worcestershire
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CORPORATE AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
13 JULY 2022

UPDATE ON LIBRARIES STRATEGY AND TRANSFORMATION (POST COVID-19)

Summary

1.   The Panel has requested an update on Worcestershire County Council's Strategy and transformation for libraries, post COVID-19, including the E-library.

2.   The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities, the Assistant Director for Communities and the Head of Service for Libraries, Archives and Archaeology have been invited to the meeting.

Background

3.   This report has been requested from the Panel as part of its agreed work programme. It provides an overview of progress implementing Worcestershire's Library Strategy and the Library Service's response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Issues for the Panel to Consider

4.   The Report provides information on:
   - The achievement of expected medium term financial plan efficiencies
   - The introduction of Libraries Unlocked at Droitwich and Stourport Libraries
   - The Library Service's response and recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Worcestershire's Library Strategy

5.   A Library Strategy for Worcestershire was written in 2019/20 following formal public engagement, a Local Government Association (LGA) Library Peer Challenge and the creation of a Library Needs Assessment.

6.   The Strategy, which sets out a medium term vision for the service and a context for future service transformation, received Cabinet approval in December 2019 and a transformation programme was put in place to deliver both the ambitions of the Strategy and outstanding Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) efficiencies of £285k. The Library Strategy is available www.worcestershire.gov.uk/libraries

Library Transformation Programme

7.   The library transformation programme included a range of initiatives: the creation of a strategic communications and engagement plan to increase awareness and participation in libraries; a library management re-structure and review of frontline

staffing; a review of service support staffing; a strategic review of library premises to identify opportunities for generating further premises income or efficiencies and the implementation of an open library service delivery model to future proof the library network while increasing library accessibility and retaining access to valued staff support.

8.   Some delays were experienced to libraries' transformation plans as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; notably to a strategic review of library premises to identify opportunities for sharing library space and the introduction of early adopter open libraries. However, other transformation projects were implemented with minimal delay and all outstanding MTFP efficiencies were achieved over 2020/21 and 2021/22.

9.   A Library Manager restructure was completed in October 2020, only 3 months later than planned, delivering a more efficient library cluster structure and three new posts critical to the delivery of the Library Strategy; a Library Service Development Manager post to drive the expansion of libraries' service offer in line with council priorities; a Library Communications post to build library profile and grow audiences and a Library Resource Manager post to lead the development of library technology, digital content and book stock to meet changing community needs and expectations. The restructure delivered £173k efficiencies without the need for staff redundancies.

10. A review of frontline library staffing followed the implementation of the management restructure to right-size library teams in response to changes to the library cluster structure. This review saw a small reduction in frontline posts of 1.4 full time equivalent (FTE); again delivered without the need for staff redundancies; while improvements to the management of staff resources across library clusters supported a 50% reduction in relief pool budget in 2021/22.

11. In response to reductions in workload arising from changes to Council-wide and service-specific operational practices, three posts were deleted from libraries' service support team during a review in 2021/22, resulting in 2 redundancies.

12. The successful delivery of the Library Strategy depends on strong communications to raise the internal and external profile of the breadth of the library offer and its benefits, and to promote wider library engagement. Following a successful bid to Libraries Connected, a consultant was secured to support the creation of a strategic communications and engagement plan for Worcestershire Libraries. While some progress has been made in raising the profile of library services, the delivery of the plan has been hampered by ongoing recruitment challenges and staff sickness in relation to the new Library Communications Manager post.

13. Place Partnership Ltd, and subsequently the Council's property team, have explored opportunities for property re-modelling options at Droitwich Library and Rubery Library. Discussions with Wychavon District Council over the potential for shared use of Droitwich Library building have been paused pending the completion of a One Public Estate review of Worcestershire properties and investigations into the feasibility of refurbishing or rebuilding Rubery Library on the wider site at Rubery are ongoing.

14. Following stage 4 lifting of COVID restrictions in July 2021, plans have been

progressed to implement 'Libraries Unlocked', Worcestershire's new open library service delivery model, at two early adopter libraries in Droitwich and Stourport. The new service went live on 6 June 2022 bringing an 85% increase in opening hours at both libraries, while retaining valued staff support for customers throughout the week. Initial responses to the service have been positive with 731 customers signing up in the first two weeks following go-live.

15. Worcestershire's aspiration for Libraries Unlocked is to provide a programme of community and partner led activities during Libraries Unlocked opening hours to promote wider community engagement in the library. Business and Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC) Business Breakfasts were hosted at both libraries in the first two weeks of going live and BIPC Business Drop-ins have also been scheduled. At Droitwich Library weekly Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) drop-ins and a weekly Knit and Natter social connecting group have been scheduled in Libraries Unlocked hours. Work continues to build the Libraries Unlocked offer and discussions are taking place with local Scout and youth groups to encourage better use of the library as a venue for hosting community activity out of hours.

Libraries' Covid response and recovery

16. Worcestershire Libraries responded positively and flexibly to the Covid pandemic, with strong support from both Libraries Connected, the sector body for public libraries, and the Council's Public Health and Health & Safety teams.

17. Much of Libraries work in response to the pandemic has aligned with the ambitions of the Library Strategy; developing new services to connect people, build their resilience and support the recovery of their independence and prosperity; playing a key role in the delivery of the Council's Here2Help offer and achieving funding to extend the library offer to meet community need.

18. A new Digital Library Hub was set up on library webpages within 3-4 weeks of the start of the first lockdown, providing new digital library services, accessible from home and aimed at addressing challenges posed by the pandemic. Many services, including weekly Bounce & Rhyme sessions for children, readers groups and coding clubs were moved online and new services were introduced including online Library Connect Bubbles providing opportunities for residents to connect safely over shared interests, a Digital Champion call back service to help those needing help using technology, business webinars and streamed cultural events.

19. With restrictions on book borrowing in place, some book funds were diverted to increase e book and e audiobook collections and subsequent increases in Worcestershire's digital library membership and e issues outperformed national averages.

20. Around 60 library staff and managers were re-deployed to co-ordinate and deliver Here2Help support across the county; transferring their customer support skills to residents needing the most support during the pandemic and building valuable knowledge of wider community service provision.

21. Libraries later became venues for hosting Covid test centres and distribution points for Covid test kits.

22. By engaging with staff and working closely with Health & Safety, libraries re-opened after the first lockdown with minimum fuss and very little delay. Worcestershire's approach compared very favourably with the national picture where libraries in many authorities remained closed for computer access or fully closed for large parts of the pandemic.

23. With the exception of the first lockdown in early 2020, Worcestershire Libraries remained open for computer access throughout the pandemic, in line with recognition from national government of libraries' significant role in providing free access to computers and the internet for those without access at home. At the end of 2020/21, despite Covid restrictions, 5,736 people had made almost 37,000 library computer bookings.

24. Over the same period, 25,500 people borrowed 488,000 books through libraries' Reserve and Collect book ordering service and, subsequently, Browse and Borrow service. There were 279,000 library visits.

25. During the pandemic, take-up of digital library services increased substantially with a 289% increase in digital membership, a 90% increase in issues of e books/magazines, a 91% increase in the use of online reference sources and over 16,000 attendances at online digital events and activities. E issues have remained at raised levels following the pandemic.

26. A successful bid for Good Things Foundation funding enabled libraries to gift digital devices to eligible, digitally excluded residents. This included the gifting of 23 devices to Learning Disability Service Users with ongoing support to recipients provided by Libraries' network of volunteer Digital Champions.

27. In the period following stage 4 lifting of Covid restrictions in 2021, many face-to face services have returned to libraries with a focus on supporting recovery from the pandemic. Social connecting groups have returned to libraries, offering varied opportunities for residents to connect socially over a shared interest. School visits have returned, encouraging reading for pleasure in children who have missed out on education, alongside a busy programme of early years activities that support school readiness. Digital Champions are back in libraries along with job clubs, business events, business support drop-ins and NHS and other partner drop-ins. Meeting room hire has also returned.

28. In October 2021 Worcestershire Libraries launched six new BIPCs at the county's six main district libraries, including The Hive, increasing access to free or low-cost business resources and services at a local level with a focus on supporting business recovery and business start-up.

29. Four young people were placed in library Kickstart roles while further partnership working with the Department for Work and Pensions, this time through the Council's Skills & Investment team, will see the launch of a Youth Hub in The Hive in July 2022, providing employment support and wider support for 18 – 24s.

30. A successful Arts Council bid for Libraries Improvement Funding at the of end 2021 has provided funds for investment in videoconferencing facilities in library meeting rooms to enhance the library meeting room hire offer and boost income

generation; and in live streaming technology to develop and increase the reach of libraries' digital service offer.

31. At the end of May 2022 library visits had recovered to 58% of pre-pandemic levels, with book issues at 77% and new library members at 65%. The number of library-based events and activities had recovered to just over 50% of pre-pandemic levels, with attendance at a similar level. Worcestershire's recovery rates compare favourably with national trends, with the exception of book issues which have been recovering below national averages. Further analysis of library issues is being undertaken to shape a recovery plan.

32. Appendix 1 tracks key library indicators from April 2019 to May 2022 and provides pre-Covid comparisons.

33. Further comparisons with national indicators of post pandemic library recovery show that the number of Worcestershire library computer users in May 2022 was 42% of pre-pandemic levels, compared to a 40% national average; while the number of attendees at library events was over 8,500, compared with 6,200 nationally.

34. A 44% reduction in the number of library volunteers from 2019/20 to 2021/22, coupled with a fall in the availability of library relief staff, has reduced the resilience of some frontline services, including those in community supported libraries. This mirrors a national trend in public libraries and calls for a new approach which attracts volunteers from a wider range of age groups and puts more emphasis on articulating the 'reward' for volunteering.

35. An exit survey of over 12,300 library visitors was conducted in Worcestershire over a week in April 2022, providing a snapshot of why residents are visiting libraries post pandemic. While 56% of library visits were for book borrowing or computer use, 44% were for other uses, with 12% attending a library event or activity, 9% visiting a co-located service, 7% using study desks and 4% meeting friends and socialising.

36. A comparison of the age profile of active library users pre and post pandemic shows an increase in the activity share of 0-4s and 5-12s from 18% to 23%; an increase in the activity share of 18-24s from 11% to 15% and an increase in the share of 65-74s from 10% to 13%. All other age groups maintained or showed a drop in share of activity, with the biggest falls being in the 25-49 and 50-64 age groups.

37. Further surveys will be undertaken during 2022/23 to monitor who is returning to libraries and for what reasons and which groups are not returning and why. This information will be used to tailor services and target communications to optimise the breadth of community engagement in libraries post pandemic.

Libraries Transformation Programme – Next Steps

38. Next steps in library transformation will be made in response to continuing financial pressures and will reflect approaches identified in the Library Strategy 2020 - 2025. They will focus on:
   a. Planning for further roll out of Libraries Unlocked
   b. Seeking community support for lower need libraries
   c. Seeking opportunities to generate income or deliver efficiencies from library premises, including new library co-locations.

39. Other key service priorities in 2022/23 include:
   a. Working with partners to develop library services that meet community need:
      i   extending the current library offer for schools to align with school priorities
      ii   exploring opportunities for a device lending scheme in libraries to promote and support digital literacy & inclusion
      iii   identifying a model for sustaining BIPC Worcestershire business support services beyond March/June 2023
   b. Encouraging the return of customers to libraries through the right service offer and strong communications
   c. Extending the reach of library services to a wider audience, including digitally excluded residents, through more flexible opening hours and targeted communications
   d. Implementing a new print solution that supports printing from customers' devices and generates income
   e. Procuring and implementing new meeting room and events booking systems to enhance the customer experience, support income generation and free up staff capacity.

Purpose of the Meeting

40. The Panel is asked to:
   - consider and comment on the information provided
   - determine whether there are any specific key areas of scrutiny within the Library Services they would wish to consider further
   - agree any comments to forward to the Cabinet Member

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Key library indicators from April 2019 to May 2022 including pre-Covid comparisons

Contact Points
Emma James / Jo Weston, Overview and Scrutiny Officers
Telephone: 01905 844964 Email: scrutiny@worcestershire.gov.uk

Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director Communities
Telephone: 01905 843658 Email: hperrott@worcestershire.gov.uk

Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director of Legal and Governance) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Agenda and Minutes of the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 10 December 2019 available here

All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.