

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a **Special meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Tuesday 20 December 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer (Vice-Chair), E Adam, P Atkinson, G Hutchinson, C Kay, R Manchester, C Martin, D Nicholls, J Purvis, J Quinn, T Stubbs and D Sutton-Lloyd.

Co-opted Members:

Mr P Walton

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors L Brown, J Charlton and S Townsend

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members in attendance.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Items from Co-opted Members and other interested parties

No items were raised by Co-opted Members and other interested parties.

5 Library Provision - Overview

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth which provided an overview of the public library service and presented the initial findings of the County Durham Libraries Needs Assessment exercise (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Alison Clark, Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism and Sarah Glynn, Strategic Manager for Culture, attended the meeting to deliver a presentation on the current service, including details of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and information on the phased approach to the libraries transformation programme.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism explained that the current service comprises of 39 libraries, a mobile library service and a library Headquarters located at Spennymoor, which houses the mobile library vehicles and book stock. A comprehensive library online service is offered, with an online book ordering and renewal service and free access to e-books and e-magazines. The mobile library service provides for the rural areas of the county and the 'Books on Wheels' service enables those with mobility problems to access library services direct to their homes. The 'Book Bus' serves residential homes, sheltered housing schemes and day care centres to deliver services to elderly and disabled persons.

Members learned that during the pandemic, with the closure of public libraries, frontline staff were seconded to support the vulnerable and the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism highlighted that, following the pandemic, libraries had become increasingly important community venues. The fast pace of change in response to the pandemic brought about new ways of working and digital transformation that otherwise may have taken many years to achieve. The service continued to diversify, for example, to offer events and activities, in addition to traditional library services. In recent months, in response to the cost of living crisis, the county's 39 libraries became 'warm spaces' to support residents throughout the winter and this had generated a great deal of public engagement through social media channels.

Following the pandemic, the number of active borrowers (borrowers who have borrowed two or more items in the previous 12 months), had recovered and was now standing at 76% of the last full pre-Covid-19 year and if the trend continued, the number of active borrowers would match pre-Covid-19 levels by the end of the financial year.

Referring to the authority's duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide comprehensive and efficient public libraries, the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism explained that the last extensive consultation on library services took place in 2012 and in May 2020, the Council's Corporate Management Team agreed to undertake a needs assessment of the library service to inform the future development of the service. An external agency was recruited to carry out an engagement exercise as part of the needs assessment. The consultation gathered views of customers, stakeholders and staff and the feedback from the exercise identified nine key elements for change as follows:

1. A strategic review of the existing physical library network;

2. A review of library opening hours;
3. Alignment of library outcomes with Council plans and priorities;
4. Investment in technology and digital content;
5. A library workforce skills review and associated training;
6. A review of communications and marketing;
7. Develop and deliver a compelling and accessible events programme;
8. Develop an ambitious plan for outreach and partnerships;
9. A review of current book stock and content policy.

The Committee noted that proposals for a new library offer would be formally consulted on, during a public consultation in spring 2023, with a view to a report being considered by Cabinet in the autumn of 2023.

The Chair thanked officers for the informative presentation and sought comments and questions on the nine key elements for change identified.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd referred to plans for outreach and partnership working and he commended the work carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, adding that he would welcome further development of this work. Councillor Stubbs asked if consideration would be given to the development of partnerships within the private sector, such as Amazon, and the establishment of community links for service delivery, for example through banks and post offices. The Strategic Manager for Culture confirmed that suggestions for outreach and partnership working would be considered.

Councillor Adam commented on the strategic review of the library network and observed a lack of provision in the south west of the county. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism responded that the ambition is to maximise access to services throughout the county, to enable all customers to access services as close to home as possible. In addition to existing public library buildings, this would include investigating how working with partners in the community and the use of mobile and self-services may increase provision.

In response to a question from Councillor Kay as to why it was deemed necessary to employ a consultancy to carry out the needs assessment exercise, the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism highlighted that due to the size of the service and the scope of the processes involved, it was considered appropriate and cost-effective to procure external expertise.

Councillor Kay spoke anecdotally of reports that customers attending a library for activities other than borrowing books were made to feel unwelcome and the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism advised Councillor Kay that she would investigate the matter.

Councillor Atkinson referred to the importance of libraries, in particular, in smaller town centres such as Ferryhill and he asked whether the transformation programme included plans to close libraries. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism stated that the aim of the transformation programme was service improvement and this would include a review of assets and buildings to ensure best use, in due course.

In response to a question from Co-opted Member, Mr Walton, as to the library service's links with Durham University library, the Strategic Manager for Culture confirmed that a strong partnership was in place with the University and the first phase of the transformation programme included input from an external reference group of sector specialists including Durham University's Director of Library Services.

Vice-Chair, Councillor Elmer, asked how the service intended to align actions with the Council Plan and its wider priorities. The Strategic Manager for Culture responded that the library review was timely to align with the Council's priorities, for example, by ensuring the delivery of library services will support the Council's sustainability priority through the use of electric vehicles and the availability of digital products. In addition, the support provided through libraries in respect of literacy, skills development and community learning would contribute to the Council's recently adopted Inclusive Economic Strategy.

The Chair commented that she would welcome the development of the activity and events programme which she believed would be a key aspect of public libraries in the future. Referring to the success of the co-location of the library at the Louisa Centre, the Chair asked for information regarding future co-location plans. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism replied that work was being carried out to better understand how families use libraries and leisure centres and she acknowledged that every location is unique and therefore co-location may not be appropriate in all areas.

The Chair then invited general questions in relation to the report and presentation.

Councillor Adam referred to the nine elements for change and asked how the elements were identified. The Strategic Manager for Culture explained that the external reference group acted as a critical friend and the elements were identified through key findings of the focus groups and data gathered from surveys completed by both active and non-active borrowers.

In addition, Durham's Youth Council was involved in the consultation and gathered the views of 500 young people. The Strategic Manager highlighted the importance of engaging with non-library users, in order to identify key barriers.

Councillor Adam observed that the report lacked data in respect of the different elements of the mobile library service and how the service provides for children, young people and those who work full-time and may not be able to visit libraries during opening hours. The Strategic Manager for Culture replied that further data relating to the mobile services could be shared with the Committee. She added that some libraries have a children's library section and that Durham Learning Resources delivers a dedicated schools' library service. Councillor Adam also raised concerns regarding literacy standards within schools and asked whether there were plans for a targeted approach to literacy, for parts of the county where literacy standards were low. The Strategic Manager responded that the transformation process aims to explore this issue in greater detail, in particular, the service's role to support literacy within families and referred to forthcoming work to develop literacy skills across the County and provide support to neighbourhoods to encourage the use of public library services.

Resolved:

- a) That the report be noted.

Members at the meeting agreed the following additional recommendations:

- b) That a further report and presentation detailing the proposals for the new library offer be considered by Overview and Scrutiny Members at a future meeting of the Committee to be held during the consultation process.
- c) That comments made by Members in relation to the proposals for the new library offer are formulated into a formal Overview and Scrutiny response, to be shared with the Service Grouping and fed into the ongoing consultation process.

6 Such other business

The Chair reminded Members that a short meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be held on 27 March 2023 which will be followed by a workshop focusing on the Climate Emergency Response Plan. The workshop will provide an opportunity for Members to work with officers to look at various sections of the CERP, with the comments made by Members during the workshop to be used to further develop the plan. Members would be provided with further information in January. The workshop will be open to all Overview and Scrutiny Members and the Chair encouraged all Members of the Committee to participate.

Concluding the meeting, the Chair, on behalf the Committee, congratulated the Strategic Waste Team on their success at the National Recycling Awards, winning the campaign of the year award for their WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) campaign and requested that the Committee's congratulations be conveyed to the team.