

Report subject	BCP Council Libraries – Creating a sustainable future
Meeting date	7 February 2024
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>Local authorities are constantly evaluating the way they deliver services, not only taking account of financial pressures but equally changes in social trends, new technology and the evolving needs of their communities. However, since BCP Council was formed in 2019, there has not been a comprehensive look at our library service to ensure it remains relevant to the needs of our communities and to the circumstances in which the council now operates. A review is therefore overdue and this report sets out the review framework.</p> <p>Exploring interest in alternative models of delivery may allow libraries to sustain and even improve their offer to communities as hubs for a variety of council/community services. A range of models including those that capitalise on the capacity in our communities, and the technology that is now available to support open access, will be explored to inform the final strategy.</p>
Recommendations	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) A public consultation programme is launched to understand the needs of the community going forwards. (b) Options for different delivery models are fully evaluated. (c) Options appraisals for the potential co-location of shared council services, contributing to the development of Community Hubs within libraries, are developed. (d) The proposed timeline for progressing the development of the Library Strategy, (paragraph 38), is supported. (e) A report returns to Cabinet in October 2024 detailing progress and proposals for the future service.
Reason for recommendations	<p>To inform the future library service delivery model.</p> <p>To reimagine the library service and ensure its efficient delivery.</p> <p>To deliver options to Cabinet by October 2024.</p>

Portfolio Holder(s):	Cllr Andy Martin, Portfolio Holder Customer, Culture & Comms
Corporate Director	Jess Gibbons, Chief Operating Officer
Report Authors	Matti Raudsepp, Director for Customer, Arts & Property Lynda Anderson, Head of Customer & Libraries
Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Decision

Background

1. The BCP Council Library service consists of 24 branches spread across the conurbation. Through the range of services provided by our libraries they contribute to many council objectives, including those within the recently agreed 2023-2027 Corporate Strategy under the 'Our Place and Environment ' and 'Our People and Communities' themes.
2. As a free, universal service, libraries represent a valuable resource to people of all ages, meeting a wide range of needs. They link residents to their communities and to the wider world of literature, online resources, and learning. The service is a statutory service which places additional responsibilities on the council, but that doesn't preclude the council from implementing changes or new models of delivery.
3. The library service has had to evolve, and continues to do so, as the needs of its customers and communities' change. Local authorities are constantly evaluating the way they deliver services, not only taking account of financial pressures but equally changes in social trends, new technology and the evolving needs of their communities. Our library service must be part of that process to retain its value and relevance to the needs of BCP communities.
4. Our library strategy will establish what the service should look like in the future and how we will deliver our ambitions for the service. The strategy will guide planning, investment, and priorities. This piece of work will be carried out within challenging financial circumstances, but at the same time this presents an exciting opportunity to explore ambitious and innovative ways in which we might reimagine our library service for the future, including how our libraries can act as community hubs for a wider range of public and community services. How other local authorities have developed their library service, the innovative ideas they may have adopted and the success of the changes they have implemented will be captured as part of this process to ensure the widest possible experience is taken into consideration.
5. The council will be developing its library strategy in the context of the library service contributing £500k to the council's 2024/25 financial pressures, and with a view to making a further contribution to the 2025/26 budgetary position as required for the Medium Term Financial Plan. It is nevertheless the aim to create an ambitious but affordable plan for the long-term future of the library service, and it is recognized that this may lead to investment where doing so would enable the delivery of benefits that would link to the council's wider corporate priorities.

6. Libraries Connected, the national sector support organisation for public libraries in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, guide the work of libraries at a national level through 4 universal library offers. These are:
 - **Culture and Creativity**- to enable local communities to access and participate in a variety of quality and diverse arts and cultural experiences through local libraries.
 - **Health & Wellbeing** – to support the health and wellbeing of local people and communities through services that inform, engage, and connect.
 - **Information and Digital** - To ensure local communities have access to quality information and digital service, to learn new skills and to feel safe online.
 - **Reading** - To build a literate and confident society by developing, delivering, and promoting creative reading activities in libraries.
7. This report aims to launch the process for delivering a new and sustainable model for the BCP library service, that builds a service fit for the future, and one that can play its part in enriching lives and contribute to the council's place shaping ambitions.

Local Context

8. Although the library service has been brought together with back-office systems and processes streamlined to create efficiencies, the community offer is largely generic, and the model of delivery has not changed. The service is typically the same size and shape as it was when it was inherited from the legacy councils, which means it was not designed to meet the needs of a single council and a much more connected community across the wider conurbation. The risk exists that the service is not delivering its potential when considered against these changed circumstances and so a review is long overdue.
9. The new BCP Council corporate strategy of BCP Council has now been adopted and a strong theme has emerged around our people and communities, our place and our environment and these themes should shape the way in which we work. Libraries can be a means for strengthening social cohesion and this is something the strategy process will seek to protect and build on.
10. The council's target operating model and transformation programme focuses strongly on the digital delivery of services which enable people to self-serve where they can. This frees up staff time to assist the more vulnerable members of the community where self-service is not an accessible option, or their needs are complex and need a greater depth of professional involvement.
11. The council owns or leases a wide variety of buildings, largely inherited as a result of local government reorganisation, of which libraries are a part. The opportunity exists to consider how the library strategy, working with the Estates and Accommodation Project, can contribute to the council's wider aims of consolidating its property estate through the creation of community hubs, making the most of the library estate whilst reducing the council's commitment to other buildings with their associated costs and liabilities. This also allows us to consider, not just the sharing of space, but the collaborative delivery of services through the library estate.

Financial Context

12. The Council's financial challenges are not unique, and it is becoming increasingly common for councils across the country to be considering how their library services can play their part in addressing those challenges. It is consequently envisaged that our strategy will deliver outcomes in time for implementation by April 2025, to take account of any required investment or savings implications connected to the Medium Term Financial Plan.
13. The library service is contributing to the more immediate financial pressures the council faces in 2024/25 with £500k of savings, which are largely being delivered through selected reductions in opening hours. These changes are being informed by usage data to mitigate impact on customers.
14. Our strategy needs to consider at pace, the needs of our communities in respect of the library service they wish to see, what options are available to the Council to meet those needs efficiently and effectively in the future, and with a view to being able to deliver the library service at lower cost and potentially with greater community involvement or technological innovation.

Strategy Development

15. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) expects councils who are considering changing their library service to inform the DCMS at an early stage before public engagement or consultation commences.
16. DCMS has allocated the council with officer contacts to support our strategy development process, and an initial meeting has taken place. The council is encouraged to maintain regular contact through the lifecycle of strategy development to gain input and advice and to learn from other councils that have pursued changes to their library services.
17. DCMS advise that key priorities for the council in underpinning a robust library strategy are a comprehensive needs assessment, consultation, and Equality Impact Assessment process. The council is free to decide the future of its library service, but its decisions are expected to be built on these robust foundations. In this regard those councils that implement change without adequate preparation and process are at higher risk of challenge, by DCMS, or by individuals or stakeholders.
18. DCMS guidance suggests strategy development should consider the accessibility of its services (physically, virtually and through outreach), the quality of the service (in terms of meeting local need), the availability of the service (including opening hours) and the sustainability of the service.
19. The test for any resulting strategy is that it:
 - Meets legal requirements relating to its statutory functions.
 - Is shaped by local need.
 - Focuses on public benefits – the outcomes and the impacts the strategy will have.
 - Be informed by evidence and good practice.

- Supports the delivery of a consistent England-wide core offer linking delivery to the Libraries Connected universal offers.
 - Promotes partnership working, innovation and enterprise.
 - Uses public funds effectively and efficiently.
20. The DCMS are very open to Local Authorities adopting different models of delivery to their present offer, exploring how it may be beneficial to partner with other organisations through commissioning agreements, or using spaces differently to co-locate and integrate different services to improve delivery for the local area.
 21. This is very much in keeping with the vision of the Cabinet to create community hubs as it reviews its corporate assets, not just libraries, but across community centres, adults, and children's social care buildings. This represents a much more cross cutting vision for what our libraries can do and how they can contribute to strengthening the delivery of services and support to our communities.
 22. To build the strategy, there are three themes which will need to be explored. These are:

Theme 1: Understanding the priorities of stakeholders and communities.

23. A consultation strategy will need to be agreed. It is suggested that this primarily involves developing questionnaires to be targeted at the public and key stakeholders.
24. There should be separate questionnaires aimed at children to ensure younger voices are heard.
25. The aim of the initial consultation would be to understand the views of BCP's residents around their library provision to understand what is most important to them.
26. The findings would then be used, alongside the outcomes of the other key areas of work, to inform the library strategy and the proposed actions and changes that it will contain.

Theme 2: Asset Management, sustainability, and potential co-location of services

27. The library estate varies greatly in size and condition as well as the public facilities within them. Some libraries for instance have public toilets, bookable meeting room space, café areas, and other services hosted from them, but others do not.
28. Many library buildings have repairing needs which require investment and very few make use of renewable energy sources. This needs consideration as we aspire to be net zero by 2030. Many of our heating systems are failing and subject to frequent breakdown.
29. The staffing costs of running libraries in independent buildings is greater than it might be if services were potentially located together in joint use buildings. The Council has an array of other buildings in and around the conurbation, many very close to library buildings. We need to establish if our buildings could be rationalised and facilities for the public improved.

Theme 3: Models of delivery

30. BCP libraries are busy places with lots of activities being delivered. They are used by a huge range of stakeholders utilising them to assist and serve the public. The

home delivery service ensures that those who are not able to reach our libraries can still benefit from many of its services.

31. However, BCP has not comprehensively reviewed its model for delivering library services since BCP was formed and there are many examples nationally where authorities have found innovative ways to provide library services differently, often extending hours and reducing costs.
32. Some of the example's others have adopted include:
 - **Public Service Mutual Organisations:** Devon and Torbay libraries, Suffolk libraries, and City of York Libraries, operate as not for profit, charitable organisations, funded in part by the local authorities.
 - **Outsourcing to an existing social enterprise or charity** – Libraries for Greenwich, Bromley, Dudley, Greenwich, and Lincolnshire are examples of where this has happened. In the Greenwich example Greenwich Leisure Ltd, operate 240 leisure centres, 120 libraries and 15 children's centres in partnership with 50 local councils, public agencies, and sporting organisations.
 - **Incorporating some community run libraries within the library offer** – Involvement of volunteers or trustees to take responsibility for the day to day running of individual libraries, with councils providing the infrastructure to support the lending of resources, source items through inter-library loans etc.
 - **Extended/Open Access to libraries** – this is where library users can access the library without staff being present. North Somerset operate this in 5 of their libraries between 6am - 8pm weekdays and 8am – 8pm at weekends. Access is gained through running a library card through a card reader on the main access door. Toilet facilities are not provided, and public PC's shut off when closing time is due.
 - **Bolstering staff hours with volunteers especially for the delivery of activities**
33. The library strategy will need to identify what model is suitable for our service going forwards taking account of what our communities value, what demand and needs there are locally, and what the Council can afford. The outcome may involve a combination of the delivery options referred to above, with different solutions for different libraries.

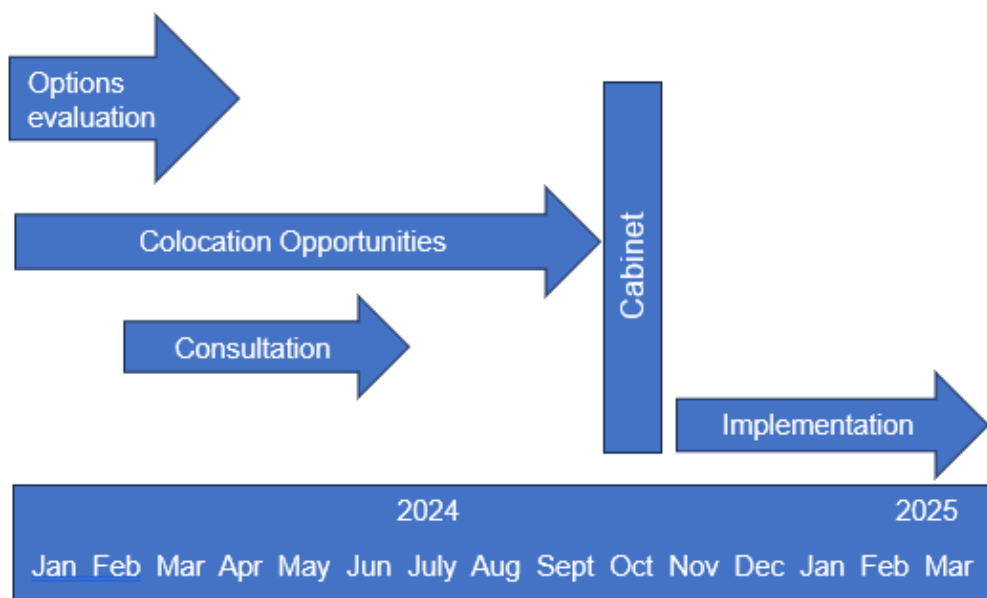
The current service

34. In readiness for the library strategy development, we have brought together what we know already about the current service.
35. Appendix 1 includes data on the costs of the service, the condition of the buildings the library service currently occupy, the borrowing and visitor statistics for each library, the activities and events which are delivered and the partner organisations/ stakeholders we work with or who use the library to engage with community.
36. We have also started to map demographic (age, ethnicity, health status, disability, sex, religion, gender, sexual orientation, veterans etc) and other key information to library locations (for example, postcode areas for those registered with libraries; housing tenure; car ownership; economic activity, broadband access etc) in order that we can develop a good understanding the diversity and needs of the local population.

37. This data will be imperative in developing a robust Equalities Impact Assessment and for informing the direction of travel in developing a library strategy.

Timeline

38. To move forward as quickly as possible, whilst ensuring the necessary phases of work are completed to ensure a robust outcome, elements of work will develop concurrently. Recommendations will be presented to Cabinet in October 2024 to progress implementation of agreed proposals along with any identified financial implications by April 2025.



39. Research and evaluation of delivery model options will begin shortly with the aim to understand those options and their feasibility by April 2024.
40. The opportunities for collocation of services within libraries, either within existing libraries, or alternative buildings, will be launched immediately and will need to link with the ongoing Estates & Accommodation Project, which is focusing on consolidation of the wider corporate estate.
41. An initial phase of consultation to inform the required needs assessment will build on the existing body of collected evidence and data. It is intended to conduct this consultation beginning in March 2024 for period of 6 weeks. The output of this consultation will be considered between May/June, alongside the earlier phases of work to arrive at a set of recommendations that will define the Library Strategy when it is considered by Cabinet in the Autumn. An outline of the consultation methodology along with the proposed themes to be explored is attached at Appendix 2.
42. In order to capture the views of non-library users eg, why do they not use the service and what might make them more inclined to use it, it is anticipated that a piece of wider consultation will take place alongside the other channels. This is likely to cost in the region of £20k and the costs will be picked up by the library service in 2023/24 budget.

Summary of financial implications

43. Financial implications connected to the outcomes of the library strategy are yet to be understood, although the strategy will be developed in the context of the financial challenges the council faces at this time. Some of the potential models (eg, extended opening hours) may require investment if they are selected for implementation, to ensure libraries can be accessed and operate without staff on site.

Summary of legal implications

44. Local Authority Library Services are a statutory obligation disseminating from the Public Libraries & Museums Act, 1964. The key duty for all libraries is to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service for all those who live, work or study in the area'.
45. What constitutes a 'comprehensive and efficient library service' is not defined by the DCMS, as it is expected that service is driven by local need and developed in consultation with local communities.
46. Should concerns arise with regard to way in which a council has chosen to change its library service it could be subject to judicial review directly from its customers or stakeholders, or DCMS has the power to launch an enquiry or refer the matter to the Secretary of State. These measures are pursued very rarely in reality, although early and ongoing engagement with DCMS is believed to mitigate risks in this respect.

Summary of human resources implications

47. The HR implications of developing a strategy at pace rest in the need to create capacity to research and explore the options, conduct options appraisals for buildings and undertake consultation with the public.
48. The consultation team are aware of the consultation needs and will be able to provide support.
49. Depending upon the finally agreed actions emerging from the strategy, there could be HR implications from a move to one or more different delivery models.

Summary of sustainability impact

50. The sustainability of the library offer, especially in relation to our library buildings is a key element in developing options going forwards.
51. The Council has signed up to the climate change emergency and it is important to consider the performance of the library estate in reducing carbon emissions and to operate more sustainably.
52. Furthermore, many of the buildings have significant repairing needs, and limited space, which currently inhibits the provision in some cases of key facilities, such as toilets for the public to use. Addressing these concerns would be prudent, and ultimately secure library provision for the future.

Summary of public health implications

53. Health and Wellbeing is a core universal offer of libraries and many of our current stakeholders are from organisations targeting interactions and activities design to support the wellbeing of the public.

54. The consultation will include these stakeholders and health and wellbeing will remain part of our statutory offer.

Summary of equality implications

55. No changes for the library service have yet to be suggested but a full Equality Impact Assessment will need to be undertaken and developed from the start of any discussion around ideas.
56. Impact of any potential change will need to be rigorously assessed against any effects on equality groups, as well as for variances in local need and demographic. Effects on children will also need to be considered.
57. A second stage of consultation will be required around specific change ideas, as the strategy develops.

Summary of risk assessment

58. The risk in developing a library strategy is that any changes result in the council failing to meet its statutory obligations. Statutory obligations are set out in the [Public Libraries and Museum Act, 1964](#), as well as the [Equalities Act 2010](#) including the [Public Sector Equalities Duty](#), [Best Value Duty 2011 guidance](#), [Localism Act 2011](#) and the [Human Rights Act, 1998](#).
59. Statutory duty contained in the Public Libraries and Museum Act is not prescribed by the DCMS, over and above the need to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service for all those who live, work or study in the area', but it does set out guidance on how it expects Local Authorities to go about their decision making.
60. Deviating from a fully comprehensive needs analysis to ensure any change meets the council's equalities duty, and the needs of residents at a community level, could result in outcomes which lead to complaint and DCMS intervention.
61. There is case law where Authorities have been deemed not to have met their duty in trying to press ahead with change, following a decision by the DCMS to launch a local enquiry. The Charteris Review and Draper v Lincolnshire are two enquiries which are often cited as cases for Local Authorities to be aware of.
62. Consultation and detailed needs analysis will be required to mitigate the risk.

Background papers

Libraries as a Statutory Service - [Libraries as a statutory service - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

The Charteris Review: [A Local Inquiry into the Public Library Service Provided by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

Public Inquiry – reduction of libraries in Lincolnshire: Draper v Lincolnshire: [Draper v Lincolnshire County Council \[2014\] EWHC 2388 \(Admin\) \(17 July 2014\) \(bailii.org\)](#)

Libraries unlimited: [Libraries Unlimited - Bringing ideas, imagination, creativity and knowledge to enrich lives and build thriving communities](#)

Suffolk Libraries: [About us | Suffolk Libraries](#)

Explore York; Libraries and Archives: [Home - Explore York](#)

Greenwich Leisure Limited – trading as Better – Bromley, Dudley, Greenwich, Lincolnshire, and Wandsworth library services: [Charitable Social Enterprise at its best | Better](#)

Bristol extended access: [Libraries' extended access \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)

North Somerset extended access: [Extended access | North Somerset Council \(n-somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

Swindon extended access: [Terms and conditions for using Extended Access in Swindon libraries | Swindon Borough Council](#)

Community libraries: [Community managed libraries: good practice toolkit - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Initial desktop review of what we know about BCP Council's library service.

Appendix 2 – Consultation methodology