as having the potential to initiate job losses amongst staff.

The suggestion that volunteers could run the service is also seen as devaluing or misunderstanding the role of professional librarians. Other key concerns over volunteers helping to run the service include:

- Long-term commitment of volunteers to the role

- Time and resources to train and to provide on-going support
- Lack of knowledge and lack of accountability
- Can lead to extra workload for staff members and take focus away from customers and towards supporting volunteers
- Reliance on small pool of people from small communities
- Devalues service and will eventually lead to library closures

Staff do see positive aspects of using more volunteers, as long as they are an addition to paid staff, are used for specific tasks or activities, and are managed correctly. The key areas staff feel volunteers can be of help are:

- Helping staff to run one-off events
- Being used to run specific activities and courses that match their skillsets and knowledge
- Can allow for extended opening times
- Can take pressure off staff, particularly when libraries are staffed by lone workers

From experience, staff suggest that providing training and on-going support is most useful when managing volunteers, and ensuring volunteers are given appropriate tasks.

Staff members were also asked their views on the 'community book drop' model (where books are left unattended in a location accessible to the public e.g. a community hall). Overall, staff are not in favour of this model as they feel it would be difficult to manage stock levels, maintain the quality of stock and that thefts would occur.

### ***Libraries becoming Community Partnerships***

As this model relies on volunteers, staff views are very similar to those held on increasing the number of volunteers to run the service. Above and beyond the points raised when discussing volunteers (see above section), staff feel there are some additional, mainly positive aspects of libraries becoming Community Partnerships:

- Could increase community interaction with the library, and use of the library
- Could be used to extend library service, and open new libraries in more remote areas
- Preferable as a last resort to prevent library closures
- Communities are best placed to understand needs of communities
- Allows the possibility to apply for different pots of funding

The key concern is over how stock would be managed across the network of libraries. In order to work well, again staff feel that volunteers need to be trained and on-going support provided with roles and responsibilities clearly laid out.

### **Key findings from stakeholder engagement**

The key findings from the stakeholder self-completion exercise are:

- The library service needs to better promote itself and increase awareness of its wider offers to both the public and other partner organisations
- The library service has good relationships with other organisations and more opportunities exist for the service to work more with other partners, however this may be hampered by a lack of staff and/or resources

- The strength of the service lies in its focus on supporting the community and the free access to both physical and digital resources
- The service is being held back from achieving its potential through the lack of funding and the lack of financial security and the uncertainty this creates for staff members

#### **Key findings around co-location:**

- The majority of co-location partners rate the relationship with the library service very highly • The key benefits of co-location are the increased footfall it can bring, the access to wider service it provides and the support from the professional library staff.
- The key disadvantages to sharing a location are the lack of space and competing demands on the buildings and the potential for services to disturb customers from other services.
- Co-locations are seen as working well when they are matched with complementary services, such as the arts, and are not seen to be working well when matched with services that do not fit together naturally, such as in leisure centres. Additionally, there needs to be sufficient space within the physical location for all services.

#### **Views on potential new ways of working:**

- NCC colleagues are in favour of focussing the service on a number of hub libraries, and feel that services working together is the right approach.
- Increasing and improving the digital offer is considered essential in the modern world, and the only concern about this approach is that older users lack digital skills.
- Co-locations is seen as an approach that works very well, particularly if the services are complementary.
- Stakeholders feel increasing the use of volunteers to help run the service can have some benefits such as allowing for extended opening hours and increasing community buy-in, but there are concerns around the unreliability of volunteers, the lack of professionalism and the need for volunteers to be managed and trained by paid staff.
- Libraries as Community Partnerships have similar benefits and concerns as using increased numbers of volunteers.

Stakeholders feel libraries offer an important service, in particular in bringing communities together, and feel that with investment, the service has huge potential.

In order to achieve the potential of the service, stakeholders feel the library service needs to:

- Demonstrate its value to local communities
- Learn from and connect with other sectors
- Work more with other organisations
- Be given financial security

#### **Stakeholder consultation: formal responses**

Formal responses to the public consultation were received from several groups or organisations, including several Parish Councils. All groups and organisations put forward their support for the library service to continue, in particular for the library service in their

particular town or village to continue to be provided and for the mobile library service to both continue to be provided and to be improved.

An overarching theme from all the formal responses is the view that the local library provision is an essential, vital service for each area and provides so much more than access to books; it is often one of the only community spaces in the area and in particular is seen as providing an important place to decrease social isolation.

## **Implications**

<b>Policy</b>	Libraries are uniquely placed to help the Council and its partners deliver their strategic objectives, whether linked to community cohesion, health and wellbeing, economic growth, promoting independent living or increasing life chances.
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	No implications beyond allocated budgets
<b>Legal</b>	<p>Library Authorities have a statutory duty under the <a href="#">Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964</a> 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons' for all those who live, work or study in the area (section 7). In providing this service, councils must, among other things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encourage both adults and children to make full use of the Library Service</li> <li>• lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area</li> </ul>
<b>Procurement</b>	The consultation was procured in accordance with NCC Procurement regulations and guidance
<b>Human Resources</b>	None at this stage
<b>Property</b>	The development of the Cramlington and Morpeth Hubs are within current NCC capital allocations. Strategic Estates will engage if required for development of collaborative projects within Stage C
<b>Equalities</b> (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	<p>The self-completion survey asked for demographic information from consultation respondents related to the protected characteristics to comply with the Equality Act.</p> <p>Libraries provide safe spaces in the heart of their communities, and provide many services targeting people who are living on a low income, people who are lonely, unemployed, or elderly, and people with long term medical conditions or disabilities.</p>
<b>Risk</b>	None at this stage. Assessments will be undertaken on an

<b>Assessment</b>	individual project basis if required
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	Libraries provide opportunities which foster community engagement and cohesion whilst offering diversionary activity.
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	<p>Libraries are trusted spaces, free to enter and open to all. In them, people explore and share reading, information, knowledge and culture.</p> <p>The consultation was widely publicised in Libraries, via council channels, media and social media and youth council etc. A total of 5,068 respondents completed the self-completion survey; of these over 1,400 responses were received as paper copies, with the rest online. Information drop-in sessions were held at all 30 Libraries across the County for people to find out more about the consultation. Telephone interviews conducted with residents to provide more in-depth views on factors driving some of the key findings from the self-completion survey.</p>
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	<p>Increasing digital access reduces the need for journeys by car or public transport to collect books and material. The Library Hubs will be situated within close proximity to public transport links.</p> <p>Libraries play an important and unique role in wider community communications about resiliency, climate change and a sustainable future.</p>
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	Libraries offer a wide range of health information, both online and through quality-assured reading lists dealing with the more common health conditions. In their role as community hubs, libraries also offer non-clinical spaces in localities where health and wellbeing groups can work with the community in a trusted and non-threatening venue.
<b>Wards</b>	All

**Background papers:**

**Report sign off.**

***Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:***

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Monitoring Officer/Legal	Helen Lancaster
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Andy Stewart
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