

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Cabinet

Date of Meeting:	1 st April 2014
Report of:	Principal Manager Local Community Services
Subject/Title:	Sustainable Libraries Strategy (Forward Plan Ref: CE 13/14-84)
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor David Brown, Strategic Communities

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 The Council recognises the valuable role that our libraries play in their communities and is committed to retaining its libraries. It has the ambition to broaden the role of our libraries and develop community hubs that appeal to a wider audience and buck the national trend of declining library usage.
- 1.2 Cheshire East Libraries are highly valued by residents. A recent Libraries survey reported 95% of users were satisfied with the library service in Cheshire East. We have the highest number of issues amongst all Unitary authorities, and the third highest out of all UK library authorities.
- 1.3 This report introduces the updated Libraries strategy that defines the service priorities to ensure we deliver a comprehensive, efficient and sustainable library service in Cheshire East. The strategy is provided as an appendix.
- 1.4 Expectations of libraries have evolved and if they are to represent value for money to all residents they must become more relevant to a wider section of the community and help our local communities to become strong and supportive and help people to develop the life skills and education they need to thrive. Libraries would not exist, however, without their traditional purpose of lending books and so our challenge is balancing the expectations of our traditional library users with the diverse needs and expectations of residents that visit our libraries to seek help with finding a job, or get information on benefits, or develop digital skills, or participate in community activities.
- 1.5 The service priorities for our libraries are:
 - Improve literacy
 - Support informal learning
 - Enable digital inclusion
 - Provide information
 - Develop libraries as community hubs
 - Improve efficiency to give best value for local people

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet endorse the Sustainable Libraries Strategy.

3.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The Council published its Three Year Plan in February 2013, setting a clear strategic direction for the authority and identifying the key outcomes we are seeking to achieve to improve the quality of life of local people. The Plan also identified major change programmes to ensure that the Council focuses its energy and resources on those areas of change which will ensure maximum value for money for local people, and also build a sustainable Council for the future. This included a project to develop a new model for sustainable library services and community hubs that challenged the service to reduce its annual operating costs by 30%.
- 3.2 While the lending of reading materials remains the universally recognised trademark of the service, the scope of the public library has evolved beyond the traditional role of promoting literature, reading and culture to also encompass information, literacy, learning, digital inclusion and job-seeking support. This strategy defines the service priorities for our libraries to ensure that it fulfils its statutory duty, while also directly contributing to the key outcomes set out in the Council's Three Year Plan, and delivers the expectations from the major change project to deliver a sustainable library service in Cheshire East.

4.0 Wards Affected

- 4.1 All wards.

5.0 Local Ward Members

- 5.1 Not applicable.

6.0 Policy Implications

- 6.1 Our libraries directly contribute to outcome 1 and outcome 3 in the Council's Three Year Plan.

Outcome 1 – Our local communities are strong and supportive.

Outcome 3 – People have the life skills and education they need to thrive.

7.0 Financial Implications

- 7.1 The Libraries strategy supports the delivery of the financial savings of the major change project to deliver a sustainable library service in Cheshire East.

8.0 Legal Implications

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 In recent case law relating to changes in library provision, the Court considered three points:

- (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. It is noted that in formulating the Libraries Strategy for Cheshire East Council an informal review of the Library Service was undertaken and a Peer Review was also undertaken in March 2012.

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 a library survey was commissioned in September 2013 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 closing libraries. Thorough consultation and equality impact assessments of any proposals affecting individual libraries will mitigate the risk of reputational damage.

10.0 Background and Options

- 10.1 Cheshire East Libraries are highly valued by residents. A recent Libraries survey reported 95% of users were satisfied with the library service in Cheshire East. We have the highest number of books borrowed each year amongst all Unitary authorities, and the third highest out of all UK library authorities.
- 10.2 The Council recognises the valuable role that our libraries play in their communities and is committed to retaining libraries in the 16 towns that they are in today. It has the ambition to broaden the role of our libraries and develop community hubs that appeal to a wider audience and buck the national trend of declining library usage.
- 10.3 The Council's Three Year Plan established a project to develop a new model for sustainable library services and community hubs. The Council is committed to its 16 libraries but the project is expected to deliver £1m saving against a baseline revenue budget of £3.5m by 2015/16. £700k of this saving has been delivered to date. The remaining £300k will be delivered through further innovation in service delivery and contract savings.
- 10.4 A Library survey was commissioned to ensure we design and deliver a sustainable library service that meets the expectations of our communities. 95% of library users are satisfied with the library service. The service that they tend to value is a traditional one, with an emphasis on borrowing books. The changes they desire tend to be enhancements or modernisations of the current library offer: Wi-Fi, eBooks, and better zoning to allow for both quiet study and noisy children in the same building.
- 10.5 The service priorities set out in the Libraries strategy are broadly similar to those defined in the Libraries strategy published in 2012, and so this strategy does not signal a significant change in direction for our libraries. They are now more closely aligned to the Council's priority outcomes defined in the Three Year Plan, and in particular reflect the evolving role of libraries as community hubs within some of our towns.

11.0 Access to Information

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

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