

Cultural Peer Challenge **Oxfordshire County Council**

March 2021

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Oxfordshire County Council Library Service was awarded a peer challenge through the Arts Council England (ACE) and Local Government Association (LGA) partnership. The scope and focus of the challenge are set out in section three of this report.

This report describes the feedback given at the end of the Libraries & Heritage Services online Peer Challenge and sets out the recommendations of the peer team.

Oxfordshire has a population of 687,466 people (ONS 2019) living in both rural communities and urban population centres. Over the next 10 years, growth plans for Oxfordshire will see the construction of 100,000 new homes and deliver an increase in 85,000 jobs. The council will need to plan how it amplifies and modernises provision for all of its services in response to an increased demand from the resident user base. In terms of libraries and heritage responding to this ambitious place-shaping agenda, it will be imperative to consider how best to utilise the public asset base to serve the growing communities, which will necessitate 're-imagining' the current offer by reshaping, refurbishing and, in some instances, relocating provision.

The council recognises the interdependence between individuals and communities and, in the wake of the pandemic, has a focus on local place-based development as part of the recovery to help ensure 'Thriving Communities for Everyone in Oxfordshire'. The service response to the challenges of COVID-19 was agile, and building on the achievements and innovations during successive lockdowns, the service is now well positioned to contribute to post COVID-19 recovery by helping to tackle loneliness and isolation, providing alternative opportunities for people to engage in cultural activities.

An internal peer review of cultural services carried out in September 2020 was a robust exercise, acknowledging the challenges faced and opportunities presented by adopting a fresh strategic approach. Subsequently senior officers have invested time in conducting research to position their thinking firmly into the national, regional and local strategic context.

There is evidence of a number of notable projects and initiatives at service level, although these do not seem to be strategically driven and aligned to corporate priorities. The council will benefit from improving the strategic alignment of these services and this will feed through to the proposed Library and Heritage Services strategy which is currently in development. In addition, investing time in helping staff to understand the 'golden thread' will enable better advocacy for the role of libraries and heritage across the council and out into communities.

During the peer challenge process we spoke to a number of staff, stakeholders and also councillors who expressed frustration at the lack of progress made with previous strategic plans for culture. This included a strategic investment plan for the creative, cultural, heritage and tourism sector in Oxfordshire 'Creating the Environment for Growth' and also the museum strategy and business case. This review has not been able to identify the root cause of the issue; however, it was variously described as 'shelving', 'inertia' and a 'systemic blockage'. There may well be valid reasons why both these initiatives have paused, but there is now an imperative to ensure that the future work around the Libraries

and Heritage Strategy is driven forward, to meet the expectations of all those involved, deliver for communities and avoid reputational damage.

The peer team found the Portfolio Holder, staff and stakeholders who participated in the challenge process to be enthusiastic, and willing. However, wide ranging, structured engagement plans will be vital to focus this commitment and build strong relationships internally and externally. In particular, ensuring stakeholders are involved with and understand the strategic direction for libraries and heritage, and that they have confidence there will be momentum in terms of translating this into tangible action.

To enable wider engagement in the strategic framework and the development of a detailed action plan, it is recommended that the current timeframe is extended.

Within this report a number of key modernising actions around IT, digital, data collection and use, and also staffing are recommended in order to form a solid bedrock from which the delivery of libraries and heritage services can progress more effectively.

Acknowledgement should be made of the tremendous efforts made by the staff to shift the offer online during the pandemic and also make adaptations for those unable to access digital services. We heard testimony of notable creativity and flexibility and staff are to be congratulated on their obvious commitment to the libraries and heritage services.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

1. Reconsider timescale for strategy development

The current plan is to develop a strategic framework for approval by Cabinet in July 2021. However, once the high-level themes are agreed at the Cabinet meeting in April, there will be significant work to undertake in order to ensure that a full and detailed analysis of local need informs the strategic direction, alongside locality-based consultation with residents and also engagement with staff and stakeholders. This is set against a backdrop of a local elections, which may see an influx of new elected members, who it will be important to involve in the strategy development process. As such, the peer team recommend that the timescale is expanded to allow sufficient time for this work to take place in a comprehensive manner.

2. Modernising foundation blocks

A number of key actions are recommended in order to form a solid bedrock from which the Libraries & Heritage services can progress more effectively:

- Put in place mechanisms that will help the services undertake transactional elements of service provision; for example taking online payments.
- Identify solutions to help the digital offer flourish and adopt a more strategic approach to engaging current and future audiences through a range of platforms.
- Review the data collection system to ensure it captures quantitative and qualitative data to both inform the management of services and also demonstrate cross-cutting strategic impact. This will better enable advocacy regarding the value of the service.
- To enable the realisation of the vision for libraries to act as vibrant community hubs and meet the demands of today's communities, consider whether the staffing structure is flexible enough and also whether the structure and the asset base is fit for future purpose.

3. Include an engagement plan as part of the strategy process – councillors, staff, customers and stakeholders

Given the need to secure political support for the Libraries & Heritage Strategy, it is recommended that workshops are convened for elected members once the new administration is in place to empower them to articulate the cross cutting value of the services and garner support for associated action plans.

Further work needs to be undertaken with the staff to introduce the strategic framework and ensure that they understand how the themes relate to what goes on at service delivery level. Testing back early thinking as a result of consultations with users will help shape the service to meet customer needs.

The majority of external stakeholders we spoke to asked to be consistently engaged with the strategy development and action plans. In the past there has been incidents of engagement with this group, however whilst strategic plans have been developed, they have not seen their input translate into actions.

4. Consider establishing new arrangements internally and externally to improve partnership working

The establishment of a cross service steering group would support the development of the Libraries and Heritage Strategy, opening up discussions regarding how the cultural assets, services and staff expertise could be mobilised. It would also help to embed understanding regarding how libraries and heritage can support wider council priorities moving forward

An external forum would harness the existing goodwill towards the council's Libraries & Heritage services and act as a mechanism to ensure ongoing engagement regarding the development of the Libraries & Heritage Strategy, resulting in improved partnership working and the potential to lever external funding.

5. Tap into all the available Peer support for both Elected Members & Officers

Peer support can play a helpful role in supporting both elected members and officers, particularly at times of transformational change.

It is recommended that the offer of participating in LGA webinars for elected members and ACE/LGA Leadership Essentials for Cultural Portfolio Holders is taken up in future as these provide an opportunity to consider how councils can use cultural services to improve outcomes for their communities and learn from good practice across the country.

Similarly, consistent officer engagement with regional Libraries Connected meetings will allow peers support and access to a forum to share experiences and best practice.

6. Look at best practice elsewhere to inform components of the Libraries & Heritage Strategy.

A number of specific initiatives were identified during the virtual peer challenge as having relevance to the current context and future ambition for Oxfordshire libraries and heritage and these are summarised with relevant links in the section on signposting and good practice from other local authorities. These are set out in section 4.3.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge were:

- Councillor Kam Kaur – Cabinet Member, Customer & Transformation Warwickshire Warwickshire County Council
- Tony Witton – Culture & Creative Economy Manager, Kent County Council
- Sophie Lancaster - Senior Manager, Libraries Development, Arts Council England
- Heidi Bellamy – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

Scope and focus

The peer team looked at one core question applicable to all cultural service reviews namely:

- How effective is the contribution of libraries and heritage to cross cutting agendas of other services and the wider council objectives?

The council also asked the peer team to focus on the following areas:

- How to ensure the themes and content in the forthcoming Libraries and Heritage Strategy will deliver better outcomes for residents, visitors and businesses.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 1.5 days participating in online during which they:

- Spoke to more than 40 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 13 meetings, and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 120 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 3.5 weeks in Oxfordshire.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of the online challenge (10 - 11 March 2021). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 How effective is the contribution of libraries and heritage to cross cutting agendas of other services and the wider council objectives?

The draft report to Cabinet 20th April 21 sets out how libraries and heritage contribute to a range of outcomes including supporting social, cultural, economic and educational wellbeing. Furthermore, the staff within the service consider themselves to be delivering a range of outcomes that contribute to the corporate priorities of thriving, communities, thriving economy and thriving individuals. A focus on strengthening the evidence base for the cross-cutting outcomes delivered by the services would help to better profile the impact of libraries and heritage work. Whilst there is widespread acknowledgment that the services contribute to broader council objectives, currently this is based on anecdotal information and there was a consensus that robust evidence would help to make the case for future internal investment and external funding applications.

There was a high level of receptiveness to working with the Libraries & Heritage team across the directorates that the peer team met and also recognition that libraries and heritage is already supporting some of their priorities; specific mentions were given to the work with public health on 'Making Every Conversation Count', literacy projects for Early Years, and supporting early stage dementia sufferers with reminiscence projects.

Moving forwards more could be done to contribute to the Adult Social Care (ASC) prevention agenda, with a suggestion that the asset base offers an alternative to day care settings, whereby vulnerable people experiencing loneliness, isolation, age related illness, managing disability or mental health could be referred to participate in activities and groups that help them remain active and independent. This could be achieved by better co-ordination with ASC to ensure that the contact centre, which maps resources in communities and signpost customers to them, is fully apprised of the totality of support offer. A key benefit of a more co-ordinated approach would be access to information regarding customer mapping, as 'call backs' are built into the service to understand whether the offer was taken up, and if not why not.

The profile of libraries and heritage has been raised corporately during the pandemic and there is a key opportunity for the services to contribute to post COVID-19 recovery with a number of specific areas mentioned relating to Education and Children & Young People. Learning loss due to pandemic has shown to be greater amongst disadvantaged children, which will affect their future attainment; there is potential for libraries to help address this learning gap by supporting children to catch up. This could dovetail with the recently announced [Education Recovery Package for Children & Young People](#).

The museum service has recently developed a series of curriculum-focused films on key history topics to support parents and teachers in delivering lockdown learning. Schools are also keen to give children as many opportunities as possible to develop their curiosity as restrictions ease, and so museums reinstating an enhanced curriculum offer will be invaluable moving forwards. In addition, an interest was expressed in discussing how the

museums and archives collections might contribute to supporting exploration of heritage issues around inclusivity, equalities and access.

Overall there was a sense that the current service offer is not strategically driven and significant scope exists to do more systematically and consistently – “good stuff happens by accident rather than design” (quote from staff focus group). This could best be achieved by using the development of the Libraries and Heritage Strategy to open up discussions regarding how the cultural assets, services and staff expertise could be further mobilised. Establishing a cross-service steering group to feed into the strategy development will help to embed understanding regarding how libraries and heritage can support wider Council priorities moving forwards.

Furthermore, tackling inequalities, healthy place shaping and prevention were cited as areas of common concern that bring OCC and community leaders together. The recently formed joint health, education and social care commissioning hub was mentioned as an opportunity for engaging with system commissioners to meet this strategic priority. Upstream prevention and promotion was cited as a way that cultural services could interface to develop and support strategic interventions.

The current Portfolio Holder is passionate about libraries and heritage and demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the services. To support this enthusiasm, and ensure the Portfolio Holder is well equipped to articulate the cross cutting value to Cabinet, the creation of a compelling narrative is recommended. This could then be used to engage a broader set of Elected Members in the new administration and drive future decision-making. There is also an important role for the Corporate Director, Customers and Organisational Development and Resources to focus on positioning the libraries and heritage service through advocacy and influencing across the Chief Executive Direct Reports group (CEDR).

The staff focus groups revealed that they consider themselves to be professional, motivated and resourceful with a clear commitment to customer service. However, the churn in service leadership, inertia regarding key decisions and lack of a long-term strategy has given rise to frustration perhaps impacting on staff morale.

The effectiveness of the team has also been impacted by the absence of the necessary business applications and digital strategy as a result of inadequate tools and technical support from the corporate core. Enthusiasm was expressed by staff to modernise services, so that they could better meet the needs of local communities. Indeed, service leadership and management should consider the opportunity to learn best practice in digital transformation to improve outcomes for customers.

To fully realise the ambition, consistent leadership and clarity of strategic direction are vital moving forwards.

4.2 How to ensure the themes and content in the forthcoming Libraries and Heritage Strategy will deliver better outcomes for residents, visitors and businesses?

The response of the libraries and heritage service to the challenges of COVID-19 was agile, with adaptations made to offer access to library services via Click and Collect, 'Ask a librarian' and the Home Library Service in partnership with Age UK. With a national focus on supporting vulnerable people, particularly those shielding, the digital offer was bolstered with a series of short YouTube films featuring museum curators talking about objects, digitised content about the collections uploaded at Oxford History Centre, and library events such as Rhymetime and Book Club taking place via Facebook.

During the pandemic there has also been an increase in engagement across all social media platforms. Delivery plans in the forthcoming Libraries and Heritage Strategy will need to embrace the changing public expectation, with both a sustained shift to digital alongside a return to 'in person' service provision to support those who cannot or do not want to embrace digital.

Plans are already in place to initiate a community co-design process for the library service in two localities, focusing on what services would best meet the local needs. It is the understanding of the peer team that this work will be completed in advance of the final strategic framework for libraries and heritage and therefore has the potential to inform the approach to achieving deeper and wider engagement with communities.

Senior officers have invested time in conducting robust research into the national strategic context, undertaken a SWOT analysis, identified the opportunity to reposition services and drafted a process to create a strategic framework for Libraries & Heritage. This includes clarifying the purpose for cultural services as 'vibrant hubs bringing people together with access to services and opportunities that will support them to thrive'. In order to translate this work into tangible outcomes, the framework will need to progress to the next stage and incorporate a fully detailed action plan, with specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based targets. This will help to ensure that there is momentum behind the plan once it has been endorsed by Cabinet. It will also reassure stakeholders that the strategy will progress towards tangible actions in local communities. Furthermore, it is recommended that once performance measures have been agreed for libraries and heritage by Cabinet, these are fed back to Overview and Scrutiny in order that they are able to play a deeper role into the overall strategic plan for delivery.

The peer team was asked to canvas opinion as to whether the proposed themes for the strategic framework were both comprehensive and ambitious. The themes are as follows:

- education, learning and skills
- health and well-being
- culture and creativity
- digital inclusion
- social inclusion and community cohesion
- economic development

Those officers who are part of the Chief Executive Direct Reports group, and who had already been party to initial discussion about the importance of cultural services across the county, expressed a general level of agreement that the themes were comprehensive and would enable them to work with the Library and Heritage services on shared priorities.

Further work needs to be undertaken with the Libraries and Heritage Leadership team to introduce the strategic framework and ensure that they understand how the themes relate to what goes on at service delivery level, as this had not yet fully percolated down. Investing time helping staff to understand the 'golden thread' will enable better advocacy for the role of libraries and heritage across the council and out into communities.

From the perspective of the stakeholders that were interviewed during the review, the reaction to the themes was a request to see these further developed into clear, meaningful outcomes. Continuing to engage with stakeholders as the process progresses will help to ensure greater understanding of the strategic direction thus engendering ownership of the subsequent action plan.

Overall it is the opinion of the peer team that the themes reflect the strategic priorities of the council and are broadly mirrored by the strategic direction being adopted by Cultural Services across the country.

Recent documents detail the intention to undertake a full and detailed analysis of local need to inform targeted services. This will be important as although Oxfordshire is one of the most affluent counties in the UK, however there are 10 wards which feature areas which are in the 20% most deprived in England. These levels of deprivation and Covid-19 have likely further exacerbated the embedded health inequalities. Discussion with Public Health highlighted the potential to collaborate around Health Impact Assessments, which ensure the wider determinants of health are considered when developing and reviewing services, activities and policies. This would bring vital information regarding health inequalities and boost the contribution of the libraries and heritage service in helping support the healthy place agenda.

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) uses a systematic and evidence-based approach to identify and assess what effect a service, activity, policy or project may have on the wider determinants of health and the health and wellbeing of different groups of people.

Stakeholders stressed that communication was historically lacking regarding the decision-making process and cited a number of previous strategic initiatives that had not progressed e.g. the previous Museum of Oxfordshire study. There remains however, significant willingness amongst the stakeholders spoken to as part of this peer challenge to further contribute to council objectives. Indeed, they self-identified as an underutilised resource that needs to be 'nurtured'. Building the cultural network is an important element of driving forward culture-led regeneration. An external cultural forum would help to harness the latent goodwill, and act as a mechanism to ensure ongoing engagement regarding the development of the Libraries & Heritage Strategy, resulting in improved partnership working and the potential to attract external funding.

During the course of the peer challenge the team heard testimony regarding the need to focus on a range of foundation blocks to enable the transition to a more modern heritage and library service. These will help to ensure the services operate as effectively as possible, underpinning the strategic ambitions.

- Digital and IT strategy support is required from the corporate IT team to put in place mechanisms that will help the services undertake transactional elements of service provision; for example taking online payments.
- Digital delivery - during lockdown the digital offer has taken a huge leap forward, this has not been without challenges. To enable the digital offer to continue to flourish, attention now needs to be given to adopting a more strategic approach, along with the necessary digital applications and skills building that will ensure the staff are able to engage current and future audiences through a range of platforms. The peer team recommend engaging with opportunities arising from the Public Library Skill Strategy, The National Archives digital programme Plugged In, Powered Up and the ACE Digital Culture Network.
- Exploiting data – data regarding the performance of libraries and heritage is captured, however testimony suggests that it is not necessarily the right data nor is the existing capture method entirely efficient, as it involves ‘double handling’. Putting in place a system to capture both quantitative and qualitative data that will help inform the management and development of services and demonstrate impact would be highly advantageous for internal and external advocacy purposes.
- Staffing - to enable the realisation of the vision that libraries and museums will become ‘vibrant hubs that bring people together to access services and opportunities that will support them to thrive’, consideration needs to be given to whether the staffing structure is flexible enough. Testimony suggests that libraries require a more flexible workforce to ensure community needs are met with peripatetic staff that can be redeployed across the network. Both staff and a number of stakeholders aired concerns about the museums staffing resource and expressed the opinion that it was not resourced adequately to realise the strategy ambition. If additional resources are not available, then it may be helpful to consider ways in which to further mobilise the volunteer capacity, using the springboard offered by COVID-19 to expand and diversify the pool.
- Asset base - a review of the asset base is needed, linking with the planned growth and informed by the place shaping agenda and desire that these serve as hubs for the growing communities. There is S106 and CIL funding available and consideration should be given to engaging users in the ‘re-imagining’ of the current offer, so that refurbishment, reshaping and, in some instances, relocating provision is the best fit for future purpose.

There are a number of national and regional initiatives that have been identified in the horizon scanning exercise undertaken as part of the internal peer review. The Oxford-Cambridge Arc, Economic Prospectus acknowledges over 7000 English Heritage sites across the Arc region, with digital and creative industries being one of the sector

strengths. The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership worked with OCC on developing a strategic investment plan for the creativity, cultural, heritage and tourism sector and there is now a subgroup, which is a key conduit for conversations about the contribution of culture to the quality of life and pride of place.

In order to ensure key opportunities and funding are not missed; the strategic framework for libraries and heritage should seek to establish clear linkages with these initiatives and demonstrate how the council is an active partner driving forward relevant proposals.

There is a key role for the portfolio holder to play in raising the profile of the work to develop a strategic framework for libraries and heritage; this will entail championing the value of the services and clearly articulating the links with the corporate priorities to secure political buy-in. A mechanism that may be useful here is for the portfolio holder to create a short video outlining the priorities of the strategy which can then be shared with councillors, staff and stakeholders. It is also suggested that a clear plan is developed for engagement at the city, district and locality level to create Member advocates for the service.

National cultural bodies can be important partners in helping to realise cultural ambitions and OCC has in the past enjoyed a strong relationship with Arts Council England (ACE). During the period of high management turnover, this relationship faltered however the peer challenge has provided an opportunity to reconnect. It has been agreed that OCC will engage with Libraries Connected, a Sector Support Organisation funded by ACE to support the public library network and with other specialised areas of ACE including Museums and Digital Teams.

Creative UK, (formerly the Creative Industries Federation and Creative England) is an important source of information and resources and may usefully connect OCC with national thinking to enable the development of a wider strategic approach.

Finally, developing a shared vision is an important foundation, but moving forwards it will only deliver better outcomes for residents, visitors and businesses if there is continuity from strategy, through leadership to delivery plans.

4.3 Signposting and good practice from other local authorities

The LGA has produced Cultural Strategy in a Box <https://local.gov.uk/cultural-strategy-box>. This guide offers key lessons and guidance in writing a cultural strategy that can be tailored to suit the needs of the local authority and place, drawing on good practice examples from across England.

Creative Places provides useful guidance on how councils can support the local economy: <https://www.local.gov.uk/creative-places-supporting-your-local-creative-economy>

Consultation methodology - Kent County Council Cultural Strategy

The consultation methodology used as part of Kent & Medway Cultural Strategy mobilised a variety of different approaches in order to include a variety of voices and be as inclusive as possible. It included conference events and focus groups, sector led conversations, one to one interviews and an online survey. KCC are happy to share the details; contact tony.witton@kent.gov.uk for more information.

Mindful that museums must consider the best operating model to meet local needs and priorities, LGA and ACE have published a handbook aimed at supporting Councillors. The guide contains information about different models, such as independent trusts, the council as a trustee and case studies around partnership working and how museums can contribute to wider local priorities <https://www.local.gov.uk/making-most-your-museums-handbook-councillors>

The current Public Libraries Skills Strategy (PLSS) is being refreshed. The PLSS aims to guide the development of information and library skills, knowledge and qualifications in the public library sector in England between now and 2030. An example of the type of work includes, delivering seminars to help library services understand how they might best embed the Library, information and archive services assistant apprenticeship standard into their library services.

The National Archives has published a digital capacity building strategy *Plugged In, Powered Up* <https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/projects-and-programmes/plugged-in-powered-up/> that sets out an ambitious plan of programmes, training and resources to support the archives sector meet its digital ambitions with regard to digital preservation, access and engagement.

ACE Digital Culture Network <https://digitalculturenetwork.org.uk/> provides specialist support in digital strategy, digital marketing, social media, eCommerce, data analytics and insight, search engine marketing, websites, content creation, CRM and ticketing, and email marketing.

Libraries Connected have created an advocacy toolkit *Libraries: An essential part of local recovery* <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-essential-part-local-recovery> this can be adapted to suit local context and inform the development of the advocacy narrative, raise awareness regarding how libraries contribute to Council priorities and to illustrate how they are an important element of the COVID-19 recovery environment.

The Centre for Cultural Value <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk> summarises existing research to make it more accessible, and has useful relevant evidence for example the value of culture on referral programmes and how they might contribute to improved health and wellbeing outcomes.

The Cultural Learning Alliance provides analysis, evidence, and arguments that can be used to show that cultural education fosters creativity, innovation, empathy, and resilience; that it is crucial for economic prosperity; and that it enriches lives, making us happier and healthier. Sign up for the ebulletin <https://culturalllearningalliance.org.uk/join-us/>

Arts Council England in partnership with The National Archives, created a guide to help libraries and archive services advocate for their work within the context of local authority planning. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/championing-archives-and-libraries-within-local-planning>

Nottingham City Council standalone library service website. Arts Council England funded Nottingham City Council to explore if and how a stand-alone public library website is achievable in context of the statutory function and in terms of user needs <https://www.nottinghamcitylibraries.co.uk/>

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham are leaders/best practice in communications (all channels) with their communities.

Communications tools with residents and users are increasingly important to provide information. The following local authorities have strong communications with their users and residents and have been recognised as leaders in utilising communication tools. London Borough Barking & Dagenham <https://www.lbbd.gov.uk/> One Borough campaign covers all the services areas in a short and clear email bulletin, also Orkney has a strong social media presence on twitter in particular <https://twitter.com/OrkneyLibrary>.

Barnsley Museums, run by Barnsley Council, offers an exemplar in new and innovative ways of heritage programming for residents facing isolation, loneliness and a lack of opportunity to engage in cultural activities <https://www.local.gov.uk/barnsley-museums-staying-safe-and-engaged-barnsley-council>

Libraries Connected Regional Support Offer programme

Over the past 12 months Haringey, Worcestershire and Leicestershire Libraries have tested out the potential for offering library services the chance to draw on support from an 'expert bank'. Each library service has worked with a specialist on a project which has focused on one of these three themes; Advocacy and evidence, Transformation: service review and design, Transformation: partnerships. The tools will be available to all library services shortly. <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/page/regional-support-offer>

Leicestershire Libraries is currently investigating ways in which it can evidence this impact in addition to traditional performance measures. The objective of the project is to support an authority to strengthen their ability to evidence the contribution of the library service within the Council and with partners.

Haringey Libraries is developing a Partnership Toolkit. It will be used to develop a culture of strong partnerships throughout the library service by providing:

- guidance about successful partnership working
- a model for partnership development in the workshop template
- signposting to resources to support partnership development

More generally, it may be useful to develop an Outcomes Framework drawing on the Local Government Association guidance designed to assist culture and leisure teams

<https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/our-improvement-offer/culture-and-sport-improvement/guide-developing-local-outcomes>. This approach can help to:

- measure and evidence the difference the service makes and its contribution to local priorities
- make the case for continued investment of public money
- demonstrate to other organisations why they should be working with you
- focus business and service plans on the priorities for the local area
- communicate the value of culture and sport to opinion formers and decision makers
- promote improvement by identifying what works in delivering better outcomes
- influence commissioners working in other service areas such as Adult Social Care, Public Health, Children & Young People's services.

In addition to the above, Local Digital is funding 3 councils to use common data standards:

<https://localdigital.gov.uk/funded-project/open-community-beta/>

Research recently commissioned by ACE from the Centre for Economic and Business Research provides useful statistics on post COVID-19 sector recovery:

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/news/faster-recovery-arts-and-culture>

5. Next steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this (there would be a charge for this). The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. William Brooks is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). William Brooks can be contacted by email at William.Brooks@local.gov.uk or on his mobile: 07949 054421