

Library Peer Challenge **Worcestershire County Council**

May 2019

Feedback Report

8 – 9 May 2019

1. Executive Summary

Worcestershire County Council (WCC) Library Service was awarded a peer challenge through the Arts Council England and Local Government Association partnership. The scope and focus of the challenge are set out in section three of this report.

The service has successfully undertaken considerable transformational change, achieving £3.7m of efficiency savings since the launch of the programme in May 2011. The programme is underpinned by key principles agreed at the time. The council's medium term financial strategy requires a further saving of £800 thousand to be achieved in 2018 - 2021. The results of a detailed needs assessment was considered by the council Cabinet in October 2018 and a formal public consultation approved and concluded in February 2019. The council is now considering the results and determining its next steps, with a report to Cabinet in July 2019.

We are concerned that the libraries remodeling proposals do not meet the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) published toolkits and guidance that are designed to support portfolio holders, senior officers, council transformation teams, and library service managers looking at the strategic planning of library services or fully match the national agenda, as set out in the Libraries Taskforce guidance. There is a need to set out a vision in a new library strategy which can be delivered within the current financial envelope. This process will require stewardship, innovation and further involvement of the public, both users and non users. The vision will set out what libraries will look like in WCC in the medium to long term, the strategy will set out how this ambition will be achieved and its efficacy measured.

The peer team recommends that elements of the library transformation programme are rescheduled, in order to free up staff capacity to work up the vision/strategy and to establish and maintain a dialogue with both the DCMS and other stakeholders. The service would benefit from refocusing its attention on relevant networks and getting out more to see good practice exemplars of a modern and effective library service. There are some difficult decisions lying ahead and we urge you to have the courage to make them, engage with the corporate centre, and to implement plans to deliver them. Your thinking will be assisted by drawing on national relevant good practice. You should consider a communications plan through which you keep all stakeholders informed of your intentions and seek their views as and when it is appropriate.

We think that there are further internal/external funding opportunities available to the library service e.g. S106, commercial opportunities. There appears to be a lack of awareness about how the libraries service could tap into internal transformation funds, despite there being a plethora of ideas about invest to save type improvements.

It is unclear if the building blocks are in place for sustainable future transformation, now is the time to reality check political support, integration with the Council's wider transformation plans and to ensure cross cutting opportunities are identified.

Better use could be made of data harvesting thereby driving further performance and innovation improvements e.g. CIPFA Plus, Big Data

Acknowledgement should be made of the tremendous efforts to date to keep transformation on track, and achieving remodelling on time and to budget. The staff are to be congratulated on their obvious commitment to the library service. Some time out should be taken to reward and mark this success. Other library services have an all staff day, and perhaps this is something the library service could consider.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

1. Engage with DCMS

The service needs to engage with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as a matter of urgency. We refer you to 16 December 2016 DCMS guidance note, which sets out advice to local authorities in the provision of libraries as a statutory service, specifically:

"We want library authorities considering changing their library service to inform the DCMS Libraries Team about their proposals prior to public engagement to assist the Secretary of State in the superintendence role. In providing this information, library authorities are asked to demonstrate:

- plans to consult with local communities alongside an assessment of their needs;
- consideration of a range of options (including alternative financing, governance or delivery models) to sustain library service provision in their area
- a rigorous analysis and assessment of the potential impact of their proposals"

Details about such DC proposals, and any queries about this guidance, should be emailed to dcms-libraries@culture.gov.uk

As WCC has embarked on its public engagement it needs to pause and seek a dialogue with DCMS before any proposals are actioned or are subject to further public consultation to ensure that Whitehall is sighted on future plans.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-libraries-as-a-statutory-service>

The guidance recommends that all local authorities should seek independent legal advice on any proposed changes they wish to make to their library service.

2. New Library Vision and Strategy with underpinning business and financial plans

The service recognises the need to develop a new vision for future provision in the county. This is a priority. It is set out as a requirement by the DCMS through their published guidance and will allow transformation proposals to progress without that being grounds for a challenge. The recent consultation and needs assessment work will help inform the development of a new strategy.

Library strategies should include a clear vision for the future library service, outlining what the service should achieve and deliver. Points to consider include:

- how well the strategy meets local needs, now and in the future, drawing on documented evidence held locally, as well as members and officers' local knowledge
- assessing the equality impact on all 'protected groups' as specified in the Equality Act 2010
- carefully considering the feedback received before making a definitive decision and demonstrating how steps have been taken to mitigate the impact
- openness to new options
- consulting again before implementing changes
- investing in working with communities and other partners to put new solutions in place, drawing on learning from elsewhere.

The current governance arrangements are provided through the Libraries Programme Board (LPB). We understand that this Board provides leadership and oversight to ensure cabinet approval of libraries strategy and to put in place appropriate implementation plans.

WCC may wish to reflect the national agenda in developing the WCC library strategy. The strategy should articulate the priorities for the service over the next few years, with an action plan which brings together the 7 Library Taskforce outcomes, a local need assessment, and the main objectives required to fulfil each outcome. As well as the national agencies, WCC Libraries should work with various local and regional partners to achieve the ambitions of this plan.

The Libraries Taskforce seven outcomes are:

1. Cultural and creative enrichment
2. Increased reading and literacy
3. Improved digital access and literacy
4. Helping everyone achieve their full potential
5. Healthier and happier lives
6. Greater prosperity
7. Stronger, more resilient communities.

3. Re-phase transformation programme

The peer challenge team suggest that the time is right for a review of the current transformation programme in order to create some time/capacity to develop a new vision and strategy for the service. The LPB has the responsibility to deliver the transformation programme for libraries within the financial requirements of the MTFs. We suggest that you engage with finance colleagues to discuss implementing savings targets in line with the strategy.

4. Finalise the library structure

Staff are understandably anxious about future transformation and new structures. While there was a mature understanding of the financial position of the council expressed by the library service, they were concerned about the transient nature of their location within the

organisation and the fit of libraries into the whole council review that has recently commenced.

5. Communication plan – councillors, staff, customers, partners, communities

The majority of people we met asked for better communication within and outside the council. This would enable the service to make the most of internal and external funding opportunities. Some good practice is documented and has been used successfully in remodeling activity. But as the service develops its new future strategy it will need to consider a communication plan as an integral part of disseminating its strategic intention, to engage with stakeholders and to communicate its purpose.

We understand that a new communications officer has recently started work and will be addressing the need for a plan.

6. Engage with partners and other stakeholders with purpose

The service has made a concerted effort to consult with residents around the continuing remodeling of the libraries. There is strong support for the proposed definition of need for a local library, raising library profile for community benefit and sharing space within the buildings with other public services and related groups. Although there is an appetite for volunteering, there is more variable support for the concept of “Open” libraries and potential opposition to any library building closure. The council has recognised the need to develop and implement a marketing and communications strategy to promote the benefit of libraries. In particular to do this, in order to address the under representation of specific groups, as identified in the recent Needs Assessment study, and to explore innovative ways of engaging residents.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Worcester were:

- Councillor Kam Kaur – Cabinet Member for Customer & Transformation Warwickshire CC
- Sue Wills – Cambridgeshire CC Library Service Manager
- Heidi Bellamy – LGA Associate
- Mark Harrison - LGA Peer Challenge Manager.

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following three core questions applicable to all library peer challenges

1. Is WCC getting best value from its library assets?
2. How does the service contribute to the corporate agenda?
3. What is the role of the council and service in the local community

And at the request of WCC, these specific questions

4. Are the current (transformation) proposals and approach the right ones?
5. What relevant good practice could be learned from other authorities?
6. Do the current proposals stand up to the rigour of the council's statutory duty to deliver a library service?

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days onsite at County Hall, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 20 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders
- Gathered information and views from more than 15 meetings, and additional research and reading
- Collectively spent more than 140 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 4 weeks in Worcestershire.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (8 - 9 May 2019). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

Is the council getting best value from its library assets?

In common with many other local authorities, the library service has continued to face significant financial challenges over the past years. To date it has responded effectively and successfully through sound financial management and the delivery of substantial savings and efficiencies which have helped to deliver over £3.7m of efficiency savings since 2011/12 budget.

The libraries have taken on the role of community hubs offering “one stop” access to a range of public services. A wide ranging remodeling exercise has helped co-locate 14 libraries with other public facing services. This has resulted in the development of some strong partnership working. However, as ambitions and priorities evolve, relationships will need to develop too. Not all partners currently feel they are engaged and involved early enough in decision-making or proposal and policy formulation. The library service is aware of this, and that it needs to look at re-setting some relationships so that they are ‘future fit’, based on the principles of collaboration and co-creation, and are founded on a mutual understanding, trust and appreciation of the roles partners can play and the value they can add.

A desk based needs assessment was undertaken in July 2018. It is a good piece of work. However, the missing stage in the transformation process must be the development of a robust strategy and a clear vision which all stakeholders can sign up to. This strategy will set the direction for the service and provide a common platform and language for everyone involved to work from. Flowing from this will be key objectives where clear priorities can be articulated.

The peer team met with highly motivated staff who are very positive about the library service. It would enhance continuing improvement to further consider how to engage and further empower staff both in the transformation programme and other work around developing a new library vision and strategy.

The service has demonstrated a range of different thinking about ways of working and has been flexible and innovative in trying different solutions to address the requirements of the transformation programme.

The role of the Hive in its support for the wider service requires further consideration. It provides book stock for the library network, and is in a unique small group of libraries that are recognised by the British Library, as part of the Business & Intellectual Property Centre’s across England. It could also join the British library Living Knowledge Network as well. It is therefore a “honeypot” that we would expect to attract further inward investment and sponsorship and we urge WCC to maximize this opportunity.

The concept of Open Libraries should be revisited, we detected some appetite for this approach among staff and councillors. However the public will need to be further convinced of the viability of this option before they fully endorse this approach. In particular concerns around safety, security and potential loss of social interaction will need to be addressed. This is now a mature model and is working successfully in a number of

councils, including neighbouring Warwickshire County Council. Their lead cabinet member has extended an invitation for WCC to visit and has offered support to the WCC lead member.

The service is very aware that a renewed focus on marketing and communications e.g. web site, social media, is necessary, as highlighted in the recently concluded consultation exercise.

The peer team suggest that you may wish to reconsider challenging the current position regarding “no closures” and no single staffing. Other councils have had similar intentions but both politicians and officers recognise that the continuing round of budget reductions is not best managed by salami slicing and reducing opening hours which may diminish the quality of the library offer. The current WCC position on these “no go” areas is holding the service back and limiting some aspects of remodeling that may lead to further service improvement. Perhaps a pilot site could be identified and an Open Libraries approach delivery model could be tested.

We understand why libraries have been outside the corporate property strategy proposals to date. But now may be the time to fully align library buildings with the Worcester One Public Estate Partnership in terms of overall utilisation, acquisition and disposal. We think that further efficiencies may be driven out by reviewing internal SLAs and lease arrangements.

Staff identified a number of Invest to save income generation type opportunities, but seemed unclear about how to progress these ideas.

Library service contribution to the cross cutting agendas of other services

The service has a good story to tell with some of its partnerships, particularly those with health and education are working well. The service’s health and wellbeing offer is aligned to Public Health outcomes through a service level agreement. The services provided for children and families are also aligned to the council’s Early Start programme, with a strong focus on looked after children.

The service also contributes to Open for Business, through its learning and skills programme, employability support services and digital support offer. Although not explicitly documented the library service appears to embrace elements of the WCC corporate agenda e.g. apprenticeships. However the lack of a current library strategy makes it difficult to see the contribution that libraries makes to achievement of the objectives of the corporate plan “Shaping Worcestershire’s Future 2017 – 2022”.

The staff we met were very clear about the contribution the service makes to helping address issues of social isolation and the needs of vulnerable groups. In order to raise the service profile it has defined an impacts and outcome framework which will be introduced in 2019/20. These should be framed in the context of the corporate objectives of WCC where possible.

The recent needs assessment has identified demographic groups that are underrepresented in active library user populations. The service will need to demonstrate its consideration of these groups' requirements.

The roll out of libraries as community hubs should play a significant role in developing aspirational communities. The role of libraries in helping learning, skills acquisition and employability is well documented and will form part of the narrative of the future library strategy.

We don't think that the library service is 'commission ready' at the moment. The library service should consider how it better markets its services, considering its cost basis, prices for providing services, ensures better networking and generally becoming more business-like.

Some library services have been outsourced or contracted to a third-party organisation. A number of councils have investigated delivering their library services with new partners in the private or voluntary sectors, or in different organisational models, such as the creation of public service mutuals, trusts or charitable companies. A few are including their library services within wider delivery arrangements by including sport, leisure and/ or arts to serve wider community needs in one place. It may be a consideration for WCC in the future.

What is the role of the library service and council in the local community?

The political and managerial leadership of the library service are well respected, both internally by staff and externally by a range of partners and stakeholders. There is recognition and support for their remodelling/transformation work to date. This will be further enhanced by the development of a shared vision. It is clear that there is drive and energy to work with partners to develop the vision and library strategy. We noted a strong support for the library service amongst the general public.

There are lots of local examples of bespoke support at community level and these need to be integrated into the narrative of the benefits of the service.

The further potential for connectivity across all sectors is an area for consideration. Although some excellent work has taken place, there is scope to do more and to do this systematically and consistently across the service.

The service clearly has an important role in looking after some of the most vulnerable people in society. It has been recognised that in some areas of Worcestershire the library is the only remaining public building in a community. It is therefore in a position to further locate council and other public services within the existing library buildings.

By providing activities directly and providing meeting /service spaces for other providers the service is helping build social capital in support of the prevention agenda. Libraries already bring people together by hosting local events and providing a shared sense of place for their users – ever more important in an increasingly digital age. They are uniquely placed to help local government and its partners deliver their strategic objectives, whether linked to community cohesion, health and wellbeing or economic

growth. Making effective use of new technologies and broadening digital access is helping libraries to extend their reach out into communities. The service should continue to assess other opportunities e.g. supporting the local economy.

We recommend that you feed back to the public the outcomes of the recent public consultation, progress to date and next steps. Currently the website just says that the consultation is closed. Further thought should be given as to the continuation of the public involvement with the library development plans, visioning and strategy development. There is a huge difference between engaging with communities on the future delivery of services and consulting with them on a set of proposals. So, a good communications plan is essential and information about the change process must be managed well. There needs to be confidence from the community that the process is an open and transparent one, that options can be explored before a preferred option is identified, and that there will be no decisions until after effective consultation. We advocate working with local communities to develop innovative solutions.

New ideas should be piloted transparently to test if they can work, focusing on identifying the bottom-up benefits to customers and communities, before the top-down value for money benefits are espoused, to generate greater buy-in from residents.

The LGA publication, 'New conversations: LGA guide to engagement', can provide you with comprehensive information on all aspects of the community engagement process: www.local.gov.uk/new-conversations-lgaguide-engagement

The staff would welcome a higher level of visibility of senior managers and councillors in libraries and communities. The commitment of the lead cabinet member for the service was universally recognised and welcomed.

We think that there may be further scope to reconsider community managed libraries in Worcestershire. Two of the peer team had been involved in successfully developing the concept in Warwickshire and Cambridgeshire and willing to share their experience with WCC. The model is mature and works well in many councils, some of the best mirror the achievements of good small businesses.

There is a considerable amount of assistance available, through the DCMS toolkit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-libraries-good-practice-toolkit/> and here is a [Community Managed Libraries Peer Network](#), supported by the [Libraries Taskforce](#), [Society of Chief Librarians](#) (SCL), and [Locality](#).

The network:

- provides a regular blog to share experiences and information
- has a regular [programme of training events and workshops](#) (provided both face to face and via webinars)
- can act as a forum to link newer community managed libraries to more experienced peers
- has [written a report](#) on its first national conference

Are your transformation proposals and approach the right ones?

Notwithstanding the need for a library strategy the service has undertaken some good on line and face to face consultation. The service will need to demonstrate clearly how this will help shape the future service provision, and how it will deal with non users and vulnerable groups.

There has been a desk research needs assessment undertaken that has provided good quality data. This data will inform a more detailed options appraisal. Data harvesting will assist you in further interrogating the data, this maybe a task that would be assisted through your partnership with Worcester University. You may also wish to consider non statistical factors for example Somerset library service identified the following factors:

Cost / value for money factors:

- unit costs of operation (e.g. cost per visitor / active borrower)
- building condition, suitability and location
- partner contributions / shared use of library building

Other factors:

- availability of other facilities that support communities / service delivery
- projected housing growth in catchment
- community / Friends group contribution
- feedback from engagement and consultation

The potential to build further on what customers want from the service could be enhanced by the use of CIPFA Plus, this would help you:

- inform future developments and improve services
- review changes following library promotion, marketing or following changes to services
- generate action plans
- track progress against plans.

The WCC Libraries Programme Board appears to provide the governance and stewardship necessary to ensure Cabinet approval of the libraries strategy and oversight to put in place appropriate implementation plans (as set out in its agreed Terms of Reference).

We advocate the establishment of a “Lessons learnt” log. We were told of some good work between collocated libraries on avoiding pitfalls of shared arrangements in multi user buildings. But these seemed to be ad hoc and dependent on individual communication between library staff, rather than systematic.

As discussed elsewhere in the report the service needs to develop a vision, strategy and implementation plan to align with the taskforce guidance, published by the DCMS and to avoid challenge in the future.

A mechanism for agreeing the overall future direction of the service with politicians will be required. It may also be of benefit to establish a task and finish Overview and Scrutiny group to look at further proposals for remodelling, transformation and strategy.

This would inform further consideration of some of the “red line” areas. Thereby putting library closures, lone working and open access back on the table.

At the time of our visit the library service transformation seems to sit outside corporate reviews/redesigns. We understand why this has happened but recommend that in future any library reviews are undertaken in the context of corporate reviews strategy e.g. 5G testing.

What good practice could you learn from other authorities?

The service has a history of identifying and adopting emerging good practice. It has also been at the forefront of new thinking, with the Hive being the only local authority and university jointly managed library in Europe. The service was an early adopter of self service, and is currently rolling out a new library management system. However, possibly because of the onerous burden of the transformation programme requirements, the profile of WCC library service seems to have diminished regionally.

Networking opportunities are not being maximised and learning is not being migrated to help with the transformation programme. Currently there is an opportunity to take a pause, reflect on work to date and identify capacity and capability to fully engage with the national and regional agendas. It is our opinion that the following will be of assistance as you move towards a new strategy and vision for Worcestershire libraries of the future.

Library Taskforce publications/Blog. The Taskforce was set up to enable libraries in England to exploit their potential and be recognised as a vital resource for all. On this **blog**, members of the Taskforce talk about their work.

<https://librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/>

Arts Council is the development agency for libraries in England. The focus is on public libraries, which operate within a wider framework of library provision and local and national government services. They have taken on the work of the Libraries Task force until 2020 <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-libraries>

Libraries Connected. The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) has become Libraries Connected as part of its new role as a Sector Support Organisation with Arts Council England (ACE) funding.

The new role will see Libraries Connected support and advocate for public libraries, building on successes such as the Universal Offers. The name change is part of a broad rebranding that has seen SCL adopt charity status, as part of the ACE funding deal worth £500,000 a year. <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/LibrariesConnected1>

The Reading Agency is a charity that works throughout the United Kingdom to harness the proven power of reading to tackle life’s big challenges like literacy, health and wellbeing and isolation and loneliness. Its vision is for a world where everyone is reading their way to a better life. It works closely with [partners](#) including public libraries, colleges and prisons to promote the benefits of reading among children and adults.

<https://readingagency.org.uk/>

CIPFA Nearest Neighbours. Allows councils to download reports comparing each English library authority that returned data (134 of the 150 councils in England have been published: reports updated March 2017) with their family group, as defined by the CIPFA Nearest Neighbours Mode. Warwickshire library service is the closest to Worcestershire. <https://www.cipfa.org/services/comparative-profiles/public-libraries/cipfastats-library-profiles-english-authorities-2017> and for Worcestershire <file:///C:/Users/mark/Downloads/Worcestershire.pdf>

JISC champions the use of digital technologies in UK education and research. It provides a range of online services and training to education, learning and research communities in the UK. Providing shared services, infrastructure and advice to help you manage your library resources, research publication lifecycle and research outputs. <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/>

LGA is a founder member of the Libraries Taskforce and has oversight of cultural activities through its Culture, Tourism and Sport Board. It provides guidance and case study material as well as blogs, leadership conferences and peer challenges https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.6_LGA%20Cllr%20handbook_Delivering%20local%20solutions%20for%20public%20library%20services.pdf

CILIP is the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. It is a professional body for librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers in the United Kingdom. <https://www.google.com/search?q=CILIP&oq=CILIP&aqs=chrome..69i57j35i39j0l4.2367j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

British Library (Living Knowledge Network) The Living Knowledge Network is a UK-wide partnership of national and public libraries. Together we share ideas and spark connections between libraries, their collections and their people.

Created by the British Library to explore new ways for libraries across the country to work as one, the [network](#) currently includes over 20 public libraries, the British Library itself, the National Library of Scotland and the National Library of Wales. The Living Knowledge Network is the only network of its kind in the UK and is centred on exchanging knowledge and developing memorable experiences for public library users. <https://www.bl.uk/living-knowledge-network/partner-libraries>

LOCALITY (funding and income) is the national network supporting community organisations to be strong and successful. <https://locality.org.uk/>

Finally the peer team evidenced much good practice internally, it is important to find a better way of sharing this across the service.

Do the proposals stand up to the rigour of your statutory duties to deliver a library service

According to the Cabinet Report (18 October 2018) you are aware of your statutory duty to deliver a library service within the meaning of the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums

Act. You are aware of the Wirral judgement, Task Force national outcomes, previous Judicial Reviews, alignment to the Society for Chief Librarians (SIL) universal offers and DCMS letters to individual library authorities. However to date you have not engaged with the DCMS to inform them of your proposals and need to do this as a priority action. You also need to develop a library vision and strategy and implementation plan to conform to best practice and guidance on this and to continue to engage with the DCMS throughout the process.

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this (there would be a charge for this). The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are: helen.murray@local.gov.uk

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.