



Northumberland

County Council

COMMITTEE: COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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BRIEFING PAPER - Library Service Strategy 2021-26

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

Purpose of report

To provide members of the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the development of the Library Service Strategy 2021-2025. Members have previously received briefings covering the key findings from the Library Service Public Consultation completed in June 2020, and the resulting three-stage approach to service redesign based on:

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

Recommendation

It is recommended that members of the Committee consider the contents of the report.

Link to Corporate Plan

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

- **Living** - Libraries offer a wide range of information which support public health and wellbeing activities as well as their own space for social activities to help individuals be active and well
- **Enjoying** - Libraries offer social support networks and information and support for residents of Northumberland to seek advice/support within their communities

- **Thriving** - Libraries provide a first point of contact for individuals seeking support with gaining new skills; for those seeking employment and business support, all of which directly contributes to economic growth and the regeneration of communities and their development
- **Learning** - Libraries provide a significant role in the development of literacy skills across Northumberland with activities such as Storytimes and the Summer Reading Challenge being established initiatives across the county for children and families.

Key issues

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 have been used to inform future Library Service provision for Northumberland based on evident and agreed need.

The Library Service Consultation

The results from the consultation demonstrated the important role the Library Service plays in the lives of Northumberland residents, particularly amongst the County's population of older people and those who use the service regularly. In addition to the provision of books, computers and resources, the value of the Library Service was recognised as a safe, inclusive, social space for community members. The full Libraries Consultation Report can be reviewed through the following link [NCC Libraries Consultation Report - Final](#)

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. These Universal Offers are

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

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

Progress Update on Service Development

The extensive consultation 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 has incorporated the learning from this robust consultation to build a comprehensive and efficient Library Service based on evident and agreed need. Three interrelated phases provide a framework in which a detailed Service Strategy can be produced and delivered. The three phases are:

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

As a snapshot of current performance, the Quarter 3 (October – December 2021) data reported 2231 new Library Service members, 96,311 physical book issues, 26,135 mylibrary.co.uk sessions, 32,952 Pressreader sessions, 4,238 hours of public PC usage, 11,051 Ebook downloads, 11,867 Eaudio downloads and 230 in person / virtual events attended by 2468 people.

(A) Strengthening the Core service

The Digital Offer

Borrowbox, the single provider for eBooks and eAudio continues to be popular and the collection has been extended to include audiobooks to support users to learn a range of foreign languages.

Full advantage is taken of titles that are guaranteed to be available for a month with no queue. The loan period remains 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 are monitored, and duplicate titles are 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.

In response to lockdown, service delivery of the Universal Offers moved online where possible. The following initiatives are now available online:

- Creative writing groups
- Family history chat groups
- Story time and craft sessions for pre-schoolers
- The Summer Reading Challenge for primary age children
- Live streamed events to support national, regional and local initiatives e.g. The Big Green Draw

Regular varied author talks include a programme entitled *Author Afternoons* which led to the staff member being awarded Librarian of the Year 2021 by the Romantic Novelists Association.

The nationally agreed extension to home use of *Ancestry* and *Find My Past* has come to an end but the public can now book to use them on a pc in their local Library.

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.

A small pilot to explore the best way the Service could support individuals who were loaned, or gifted devices, by Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) has recently led to an individual using one of the devices to gain employment.

Further development of the face to face digital offer is now dependent on libraries being able to reduce spacing between pcs; the easing of restrictions on events and recruiting new volunteer Digital Champions to complement and extend the work of the staff.

Staffing Structure

The staffing structure to support the establishment of Library Hubs, designed to address the evidenced priorities and needs of each Locality Area, includes a Supervisor role in each area to provide 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. Recruitment to the Supervisor roles is now complete and an exercise to fill the resulting vacancies is underway. A new Librarian post has been filled to add capacity to the county wide team and facilitate an increased focus on our digital offer. The temporary appointment of a Digital Resources Assistant has furthered this work and alongside the recruitment to Supervisor and Librarian posts has provided progression opportunities for existing staff. Current recruitment to Library and Information Assistant vacancies will conclude this phased approach to recruitment.

In view of the workforce profile, several apprenticeship posts have been created across the County. Four are currently in place (Berwick, Morpeth, Cramlington, Schools Library Service) and a further four are currently being recruited to start in April (Alnwick, Hexham, Prudhoe and Business Admin at Sycamore).

Opportunities to bring additional capacity and skills to the service through project work are continually sought and pursued. There are currently two half time Reading Facilitators delivering the Reading for Wellbeing project in Newbiggin.

Resources

In September 2019, in addition to the county wide consultation, Elected Members agreed 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 timeframe has been impacted by the pandemic, but this allocation has enabled the Service to enhance available stock in the libraries at Alnwick, Cramlington and Ponteland as they reopened in their new locations, to enhance our digital newsletter and make minor improvements elsewhere.

A further injection of new reading resources has been possible at all libraries, thanks to the allocation of Covid Outbreak Management Funding (COMF) to the value of £150k. This is supporting those who continue to maintain a cautious approach by using our Select and Collect option and enhance the selection for those who return to select for themselves.

The Desktop Refresh project was completed during 2020 which reduced 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 restrictions on physical visits. An additional resource of £25k since March

2020, has been invested in eBooks, eAudiobooks, eNewspapers and eMagazines from Service budgets.

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.

Self-service 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 partners who can offer extended access to premises. The kiosks allow staff to focus on higher value interactions with customers who need them. The first phase of installation is now complete with new kiosks in Alnwick, Amble, Ashington, Bedlington, Berwick, Blyth, Cramlington, Haltwhistle, Hexham, Morpeth, Ponteland and Prudhoe. Card payment facilities will follow in phase two in addition to kiosks in Bedlington Station and Newbiggin.

A range of self-service options will then follow:

- Wifi Printing (whereby a user can print, pay for and release their wifi 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

Capacity

The capacity of the Service can be enhanced with the support of volunteers, and volunteers themselves benefit in many ways including social cohesion, skill development and a sense of fulfilment. Many of the Library Service volunteers are in the age vulnerable category and as a result of the pandemic, some will not return, some plan to in the future, and a small number already have. Orientation sessions on the changes and risk mitigation that have taken place are being provided.

A bid to the Arts Council England (ACE) Volunteering Futures Fund is being prepared to enable the service to work with partners from statutory and voluntary organisations across the County on a 2-year programme. If successful, the project will create volunteering opportunities particularly for young people in Northumberland Libraries and the wider cultural sector.

Service Improvement / New Ways of Working

New ways of working have been adopted during the pandemic to maintain access to the diverse 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 over the phone and online about reading likes and dislikes. Library staff have encouraged young readers with lucky dip selections of books and craft activities at key points in the year e.g., Halloween and Christmas.

The enhanced digital resources and online events programme, 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 Librarian team, in the process of revising their work to focus on face-to-face outreach, have adapted to work on virtual outreach as well. Partnerships with Leading Link, Children's Centres and NCT in particular have helped raised awareness of the service in the wider community.

The opportunity to realise a new Mobile Library fleet has been taken and work is underway to create multi-purpose, more agile, vehicles that will be used by both the Library Service and NCT.

Marketing / Awareness

The need for more general information and awareness about the Service was identified in 2019 which prompted the production of 'Rediscover your Northumberland Library' materials. This requirement to increase awareness was also highlighted through the consultation.

A portion of the Covid Outbreak Management Fund (£15k) has been allocated to improve awareness of the service and its locations. Professionally designed and produced publicity material has been commissioned and improved local signage will increase visibility of the branches as the public begin to move throughout their local area more freely.

The distribution of the new material through key locations and organisations will be used as part of Service recovery, and outreach work. The Service has established a regular monthly newsletter that is distributed by email to over 3,000 library members. Please see the following link for access to the latest Newsletter <https://nland.uk/FebNewsletter>

The Service's presence on social media has also been reinvigorated, including the introduction of Family History Chat on Facebook (over 200 members) and the development of a 'voice' that has proved effective in attracting attention.

(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, a series of Hub Libraries is being established serving each of the diverse Locality Areas.

The designated Hub Libraries 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 will be programmed according to known local needs and ambition. This approach gives 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 was 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

- Well identified 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, personal business 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
- Local studies resources for loan and reference with a focus on the specific local area
- A wide and changing range of books and resources for loan
- Facilities sited on one floor where possible to ensure the most efficient delivery of service

Berwick, Blyth, Cramlington, Hexham and Morpeth are the County's designated Hub Libraries.

(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 co-located 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.

The Libraries Team are working closely with Northumberland Communities Together to develop a network of needs led, locally facilitated opportunities. So far this work can be seen in operation at the Hub in Cramlington and is also being developed in preparation for the Community Hubs at Haltwhistle and Newbiggin. A complementary approach to provision will be taken in communities where the library and hub are not co-located.

During this phase opportunities are being 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. Discussions are underway regarding the style of future provision at Allendale, Corbridge, Lynemouth, and Wylam. Bedlington Station Library is currently being relocated through a new partnership with the nearby Community Centre.

The Library Service Manager continues to establish links with colleagues in Council departments, and other organisations, who have shared objectives with the Service. This, combined with the county's integrated response to Covid 19, has resulted in heightened awareness of the library service and has significantly increased partnership working. There will be a particular focus on developing partnerships with the health sector such as the Reading for Wellbeing project, conceived and part funded by Ann Cleeves, which is bringing additional capacity to the service to pilot focused reading support. With the NHS Trust and the Glendale Trust, the service has introduced the *Attend Anywhere* initiative at the Cheviot Centre in Wooler.

The Service continues to work with Advance Northumberland to complement the development of local Business and Intellectual Property Centres (BIPC) at Berwick, Hexham and Morpeth supported by the regional centre in Newcastle and funded by the British Library.

Partnership work will continue to be developed by the Librarian team, both at Locality level e.g. Berwick and Morpeth Book festivals and as part of countywide initiatives, such as Thriving Communities which resulted in the 'In our Footsteps' project, aimed at supporting people in the early stages of dementia. The project, piloted in Ashington and Haltwhistle, delivered a series of workshops which encouraged people to create a heritage trail by working together with a family member or friend to share stories and memories.

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. The Strategy will be guided by 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

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

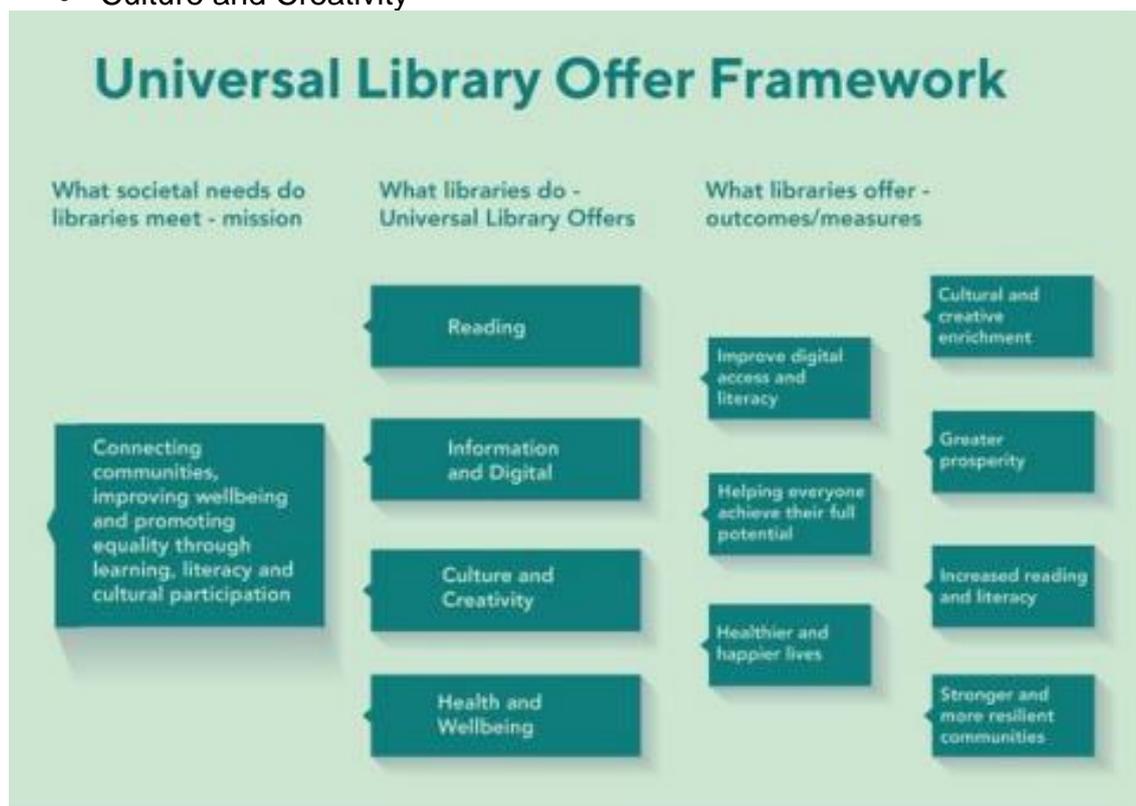
The DCMS also highlight that library services contribute to 7 outcomes critical to the individuals and communities in their areas:

- 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 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



Implications

<p>Policy</p>	<p>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.</p>
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Finance and value for money	No implications beyond existing budget allocations
Legal	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
Procurement	None at this stage
Human Resources	None at this Stage
Property	Property Services are engaged in any potential asset considerations
<p>Equalities (Impact Assessment attached)</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<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>
Risk Assessment	None at this stage. Assessments will be undertaken on an individual project basis if required
Crime & Disorder	Libraries provide opportunities which foster community engagement and cohesion whilst offering diversionary activity.
Customer Consideration	<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</p>

	provide more in-depth views on factors driving some of the key findings from the self-completion survey.
Carbon reduction	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. Libraries play an important and unique role in wider community communications about resiliency, climate change and a sustainable future.
Health and Wellbeing	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.
Wards	All

Background papers:

Report sign off.

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

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