



Report to Communities & Localism Select Committee

Date:	5 October 2022
Title:	Buckinghamshire Libraries – Developing a Vision and Strategy
Cabinet Member(s):	Cllr Clive Harriss
Contact officer:	David Jones, Head of Libraries David.Jones@Buckinghamshire.gov.uk
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	The Committee are recommended to note progress in developing a new vision and strategy for Buckinghamshire libraries.
Reason for decision:	For members to be informed and comment on the emerging libraries vision and strategy and further engagement plans.

1. Background

- 1.1 Work has now started on developing a five-year vision and strategy for Buckinghamshire Libraries.
- 1.2 The library service has been transformed in recent years in response to a range of challenges and opportunities and now delivers a broader range of services, including enhanced digital services. Key performance information and statistics for Buckinghamshire Libraries can be found in the attached slide pack.
- 1.3 Increasingly the emphasis for the service has been on promoting health and wellbeing, inclusion, and in enabling access to information and services - particularly for the most vulnerable. Buckinghamshire Libraries have re-modelled buildings and developed partnerships to broaden the offer:
 - Most libraries now operate as Council Access Points (CAPs) and provide local and supported access to information and services.

- Specific projects have taken place to engage residents and partners in developing new services and activities in libraries, to meet the needs of local communities (for example, the Marlow Library refurbishment, and community engagement to deliver new activities in Micklefield).
- The new Amersham library within the Chilterns Lifestyle Centre has demonstrated the benefits of shared premises. Library usage has diversified and significantly increased; this is now the second busiest library in Buckinghamshire behind High Wycombe.
- In High Wycombe, a successful partnership with Action4Youth has been developed to deliver the Junction Youth Club. Open seven days a week, this facility attracts 50 – 100 young people a day and has resulted in the doubling of library usage by young people.
- Buckinghamshire Libraries have responded with speed and flexibility to re-purpose staff, information, and spaces to support residents throughout the pandemic and to welcome Ukrainian refugees. Most recently, libraries are now effectively supporting residents with the cost-of-living crisis, with surgeries promoting financial health and mutual aid and in developing the role of libraries as warm and welcoming spaces.

1.4 There is now an opportunity to build on the successes and lessons learned from the above developments and to create a new vision and strategy that aligns with key national and local agendas and priorities, for example levelling up in Buckinghamshire.

2. Developing a vision and strategy

2.1 Some initial scoping has been undertaken around developing a new vision and strategy, with library staff and volunteers as well as Trustees and volunteers from the Community Libraries engaged in several workshops at the end of last year to discuss and agree a future purpose and vision for Buckinghamshire Libraries. The following definitions were proposed through these groups.

Shared purpose (*‘Why the library service exists’*)

Our purpose is to provide free and accessible resources to connect communities and support learning and wellbeing in an inclusive, safe, trusted, and welcoming environment.

Shared vision (*‘What we are going to aim for’*)

Our vision is for all libraries to be welcoming and safe spaces for everyone in our communities to access services, information, and tools they need to learn, imagine, discover, and thrive.

2.2 Work has also begun to start mapping the high-level strategic context for Buckinghamshire Libraries, with the following plans considered thus far:

- Buckinghamshire Council Corporate Plan
- Community Board Priorities
- Buckinghamshire Cultural Strategy
- Opportunity Bucks – Succeeding for All - A local response to Levelling Up
- Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Universal Library Offers (National vision for libraries)

Further engagement will be undertaken with a range of council services and partners to consider wider strategies and work in development.

2.3 As set out above, Buckinghamshire Libraries have been successful in diversifying the service offer and responding to local priorities, but it is in the nature of the services that if we try to be all things to all people, we risk limiting our impact by spreading our resources too thinly. Therefore, clarity around future priorities is critical (and this might require agreement on where the opportunity for libraries to deliver impact is more limited).

2.4 An assessment of the strategic context to date has identified four broad areas, common to all plans, that could be agreed as service priorities for Buckinghamshire Libraries.

Health and Wellbeing

2.5 Buckinghamshire Libraries have made important contributions around key health challenges such as mental health, loneliness and social isolation, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, and there is scope for the library offer to be developed further. Activities to date include:

- Social activities e.g., knit and natter to bring people together, combat loneliness
- NHS Health Checks, smoking cessation sessions, blood pressure checks in libraries
- Bibliotherapy – ‘reading well’ collections to support mental health
- Health education, campaigns around particular conditions e.g., strokes
- Information on diet and exercise (libraries staff trained to have conversations)
- Proactive services and activities to support people living with dementia, autism

- 2.6 We are working with Public Health on a 'Healthy Libraries' model and a personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) project delivered through our schools library service. We will also look at ways of supporting NHS Health on the High Street initiatives. Libraries can also support the wider prevention agenda and help keep people active and socially engaged; and in our thinking around libraries as hubs, we will align with adult social care and continue to explore opportunities for collaborative working with health partners.

Culture and Learning

- 2.7 National research has evidenced that the informal and neutral setting of a library can promote equal access to cultural activity i.e., people who do not usually engage with cultural activities are more likely to do so in an informal library setting. Buckinghamshire Libraries have recently delivered successful poets in residence and touring theatre programmes and the library service is a key partner in the Buckinghamshire Cultural strategy.
- 2.8 Libraries have always had a role in promoting reading and learning and this will remain as a key priority for the service. The library service supports Buckinghamshire schools with project collections and work with early years to get book packs to babies and carers. The service supports hundreds of reading groups, hosts writing groups and library spaces are used for a wide range of learning activities in partnership with organisations such as Adult Learning and University of the Third Age (U3A).
- 2.9 Importantly, libraries also support computer literacy and promote digital inclusion with free classes and gadget days and support skills and employment with interview and CV writing classes.

Stronger Communities

- 2.10 The position of library sites as neutral and safe spaces in the community, means that they are excellent venues for the types of community activity that build cohesion, encourage civic participation, and promote community safety.
- 2.11 Two thirds of our library sites are co-delivered in partnership with volunteers and third sector organisations. Looking ahead, we will build stronger links with community boards and further develop libraries as local hubs at the heart of the community.

Access, Information, and Inclusion

- 2.12 Free access to information is the core function of a library service. In Buckinghamshire we have extended this role by developing libraries as council access points, offering support, and signposting to services across all three channels – face to face, phone, and web. The digital information offer has been expanded and we have an extensive range of books, magazines, and newspapers available online.

- 2.13 Access and inclusion are central to our work to ensure that all residents can access services and we have developed strong partnerships with organisations such as Age Concern, Bucks Vision, RNIB, Dementia Friendly alliance, and Buckinghamshire Disability Service. We are also actively researching language needs in Buckinghamshire and developing cultural programmes to help attract all Buckinghamshire communities into the library.
- 2.14 Libraries have a strong offer to help support the most vulnerable in society. A network of safe and accessible community venues provide access to information and services face to face, by phone and by computer. The flexible spaces, strong partnership arrangements, free access to information and staff aptitudes of care and helpfulness mean that libraries can be deployed at short notice to support council initiatives to help the most vulnerable residents.

Future approaches

- 2.15 The key principles for effective delivery against these priorities will be:

Developing libraries as local hubs

Traditional use of libraries e.g., book borrowing is in decline nationally, and so the future vision and strategy for libraries requires the diversification of the library service offer, to contribute to wider agendas such as wellbeing and inclusion. Sharing premises and/or re-modelling existing library spaces as hubs can reduce premises costs, increase footfall, and ensure future sustainability for the service.

Working in partnership

Buckinghamshire libraries are enabling services, collaborating with a wide range of partners to deliver shared outcomes. The library service has a strong and successful track record of partnership working and partners are positive towards libraries because of the safe and informal community setting, high levels of customer reach and satisfaction, free access to ICT and knowledgeable and helpful staff.

Engaging and empowering staff and volunteers

Our libraries staff and volunteers are the greatest assets of the service. They are motivated, skilled and have strong personal values around caring and support for Buckinghamshire communities. Our strategy will need to consider how best to harness the creative energies of staff and cultivate an empowered and dynamic workforce leading change and improvement at all levels.

3. Legal and financial implications

- 3.1 There are no legal or financial implications at this stage.
- 3.2 However the net revenue budget for the service is £3.7m and existing MTFP savings targets are:

Year	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
Savings (£000)	180	75	75	330
Incremental Savings (£000)	180	255	330	330

4. Corporate implications

4.1 The development of a vision and strategy for Buckinghamshire Libraries will contribute to a range of key corporate priorities as described in the report and appendix.

5. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

5.1 The development of the vision and strategy is at an early stage and local councillors and community boards will be engaged and consulted as the work progresses.

6. Communication, engagement & further consultation

6.1 This report provides members with early sight of the proposed priorities underpinning the future vision and strategy. The vision and strategy will be informed by customer insight, to be gathered through research and stakeholder engagement:

Partner engagement	<p>Customer First Exploring roles of libraries as CAPs and CAP+ and engaging with technical services around ICT/access</p> <p>Culture and Learning Buckinghamshire Culture, Early Years, Children’s services, Youth Services, Adult Learning</p> <p>Public Health / Adult Social Care/BHT Work with PH already underway to develop a ‘Healthy Library’ model. Opportunities to engage with Adult Social Care, Community Café, and Health on High St projects</p> <p>VCS, Community Boards and Parish and Town Councils Engage with key VCSE partners such as Community Impact Bucks, Leap etc, plus Community Boards</p>	October - January
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	<p>Inclusion and levelling up</p> <p>Work with organisations such as Bucks Vision, BUDs, RNIB, Dementia Friendly, cultural organisations, Community safety etc. to ensure delivery of inclusive and accessible services. Engagement with services and groups promoting debt advice, helping hands, Heart of Bucks, Financial Insecurity Partnership etc</p>	
<p>Community engagement</p>	<p>Research, surveys and focus groups</p> <p>Base-line data and gap analysis to identify under-represented groups – focus groups to better understand needs of harder to reach groups</p> <p>Survey on access arrangements – satisfaction with existing opening hours</p> <p>Surveying on levels of awareness of service offer to inform future marketing strategy.</p>	<p>October - January</p>
<p>Staff, volunteer, and Community Library engagement</p>	<p>Staff workshops</p> <p>Community Library Forum</p> <p>Buckinghamshire Libraries Conference</p>	<p>September / October</p> <p>September, December</p> <p>February</p> <p>November 2022</p>

7. Next steps

- 7.1 The libraries strategy will be produced using inputs from the above engagement and research; the anticipated governance timeline for the strategy is as follows:

CMT – January 2023

Cabinet – 21st March 2023