

Divisions Affected - All

CABINET 21 December 2021

Oxfordshire County Council Libraries and Heritage Strategy 2022-2027

Report of Corporate Director, Customers, Organisational Development and Resources

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) Agree the draft Libraries and Heritage Strategy and action plan as set out in appendices 1 and 2, developed following a programme of stakeholder engagement and feedback from the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
 - b) Agree a period of 8 weeks for public consultation on the strategy on the Let's Talk Oxfordshire portal and taking place within libraries and heritage venues.
 - c) Note the feedback provided by the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that an annual review of the actions to deliver the strategy will be reported to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the future.

Executive Summary

2. In April 2021 the Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet commissioned the development of a strategy for the future direction of the county's library and heritage services. The aim of the strategy is to set out a new purpose, ambition and vision for libraries and heritage services underpinned by an increased strategic focus on, and contribution to, the social and cultural health and wellbeing of the community in its widest sense. The actions proposed within the strategy aim to enable us to build on our existing strengths and increase the positive impact of these services on community outcomes.
3. The draft strategy, attached as Appendix 1, has been developed through a process of stakeholder engagement, analysis of current service performance

and future trends, a review of social and demographic change and community needs to identify future opportunities.

4. Workshops were held with staff, councillors, external partners, volunteers, and Friends groups and a presentation to each Oxfordshire County Locality board. The workshops provided information on the performance of these services, information on need and future demand providing enabling them to contribute ideas and views on the future development of these services. A public engagement exercise was also undertaken inviting views through the Let's Talk Oxfordshire engagement portal.
5. During 2021 the service undertook a peer review to help shape and inform the strategy and in November 2021 the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the work undertaken to date and made a series of suggested improvements (captured in the minutes of the meeting) which have been reflected in the strategy.
6. The draft strategy and action plan sets out the strategic context, ambition and vision for the service. It is proposed that it is reviewed annually with an accompanying action plan developed in order to meet the stated priorities within the document. The strategy itself sets out an ambition for these services to become more community focused and responsive and as such there is a wider commitment to ongoing engagement with service users and stakeholders.

Background

7. The strategy covers the libraries and heritage services delivered by the county council. The library service is delivered through a network of 44 libraries across, a home library service, and a prison library service in Huntercombe and Bullingdon prisons. Libraries offer books for loan, access to trusted information, free access to PCs and wifi, printing and photocopying, support with digital skills and a programme of activities to promote literacy, a love of reading and enjoyment of culture. 1,200 volunteers support the service with volunteers acting as Digital Helpers, running activities in library's, and delivering books to 670 housebound residents. 22 of the libraries are managed by council staff and 22 are Community Supported Libraries, managed by staff and volunteers through a partnership agreement with Friends Groups.
8. The Heritage Service encompasses the Oxfordshire Museums Service, Oxfordshire History Service and the Victoria County History project (a multi-partner local history project supported by the VCH Trust) and are responsible for:
 - the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock
 - the Museums Resource Centre at Standlake, housing the reserve collection
 - a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade 1 listed medieval barn at Swalecliffe, providing accessible storage for large agricultural and trade vehicles

- the museum service also has a legacy responsibility for the remains of the Bishop's Palace in Witney
 - local history and archives based in the History Centre in St Lukes Church
 - all sites are accredited to a set of nationally recognised standards for heritage organisations
9. The Heritage Service's purpose is to collect, conserve and provide opportunities to engage with Oxfordshire's collections of museum objects, archives, and local history records. Engagement is provided through access to exhibitions in the Oxfordshire museum, the museums learning service for schools, a programme of activities in the museum and in outreach settings and access to archives and local history records in the history centre. Increasingly the services are making their collections available digitally to increase and widen access.
10. The council has a statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service' as set out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 for all persons who live, work and study in the area (section 7). The council also has statutory responsibilities to run an archives service under the Public Records Act (1958) and the Local Government Acts (1962, 1972), and has been identified and appointed by the Lord Chancellor as the approved Place of Deposit for the public records of Oxfordshire. These Acts require the care of and provision of access to public records and the records of local authorities.
11. In 2019 the last year of operation before the pandemic
- libraries registered 2.3 m visits and made 3.4 m loans
 - libraries ran 8,355 events attended by 98,000 people
 - 127,092 visits were made to the Oxfordshire Museum
 - 3,645 visits were made to Oxfordshire History Centre
12. Libraries, the museum, and history centre were closed during periods of lockdown in 2020 and 2021 with staff being re-deployed to support other services such as registration and making shielding calls, however the home library service continued to visit our housebound library members. Services wherever possible were delivered digitally including and activities for children, reading groups and some library activities for adults, museum activities to support children learning and history centre website content was significantly enhanced. The library service saw a significant increase in on-line membership and e-book borrowing. From November 2020 during the second lockdown libraries offered a 'click and collect' service where residents could ask library staff to select books for them to collect from our largest branches and a small number of free PC bookings were made available in recognition that some residents were facing prolonged digital exclusion due to lack of personal devices and/or connectivity.
13. The draft strategy sets out the case that:
- there is increasing recognition that libraries and heritage services contribute to health and well-being, education and skills, community

- cohesion, economic development, reducing social isolation and creating a sense of place; and
- that a clear sense of direction, ambition and strategic focus can maximise impact of these services on these broader community outcomes
14. In common with other library services across the country we have seen a decline in use over the last five years. Visits to libraries in Oxfordshire are not declining as fast as the national average but issues are declining slightly faster. Research by DCMS in 2016/17 based on reviews of CIPFA data found that a small percentage of library services were delivering an increase in issues and visits. The factors influencing growth were determined to be strong leadership and a clear strategy for the development of the service. Library use was found to be growing in places where they are used to tackle challenges such as skills, digital literacy and loneliness, while in places which lack leadership or sufficient focus on place-based priorities, libraries are under-exploited and consequently under-utilised.
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/analysing-data-cipfa-statistics-and-the-future-of-englands-libraries>
15. It is not possible to compare the performance of Oxfordshire's museum and history service with others as these data sets are not available but both services have broadly maintained user numbers over the last three years.
16. Having considered the outcome of our engagement, performance review and research the strategy identifies what we need to prioritise and deliver over the next five years to increase the impact of libraries and heritage on the county council and community outcomes and contribute to Oxfordshire's strategic priorities. We have proposed a vision, three strategic aims and actions to deliver the council's ambitions for these services. The vision and strategic aims are set out below and in more detail with the strategy at Appendix 1, with the proposed actions attached as Appendix 2.

A new Vision for our libraries and heritage services

Our libraries and heritage services provide opportunities for people to connect and create, to learn and grow together. Inspiring us all, they are places to imagine, and they make a difference to the wellbeing of the communities they serve.

Strategic aims

People - our libraries and heritage services will support people and communities to reach their full potential

Libraries are the place where children and adults can find that special book that helped them get the reading habit and then borrow for free to feed that habit for life. In libraries, the museum and the history centre people learn new skills, gain information, and participate in activities to support them to live successful and

healthy lives. We offer so many opportunities from finding out about family history and the county's heritage, access to council and other benefits, free computers to apply for jobs, research and learn, meeting authors, participation in book groups, volunteering and learning digital skills to mention but a few.

Place - our libraries and heritage services will be recognised as valuable community assets and will strengthen their role in 'place making' with communities at the heart of our thinking and service design.

Our services will place the needs of the local community at the heart of our thinking, decision making and service design. As community needs change, so must our libraries and heritage services to ensure that our physical spaces are integrated with the growing demand for digital services. We will increase our visibility in communities to ensure increased delivery of the vital social benefits of companionship, support and inspiration. We will listen to and learn from our communities to co-design our spaces. Jointly agreeing outcomes will be crucial to success.

Partnership – our libraries and heritage services will deliver on national and local priorities, increasing our strategic and operational collaborations with the full range of partners

Libraries and heritage services consistently work in partnership with local and national organisations. We will develop new and existing partnerships and evaluate existing partnerships. Partnerships will be essential in attracting funding to support our ambition but also to ensure we are using our heritage and library assets to deliver maximum impact for health and well-being, opportunities for children and young people, vibrant local economies and preventing demand on other services where possible. Our staff will be supported to develop partnerships where relationships and local knowledge is central.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

17. The strategy has been developed to ensure that libraries and heritage services contribution to the council's corporate policies will be maximised.

Financial Implications

18. There are no immediate financial consequences arising from this report. Management of library buildings is undertaken by the county council's property and facilities management team and development proposals are set out in the capital programme.

Legal Implications

19. There are no legal matters arising from this report. The County Councils' statutory obligation to provide the service are set out in the strategy and a full programme of consultation has been undertaken in the development of this proposed strategy.

Staff Implications

20. There are no immediate staff implications arising from this report

Equality and Inclusion Implications

21. There are no immediate equalities and inclusion arising from this report.

Sustainability Implications

22. The strategy identifies the need to ensure all building refurbishments are designed to reduce impact on the climate. Libraries will review their role in providing trusted information on climate change to ensure it is accurate and will work in partnership to deliver a programme of activities and events to raise awareness of climate change and how residents can take action to reduce climate change.

Risk Management

23. The risk in adopting a libraries and heritage strategy is primarily one of effective communication and managing expectations. The strategy implementation will be strengthened by partner and community support and it is proposed to deliver a stakeholder engagement programme to build support for the strategy.

Consultations

24. The draft strategy will be published on the Lets' Talk Oxfordshire consultation and engagement portal for 8 weeks (following Cabinet) to enable further public consultation. Significant actions in the strategy will also be subject to stakeholder and engagement where necessary, and in line with the principles set out in the strategy, to ensure the council meets its statutory duties.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Draft Strategy 'Creative, Inspiring, Inclusive' - A library and heritage service for Oxfordshire now and for the future Strategy 2022-27

Appendix 2: Draft Action Plan

BACKGROUND PAPERS: None

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