

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Cabinet

Date of Meeting: 20th August 2012
Report of: Customer Service and Libraries Manager
Subject/Title: Libraries Strategy
Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Brown

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 This report introduces the new Libraries strategy that has been developed to define the priorities for Cheshire East Libraries to ensure the Council fulfils its statutory duty while also contributing to the priorities for action set out in the Cheshire East Sustainable Communities Strategy.
- 1.2 The strategy is not proposing radical changes to the library service. The key challenge is to continuously improve and modernise the way that we deliver the service to keep pace with evolving customer expectations, and to be flexible and responsive to take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves.
- 1.3 The strategic objectives for our libraries are:
- Improve literacy
 - Support informal learning
 - Enable digital inclusion
 - Provide information
 - Promote libraries as community anchors

2.0 Decision Requested

- 2.1 That Cabinet endorse the new Libraries Strategy.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 Cheshire East Council has a statutory duty 'to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof' as set out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. The Libraries strategy defines the priorities for Cheshire East Libraries for the next three years to ensure that it fulfils its statutory duty while also contributing to the priorities for action set out in the Cheshire East Sustainable Community Strategy.
- 3.2 The strategy is not proposing radical changes to the library service. Its purpose is to provide the strategic priorities for the service against which developments and opportunities should be assessed. It does not aim to describe everything that we will do to achieve the objectives as this will be

reviewed and documented through annual service plans, but it will highlight some high profile developments or opportunities that we will proactively consider during the next 12 to 18 months, such as whether to introduce the ability to download e-books through libraries.

4.0 Wards Affected

4.1 All wards.

5.0 Local Ward Members

5.1 Not applicable.

6.0 Policy Implications including - Carbon reduction - Health

6.1 The review of the mobile library service and the proposal to reduce the number of vehicles from three to one will reduce fuel consumption.

6.2 Libraries provide a wide and diverse range of health and wellbeing activities, from Reading Groups to Health promotion activities to books on prescription. Volunteering is also recognised as delivering important health benefits, and Libraries offer a number of volunteering opportunities such as Reading Challenge Champions, IT Buddies and Rhymetime Assistant. Cheshire East Libraries are involved in a project being jointly lead by the Reading Agency and the Society of Chief Librarians to better articulate what libraries can offer to support health and well being. The project has so far defined the Public Library Health offer as:

- A network of local community hubs
- Non-stigmatised, non-clinical community space
- Community outreach expertise, access to vulnerable people and local knowledge
- Expertise and support
- Supported on-line access
- Health related self -help reading programmes, services and resources, referral and signposting and social and recreational activity
- Volunteering and community engagement opportunities

7.0 Financial Implications (Authorised by the Director of Finance and Business Services)

7.1 The Libraries strategy does not have any direct financial implications. The financial implications of any subsequent actions will be considered on a case by case basis, and may contribute to savings already budgeted or contribute to new policy proposals in future business plans.

8.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

8.1 Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 a local authority has a duty to provide “ .. a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof..” who live, work or are being educated in it's area.

8.2 There have been a number of challenges to Local Authorities looking to change their library provision over recent months. In those cases, authorities were proposing library closures whereas the Libraries Strategy members are being asked to approve, does not include this. However, in the relevant cases three points were considered by the Court:

- (1) The duty placed on the Local Authority by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964
- (2) The Public Sector Equality Duty (S149 of the Equality Act 2010)
- (3) The need to consult.

8.3 In respect of the duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act, the Court held that the LA could not be found to have complied with this duty unless it had assessed the needs that it's library service had to meet. However, the requirement to conduct an assessment of needs did not require a LA to carry out a discrete information-gathering exercise; it was entitled to rely on the expertise and experience of its professionals and on information gathered from a variety of reliable sources. In formulating the Libraries Strategy for Cheshire East Council an informal review of the Library Service has been undertaken by the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee and a Peer review of the service has also been undertaken. This would seem to be sufficient to meet the expectations set out by the Court.

8.4 Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 sets out the Public Sector Equality Duty:

“A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to –

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this act;
- (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it..”

An Equality Impact Assessment has not been provided with this report and case law states that such a document is not a necessity for conformity with the Public Sector Equality Duty. However, Local Authority decision makers must consciously address their minds to the public sector equality duty when making decisions and members need to ensure that they are satisfied that they have sufficient information available to them to comply with this duty.

8.5 Finally, there is no specific statutory duty to consult in respect of library provision. However, the Local Authority does have general duties to consult

and involve the community in changes to services. It is noted that questions in respect of library provision have been included in the Spring 2012 Influence Cheshire East Survey and the results have been taken into account in finalising the Libraries Strategy.

- 8.6 As the strategy is put into effect and specific proposals arise, officers may need to carry out detailed consultation in respect of those proposals and legal advice should be sought on this point at the relevant time.

9.0 Risk Management

- 9.1 Reputational risk is the main risk associated with any proposals to change a library service. The risk to Cheshire East is low given the Libraries strategy is not proposing any radical changes to the service. Thorough consultation and equality impact assessments will mitigate the risk of reputational damage.

10.0 Background and Options

- 10.1 An informal review of the Library service undertaken by the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee in September 2011 described Libraries as an important resource to the public that are seen by many as an integral part of a city, town or village identity and aesthetic. The Committee's report stated that it is important that Cheshire East Council has a strategy in place to maintain and develop its library services for the residents of the borough.
- 10.2 A Peer review carried out by the Local Government Association in March 2012 concluded that we are providing a good library service, professionally managed and delivered by highly motivated staff. Amongst its recommendations, the review advised us to urgently focus on improving the positioning of the library service in the council, recognising that the services' corporate profile may be limited, although apparently valued politically, and potential as a major contributor to wider priority outcomes not properly understood or utilised. They advised that the production of a library strategy should seek to address this by examining the future of the library service in terms of this wider contribution as well as looking at the specific service needs to be met by libraries.
- 10.3 The Influence Cheshire East (ICE) Spring 2012 Survey included a section on Libraries to assess residents' current library usage and to explore what their future requirements of libraries may be. This research solidifies the position and role of libraries from a resident perspective. Residents use them, are satisfied with them, and believe they have a future. Threats to libraries from evolving technologies do exist, however they may not be as critical as thought. It will be important to monitor trends in library usage and in technological usage, and incorporate changes as and when necessary, although any change should only be integrated gradually, and within the ethos of libraries. Books, and the community role of libraries, are the main attributes that should be built on – the latter especially has much potential.

- 10.4 The strategy has considered the learning from the Future Libraries Programme that was published in August 2011. Cheshire East has already implemented or considered many of the opportunities outlined by the programme. For example, the programme recommended one of the possible models for delivering more efficient and effective library services could be to deliver the service network in different ways through co-location or new, non traditional outlets and service points. Cheshire East has already taken the opportunity to co-locate customer service points in Libraries. The Council is also currently considering the business case for developing Lifestyle Centres in some towns. The opportunity to include the library within the scope of a Lifestyle Centre is being considered in locations where it makes sense. Any proposal to include a library within a new lifestyle centre could clearly have an impact on the location of libraries within Cheshire East, but it will not affect the core purpose or strategic objectives of the service.

11.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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