



Report to Cabinet

Date:	21 March 2023
Title:	A Vision and Strategy for Buckinghamshire Libraries
Cabinet Member(s):	Clive Harriss, Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure
Contact officer:	David Jones – Head of Libraries
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	Cabinet are recommended to approve the Buckinghamshire Libraries strategy as set out in this report and appendix. This would be implemented within the approved MTFP.
Reason for decision:	Adoption of this new strategy - developed through a comprehensive process of research and engagement - will ensure a clear focus for Buckinghamshire Libraries, aligned to local communities' needs and the delivery of wider priorities.

1 Executive summary

- 1.1 Buckinghamshire Libraries have transformed over recent years to offer a range of services and activities that promote wellbeing, inclusion, and community cohesion.
- 1.2 Work has taken place with staff, volunteers, councillors, and partners to develop a new vision and strategy for Buckinghamshire Libraries. The strategy establishes a clear set of priorities to ensure we continue to meet the evolving needs of our communities and to maximise libraries' contribution to key agendas across Buckinghamshire.
- 1.3 The vision is for a service that provides welcoming and safe spaces for everyone to access reading, culture and the information and services they need to learn, discover, imagine, and thrive.
- 1.4 The priorities for Buckinghamshire Libraries are:

- Encouraging Culture, Reading and Learning
- Building Stronger Communities
- Enabling Access, Information, and Inclusion
- Promoting Health and Wellbeing

1.5 Our guiding principles for delivery are:

- Building partnerships
- Developing libraries as hubs
- Engaging and empowering staff and volunteers
- Constant service improvement.

1.6 An extensive engagement exercise was undertaken to inform the priorities and gauge the level of support for the proposed approach. This demonstrated that 90% of respondents agreed with the vision, with approval ranging from 84% to 92% for the four priorities.

1.7 Work has taken place to develop short to medium term objectives to deliver the new vision and priorities, along with the associated measures of success. We will now engage with staff, volunteers, and partners to develop a detailed action plan to deliver a modern, relevant, and sustainable library service for Buckinghamshire. The action plan will be reviewed annually with particular attention given to ensuring alignment with the *Opportunity Bucks - Succeeding for All* programme including future discussion with ward partnerships.

2 A vision and strategy for Buckinghamshire Libraries

2.1 Background

2.2 The library service has transformed in recent years in response to a range of challenges and opportunities and an innovative 'mixed economy' delivery model has been developed, based on local community partnerships, to ensure sustainable local library services. Buckinghamshire libraries have also modernised through the development of enhanced digital services offering free 24/7 access to an extensive range of resources. Key performance information and statistics for Buckinghamshire Libraries can be found in the attached slide pack.

2.3 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 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.

2.4 There is now an opportunity to build on the successes and lessons learned from the above developments to create a new vision and strategy that aligns with key national and local agendas and priorities, for example *Opportunity Bucks – Succeeding for All*.

2.5 Development of the vision and strategy

2.6 Initial scoping workshops around developing a new vision and strategy were undertaken with library staff and volunteers, as well as Trustees and volunteers from the Community Libraries, at the end of 2021. The following 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.

2.7 Work also took place to map the high-level strategic context for Buckinghamshire Libraries, with the following plans considered:

- Buckinghamshire Council Corporate Plan

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

2.8 This assessment of the strategic context identified four broad areas, common to all plans, that could be agreed as service priorities for Buckinghamshire Libraries:

2.9 Health and Wellbeing

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, which bring people together and 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 physical activity (libraries staff trained to have conversations)
- Proactive services and activities to support people living with dementia and autism.

2.10 Culture and Learning

National research has evidenced that 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 delivery of the Buckinghamshire Cultural Strategy.

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 works 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).

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.

2.11 Stronger Communities

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.

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, further develop libraries as local hubs at the heart of the community and align with the *Opportunity Bucks - Succeeding for All* programme including future discussion with ward partnerships.

2.12 Access, Information, and Inclusion

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.

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 UK, BucksVision, RNIB, Dementia Friends and Buckinghamshire Disability Service.


Libraries have a strong offer to help support the most vulnerable in society. 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.

2.13 **Community and stakeholder engagement**

2.14 Building on the initial phase of scoping workshops, there has been subsequent wide-ranging engagement to gauge the level of support for the emerging vision and service priorities set out above, to understand the views of users, non-users, and stakeholders, and to identify ideas and opportunities to inform the further development of the strategy.

2.15 This latest phase of engagement has included discussion with the Communities and Localism Select Committee; a community survey seeking views on the proposed libraries vision and strategy; staff, volunteer, and community library workshops; and meetings involving a wide range of internal and external stakeholders and partner organisations. Please refer to section 7 of this paper for further details.

2.16 **Key findings**

- 2.17 Analysis of the of 802 survey responses demonstrates strong support for the purpose, vision, and draft priorities. The data shows that 90% of the people who answered this question agree or strongly agree with the purpose and vision statements and that 84% to 92% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the four priorities.
- 2.18 The survey has also generated helpful insight into the current user profile, popularity of different services and effectiveness of library service communication channels. Over half of the respondents have provided free text comments explaining what might make them use the library more often; this detailed information is being analysed and will be used to inform service planning.
- 2.19 The following points were noted during the discussion of the emerging vision and priorities at the Communities and Localism Select Committee:
- Members were provided with assurance that books and reading remain a key priority.
 - It was noted that Buckinghamshire were ahead of the curve in maintaining a great service offer on a reduced budget.
 - A member pointed out that community libraries should be given the opportunity to operate as freely as possible, as Buckinghamshire's community libraries had been successful in the past.
 - A member suggested that more interaction with parish councils was needed to effectively offer support to libraries.
 - At the last Select Committee looking at Visitor Economy, it had been suggested that libraries could host visitor information.
 - In response to a member's concerns about gaps in physical access to libraries, it was noted that work had been undertaken to map areas and identify gaps in provision.
- 2.20 Key themes emerged across all the engagement sessions:
- There is strong support for the vision, purpose, and priorities
 - Partnership work is the key to delivering the vision
 - Key priorities need to be flexible enough to adapt to the changing environment
 - There needs to be consideration as to how the vision and strategy is brought to life and communicated
 - The vision needs to be more succinct - no need to promote the statement of purpose
 - Reading and literacy is key and should be referenced in the priorities wording.
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2.21 **Proposed vision, priorities, and objectives for Buckinghamshire Libraries**

2.22 Based on the feedback from engagement, we have refined the vision statement (below) and priorities, including short to medium term objectives and success measures to underpin these. These are set out in the strategy document appended to this report.

Buckinghamshire Libraries

Welcoming and safe spaces for everyone to access reading, culture and the information and services they need to learn, discover, imagine, and thrive.

2.23 Work will now take place with staff, volunteers, and partners to further develop and embed the strategy, including through the production of a detailed action plan. Our concern with service planning and development will be to remain flexible and responsive, mindful of new and emerging trends and the development of a new national public libraries strategy led by Baroness Elizabeth Sanderson.

2.24 Through our engagement we have also identified four key principles which will underpin effective delivery:

2.25 Constant service improvement

Buckinghamshire Libraries are committed to continuous service improvement driven by enabling digital access to our services, having an effective marketing strategy, and improving the reporting and monitoring of performance.

2.26 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 priority will be to harness the creative energies of staff and cultivate an empowered and dynamic workforce encouraging the contribution of staff from all levels.

2.27 Developing libraries as hubs

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

premises costs, increase footfall, and ensure future sustainability for the service. This will be informed by the needs of the local community and mapping of wider service provision, building on the success of existing co-locations with public, VCSE and banking services.

2.28 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.

3 Other options considered

- 3.1 The alternative is to not produce a strategy; this option has been discounted, as we need to ensure clear direction for service planning and to align with key Buckinghamshire priorities to maximise the impact of library services.

4 Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 There are no specific legal or financial implications arising from adoption of this new strategy and the strategy proposed will be implemented within the approved MTFP; it supports the fulfilment of the Council's statutory duty 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library for all persons'. As context, the net revenue budget for the library service is £3.7m in 2022/23 and existing MTFP targets are set out in the table below; these are being achieved through a combination of service efficiencies and increased income.

Year	2022/23	2023/24	Total
Savings (£000)	180	85	265
Incremental Savings (£000)	180	265	265

5 Corporate implications

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 This decision does not require a full equality impact assessment

- 5.3 This decision does not require a data protection impact assessment

6 Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 Posters and online links were sent to all Community Boards and the survey was shared with all elected members through the members' bulletin. No specific additional views were received.

7 Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 Communities & Localism Select Committee – A report on the emerging vision and priorities was provided to members of the Communities and Localism Select Committee and discussed at the Committee's meeting on 5 October 2022.
- 7.2 Survey - seeking views on the proposed libraries vision and strategy. The survey ran for six weeks from the beginning of December 2022 until 15 January 2023 and a total of 802 responses were received. The survey was promoted through a wide range of organisations and channels to ensure inclusivity.
- 7.3 Workshops with library staff, volunteers, and community library partners - All library staff and volunteers participated in local team workshops and local library managers also visited community libraries in their areas to discuss the vision and priorities. The views of community libraries were also sought through meetings with the Community Library Forum.
- 7.4 Wider stakeholder engagement - three online sessions were held during December 2022 and January 2023 to seek the views of internal and external stakeholder groups. There were a total of 58 attendees, including: Buckinghamshire Council services - Early Years, Youth Services, Adult Learning, Public Health, Adult Social Care, Community Safety, Helping Hand; Buckinghamshire Culture and cultural organisations; Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust and Buckinghamshire Integrated Care System/Board; Buckinghamshire Older People's Action Group; Community Impact Bucks; Leap (Active Partnership); BucksVision; Buckinghamshire Disability Service (BuDS); RNIB; Dementia Friends; Citizens' Advice Bucks; Heart of Bucks; Financial Insecurity Partnership.
- 7.5 A communications plan setting out how we will share the engagement feedback and promote the new vision and strategy is attached as an appendix.

8 Next steps and review

- 8.1 Following Cabinet approval of the strategy, the next steps will be to formally launch the strategy by implementing the attached communications plan. This will include

further discussion of the strategy and action plan with staff, volunteers, and stakeholders at the library service conference on 24 March.

- 8.2 We will engage with staff, volunteers, and partners to develop a fully detailed action plan. This action plan will be reviewed annually in line with the Council's business planning cycle, with particular attention given to ensuring alignment with the *Opportunity Bucks - Succeeding for All* programme.

9 Background papers

N/A

10 Your questions and views (for key decisions)

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report, please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider, please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by email to democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk.

