

Report to the Environment, Transport and Locality Services Select Committee

18th November 2014

Face of the Council - Heart of the Community:
Developing a vision and strategy for the library service

Appendix A: Submission to Sieghart review

1. What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?

Nationally, public libraries have experienced a year on year decline in book issues since 2006 and one key challenge for us is to work harder to promote reading and an enjoyment of literature.

We also recognise that library services can make important contributions to local and national agendas relating to digital inclusion, prevention matters, health and wellbeing, social cohesion, community safety, skills, business and employment.

These contributions have now been defined following research. The four 'Universal Offers' (2012) and *Envisioning the library of the future*, a report produced by the Arts Council in 2013, have provided a framework around which the library service in Buckinghamshire plans and delivers strategic priorities.

The Universal Offers in Buckinghamshire

The four 'Universal Offers' have been developed by the Society of Chief Librarians and partners including Arts Council England and The Reading Agency. The offers – Health, Reading, Information, and Digital – are the four service areas which modern users regard as integral to public libraries and the offers identify where libraries can provide real value to local people.

The Public Libraries Information Offer focuses on supporting people to access information and services online in life-critical areas such as careers and job seeking; health; personal financial information and benefits. Central to this offer is helping people to use vital government online information and services.

In delivering this offer, Buckinghamshire libraries make an important contribution to digital inclusion. We are the provider of free and mediated (supported) access to digital information and we are well positioned to ensure that residents who do not have access to computers and/or do not know how to use them are not disadvantaged.

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In Buckinghamshire, our libraries are now supporting computer literacy by offering free access to 'Learn My Way' an online IT training courses. Partnerships are also being developed with Job Centre Plus and adult learning providers to deliver a programme of assisted digital access, to support changes to welfare reforms.

The Digital Offer articulates the important role that libraries have in ensuring that everyone has access to the digital world and what a customer should expect from their public library. In Buckinghamshire we have introduced Wi-Fi across the network, revised our pricing to remove barriers to access and are now upgrading all public computers to Windows 7.

We have developed a strong social network presence and actively promote accessible computer services for disabled users. Through a network of 25 library 'e.champions' we promote the use of digital devices and enable access to an extensive range of online resources.

The *Universal Reading Offer* identifies how we develop, deliver and promote reading services, including supported online access, community outreach and services for targeted audiences.

Our work to deliver events programmes and the Summer Reading Challenge sit under this offer. The library service works to an agreed annual calendar of events and our priorities in terms of co-ordinated and high profile events during 2013/14 included World Book Night – April 2013; National Bookstart Day - June 2013; Older Persons Day - October 2013; National Libraries Day - February 2014; and Healthy Living Week. We are working with the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS) to prepare an events programme for the 2014 Anniversary of the First World War (1914-18). Following an extremely successful event in 2013, Buckinghamshire Libraries were asked to host the Poetry by Heart 2014 Buckinghamshire County Finals at High Wycombe library on Wednesday 29th January.

The *Public Library Health Offer* focuses on the public library contribution to the health and well-being of local communities. In Buckinghamshire we have increased our Wellbeing/Mindfulness collections, delivered IT sessions to older persons, developed a county-wide network of 'over 50's' groups and delivered a programme of Health Promotion events.

In partnership with Buckinghamshire Public Health and external providers *ToHealth*, Buckinghamshire Libraries hosted free NHS Health Checks during November and December at Aylesbury, Chesham and High Wycombe Libraries. The Bucks Floating Support Team now delivers regular weekly sessions at High Wycombe and Aylesbury Libraries and *Bucks Disability Service* delivered information sessions on key changes to the Disability Benefits system at 13 different library locations.

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Envisioning the library of the future

Envisioning the library of the future is a 2012 programme of research commissioned by the Arts Council to help develop a long-term vision for public libraries in England. The research has confirmed that public libraries are trusted spaces, open to all, in which people continue to explore and share the joys of reading, information, knowledge and culture.

The research also indicates that public libraries face many challenges in the coming years, including: advances in technology, which affect the ways in which people want to connect to information and culture; reduced public expenditure; the increasing involvement of citizens in the design and delivery of public services; and the needs of an ageing population.

In order to nurture the library sector to be as successful, sustainable and enjoyable as possible in light of these challenges, the Arts Council has set out four priority areas for development:

- Place the library as the hub of the community
- Make the most of digital technology and creative media
- Ensure that libraries are resilient and sustainable
- Deliver the right skills for those who work in libraries

In Buckinghamshire the combination of extensive partnership working through our County and Community model is succeeding in placing the library as the hub of the community. Increasingly, our libraries are working with Public Health, Advice agencies, Adult Learning, Adult Social Care, Job Centre Plus, Bucks Business First and other partners to capitalise on the opportunities provided by safe, welcoming, neutral and non-territorial library spaces, mediated access to digital information and the availability of trained library staff.

The community library partnerships in Buckinghamshire provide a sustainable and lower cost model for local library services and bring benefits to the individual and wider community. The contribution of community libraries in Buckinghamshire is detailed under question 3.

2. Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?

The current delivery mechanism works well and combines local accountability and focus with opportunities for efficiency through regional and national collaboration.

In Buckinghamshire the library service priorities are closely aligned with those of the county council. Support for business and enterprise, for example, is an area where the library service has concentrated effort in support of the council's priorities e.g. Chesham Library's Business Hub offers business facilities and information services in partnership with *Bucks Business First*.

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In addition, the library service is well placed to develop a role as the ‘face’ of the council and help drive efficiencies in the process. Increasingly public library services enable free access to face to face, phone and web channels and in Buckinghamshire the library service works closely with the corporate communications team to deliver council campaigns and key messages e.g. Adoption and Fostering awareness.

The local focus for library services has also allowed the successful implementation of a community library strategy, as detailed in Q3 below. Central to the success of the project was the co-ordinated approach through the Local Area Forums and Localities teams the leadership of local council councillors was crucial in helping to develop local options.

The launch of the national offers is encouraging the coordination of high profile events and promotions (e.g. Reader Development) and these brings efficiencies through shared resources and also deliver greater impact because of co-ordinated marketing. Collaborative working, particularly around systems and procurement, allow greater efficiency without compromising the benefits of locally accountable services.

Buckinghamshire are one of the founding authorities of the South East Libraries Management System consortium. Eleven library services have now combined to enable shared access to lending materials, co-ordinate systems developments and maximise the purchasing power efficiencies of collaborative working

Last year Bucks customers borrowed around 4000 books from our partner libraries, which were reserved online through the Buckinghamshire catalogue. This partnership extends the range of reading material available to all of our customers. Our customers are also able to borrow directly from other libraries in the consortium using their Buckinghamshire membership card, which means more convenience especially for those who live on the borders between local authorities or who live and work in different areas.

3 What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?

The Buckinghamshire model

The wording in this question needs clarification in order for a meaningful answer to be provided. Across the country a range of different community library models have been developed and the terms 'community library' will mean different things in different places.

For example, *Independent community libraries* have no public sector involvement whereas *co-produced libraries* involve partnership between the public sector and the community. In respect of the latter, there will be significant variations depending on governance, financial support, access to systems, staffing arrangements etc.

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In Buckinghamshire, consultation during 2010-2011 led to a programme of significant transformation to co-produce solutions with local communities to sustain library services and prevent closures in the face of funding cuts. Negotiation with communities resulted in the development of a range of locally adapted solutions. Importantly, these partnerships are part of the council's statutory offer.

The successful enabling of community libraries in Buckinghamshire was based on flexibility, support and honest and open dialogue. It was also important for us to develop a new vision for the service and drive a cultural shift across the service. In our experience we have found that properly supported community libraries, based on principles of partnership, that benefit from the skills and expertise of the county can be cost-effective and sustainable models of local library service delivery

Our project 'mantra' was that one size does not fit all and so in terms of the models adopted and timeframes applied, optimum flexibility was encouraged. Some models are fully self-managed whereas others still have council responsibility for premises management. In some models there are paid staff and in others only volunteers.

Thirteen community library partnerships have been developed since May 2010. Eight of these partnerships are self-managed community libraries. Community (not for profit) organisations deliver library services in partnership with the council. The relationship is defined through a lease on the premises and a service level agreement. Although managed by local community organisations, they remain part of the library network, supported by the county in terms of Book Stock, links with the Library Management System and training and development.

In Buckinghamshire there are five community supported library partnerships. The local authority retains the management of the building and provides a reduced staff presence. Local friends groups or library committees recruit volunteers, fund raise and work in partnership to raise money to maintain and extend opening hours and service provision. This is a partnership model of jointly managing and jointly delivering library services. Work is underway to deliver four more community library partnerships by the end of 2014. Eight community libraries have increased their opening hours since May 2010.

We realised quite early on that the success of the project would be in proportion to the level of support that we offered and so we have committed to a comprehensive and ongoing level of support. We recognised that additional staff capacity would be needed and appointed to a new community support role.

At the beginning of the project we recognised that we were travelling uncharted territory. We had made mistakes in the past, still did not have all of the answers but tried to be open minded and honest in our statements and dealings with local residents and partners. Our honesty helped build trust.

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Engagement with local communities was initially through a series of public meetings followed by workshops where different models were discussed. The workshops allowed the sharing of practical information relating to existing income and expenditure, governance models, business planning and fund – raising.

Through individual workshops it became clear that governance and fund raising represented concerns across all groups and so we delivered a number of seminars focusing on these areas where representatives from all fourteen working groups were able to attend.

The partnerships that have emerged have all developed in line with local vision. At Ivinghoe, the Beacon Villages Community Library is part of a village hub that also includes the Post Office and Village Hall. Chalfont St Peter developed a commercial sponsorship arrangement with a local insurance company and at Great Missenden complimentary usage has been identified to bring the local police into the library to share space and reduce costs.

Finally, we have worked hard to develop a vision that brings the ‘county’ and community’ together. For the community partnerships we seek to support without controlling and to foster an approach across the county where we seek to include and involve community libraries rather than to marginalise or isolate them. We have introduced a mixed economy of delivery and we emphasise the complimentary nature of the partnerships. We focus on the relative strengths of county and community models and speak in terms of the breadth, expertise and capacity of the ‘county’ combining with the local, responsive and flexible nature of ‘community’.

“Having worked with several authorities on community libraries, Buckinghamshire stand out with regards to their pro-active approach to working with the community. More than most, Buckinghamshire have remained open minded to find solutions in partnership with the community, embracing community involvement as part of the solution. Their approach to continually engage with communities to evolve their approach has resulted in some innovative and inspiring examples of co-produced libraries which provide a great example to this growing movement.”

Anton Schultz Development Manager – Locality

Wider Impact

For many rural communities the social impact of the library is significant given the absence of other accessible community venues. In particular, the provision of free, safe ‘open door’ social space and activity can reduce the isolation of elderly people and reduce the need for social services to address this.

The community library strategy generated a range of added value that we had not anticipated. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that volunteering helped to combat isolation and our new models are acting as a catalyst for

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mobilising community involvement in a way that increases social cohesion and local resilience.

The community library model in Buckinghamshire brings value to the individual volunteer and has a positive impact on the wider community. We are actively involved in the DEFRA / Arts Council research into libraries and rural communities and are in the process of engaging with local residents and groups to support the creation of locally owned and resilient library models that could serve as the precursor to the gradual and phased replacement of current mobile library services.