

Northumberland County Council

Brief for Library Service Consultation

Introduction

Northumberland County Council wishes to carry out a comprehensive consultation with users and non-users of the library service to inform future strategy for delivering the service.

Taking into account library performance data, staff feedback and financial considerations, we understand that in its current form the library network is unsustainable. An internal review has proposed a model for future delivery which rationalises the library network, both stabilising and strengthening a core “universal” offer with digital at its core. The County Council wish to fulfil their statutory duty to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ service, by identifying an affordable and sustainable model which delivers the following vision:

The Library Service will be enriching lives through providing access to reading, information and knowledge that meets the needs of our communities.’

The proposed Service mission (how we will work to achieve the vision) is:

The Library Service will strive to provide a welcoming, clear, consistent, connected and valued offer to customers so that no matter how they engage, there will be convenient access to the information and resources they require.

The service needs to clearly identify its priorities for future provision and determine the most effective way of delivering these priorities based on evidenced and agreed need. The Service is energetic and optimistic for the future, there is significant capital investment into new facilities planned and a new Service Manager is in place to drive this period of ‘positive change’.

Background

Northumberland is England's most northerly, and most sparsely populated County. It stretches from the Scottish Border in the north and west to Tyneside and County Durham in the south. The County is flanked by Cumbria, the Cheviot Hills and North Pennines to the west and by the North Sea to the east. It is characterised by scenic landscapes featuring rolling hills, a dramatic coastline with vast sweeping beaches, moorland and distinctive heritage assets. Visitors are enchanted by its vastness, big skies and communities of character. The County features two Areas of Outstanding natural Beauty, a World Heritage Site, Europe’s largest man made forest and a National Park which covers a quarter of the County.

Northumberland is home to 316,000 people and covers an area of 5,013 km², of which 96.7% is classed as rural. 49.1% of the population live in rural areas compared to the North East (18.8%) and England (18.9%).

51% of the population live in the 3% of urban land based mainly in the South East of the county which features the three largest towns, Blyth, Cramlington and Ashington. These act

as the main employment and service centres for much of the area. Beyond the south east, the County's main settlements are located along the Tyne Valley corridor, and on a north-south axis across the lowland coastal strip; both areas incorporate main roads and rail lines. Morpeth, Hexham, Prudhoe, Berwick-upon Tweed and Alnwick are the main market towns, all of which have large rural hinterlands. The predominantly rural areas of the County are interspersed with smaller towns, some with their own hinterlands, as well as numerous villages, hamlets and isolated farmsteads.

3.2% of the population live in one of the 10% most deprived areas of England compared to 16.98% in the North East and 9.9% across England (2015). 20.8% of the population are classed as income deprived and 25.4% are employment deprived. (2015 IMD). Wages for those living in the county are lower than the country figure, with the gross weekly average (median) pay being £487 compared to £492 in the North East and £544 in England (2016).

Northumberland County Council

In February 2018, the council approved its Corporate Plan for 2018 to 2021. This is the council's main strategic planning document and is a clear statement of the vision, strategic aims and policy priorities of the authority. The Vision focuses on making Northumberland a county a great place to live, and in which you can access the things you enjoy, whilst having the opportunity to learn and thrive. The full Corporate Plan can be found through the following link:

<https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/About-the-Council/The-Corporate-PlanV3.pdf>

The Northumberland County Council Library Service

The County Library Service operates within the Council's Cultural Services. The Library Service currently employs 82 FTE staff with an annual budget of £1,829,142. The scope of the service includes:

- Delivery of 30 libraries through standalone, integrated and co-located facilities
- Delivery of mobile library services
- Delivery of library services for HMP Northumberland
- Delivery of the Schools Library Service

Of the 30 Libraries, 3 are integrated with Visitor Information, 2 are Community Access Libraries (CAL's) and 4 are located within Leisure Centres.

Service profile

- There are 97,519 members recorded on the library management system.
- There were 607,507 issues in 2018/2019 (not including digital issues).
- There were 27,897 digital issues in 2018/2019 (eBooks, eAudio & eMagazines).
- 9,503 users of mylibrary.co.uk website in Jan - Mar 2019 with 24,772 sessions visiting 229,074 pages. *(Moving to the new LMS meant we have only recently started tracking people on the library website).*
- School Library Services (SLS) issues 2018-2019 were 35,430.
- There were 58 active reading groups 2018-2019.

- There were 629 events and special activities in the Libraries from during 2018 - 2019.
- The Mobile Library Service engages with 3,033 registered users
- 9,747 new members joined the library service in 2018-2019.
- 54,164 reservations were placed by library members for items in 2018/2019.
- There was 66,681 hours of use on the Library Public PCs.

The Library Review

Over recent years Library Services within Northumberland have been subject to significant structural and leadership change. This has included the transfer of the complete Service to a Charitable Leisure Trust (2015) and a fragmented return to management by the Council over the period 2016 - 2018. From 1 June 2018 All Library Services have been managed by Northumberland County Council.

A recent internal review of the service has shown that the changes made before its return to the Council have:

- had no rationale or consistency applied to them
- had a detrimental effect on the communities that they serve
- not supported the provision of the universal offers
- impacted on the number of users engaging with library services
- not supported digital engagement
- significantly reduced the number of staff across the service

Unsurprisingly the changes have resulted in poor provision of library services in some locations as well as poor staff morale.

The review highlighted that there is an opportunity to reshape and develop library services which will support a wider range of council priorities as well as ensuring the improvement of access to library services users across the County.

Our requirements

We need to carry out a comprehensive consultation with users and non-users of our library service about our options and ideas for delivering the service differently in the future. The service needs to identify the key strengths and weaknesses of the service, establishing the views of residents on the proposed changes to service delivery and the degree to which local communities would be interested in actively helping to run the service.

Whilst your advice on the overall approach to the consultation taken is welcomed, we anticipate the methods used might include an open access questionnaire, a sample based questionnaire, focus groups, library based drop in sessions and internal / external stakeholder meetings. There will also be an appropriate arts based activity approach to engage children and young people.

The content of the consultation should:

- Test the suitability of different models of service delivery across the County
- Consider the role of the Mobile Library Service
- Identify highest / lowest used library services / activities
- Identify barriers to library service use across the County

- Consider the effectiveness of, and potential for further colocated services
- Establish the most highly valued elements of the service across the County
- Include opportunities for community groups and individuals to propose ideas on future delivery
- Actively involve the staff teams in determining future priorities and delivery models
- Establish the level of interest amongst individuals and groups to support or take on delivery of some or all aspects of the service in an area of the County.
- Engage and consult with a representative cross section of residents of the County and affected groups (including children and young people, older people, ethnic groups, people with disabilities and staff) and
- Stand up to rigorous external challenge if required.

The information produced must be capable of informing:

- Future facility profile
- Staffing structure
- Technology platform investment
- Budgetary profile
- Delivery models
- Collaborative opportunities with wider NCC departments

We will require our chosen contractor to:

- Attend a pre-start meeting with us to discuss, advise and finalise the overall approach and methodology including timescales and detailed deliverables
- Work closely with relevant colleagues across the Council to design and deliver the consultation
- Undertake questionnaire design, sample design, facilitation etc as required
- Prepare and design consultation materials in association with the Council
- Process and collate all data
- Provide an interim report on the consultation findings
- Deliver a final report on consultation findings in electronic format suitable for uploading to the Council website
- Provide a presentation of consultation findings to (1) the project steering group & (2) a selection of Elected Members .

Management

The contract will be managed by the Library Service Manager who will Chair a project steering group to be in place throughout the consultation project. The appointed organisation will be required to work closely with relevant NCC departments to fulfill the requirements of the brief. The appointed organisation will be required to provide bi-weekly updates to the project steering group.

Timescale

It is anticipated that the consultation will be active for a period of three months.

Fees

£25,000 is allocated for all delivery of the consultation and associated requirements. This fee is inclusive of all fees incurred by the appointed organisation for travel, accommodation and materials as required.

A schedule of fee release will be agreed prior to appointment.

Submission Process

If you would like to be considered for this exciting commission please submit your response via [redacted] by 12 noon on [redacted].

Your response must include the following elements:

- Evidence of understanding of the benefits of public library service provision in a County such as Northumberland
- An illustration of your thorough understanding and extensive experience of the requirements of delivering of high quality public consultation exercises on behalf of public sector organisations
- An outline plan for delivery of the project with indicative budgets for each element.

A fee proposal including:

- Clearly expressed event management fee levels including rates for each person involved.

Additional information:

- Names of two independent referees from two recent commissions.
- Demonstration of the following insurance cover:
 - £10,000,000 Public Liability
 - £10,000,000 Employers Liability Insurance
 - £2,000,000 Professional Indemnity

Decision-making

Submissions will be assessed by the Event Steering Group according to the following criteria:

- Quality of proposal (15%)
- Capacity of the organisation / individual to undertake the commission (15%)
- The experience, qualifications and expertise of the individuals who will work on the commission (50%)
- Value for money (20%)

Submission

Proposals should be submitted via by