

## **Divisions Affected - All**

### **PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**24 NOVEMBER 2021**

### **DEVELOPING A LIBRARIES AND HERITAGE STRATEGY**

**Report by Claire Taylor, Corporate Director, Customers  
Organisational Development and Resources.**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- (a) consider the contents of the report and presentation and provide feedback to the Cabinet Lead member for Community Services and Safety, Corporate Director, Customers Organisational Development and Resources and supporting Officers;**
- (b) decide if any further action is required to support the emerging strategy;**
- (c) approve the development and content of the strategy.**

### **Executive Summary**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee with background information and work undertaken to develop the emerging Libraries and Heritage strategy which will be considered at Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2021.

### **Scrutiny Guidance**

2. No other papers or briefings have been submitted to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to the meeting.
3. This agenda is intended to operate as follows at the Place OSC Meeting:
  - a.** Brief overview of proposed strategic direction for Oxfordshire County Council Libraries and Heritage Services and the process for developing the strategy
  - b.** Question & Answer session with Cabinet Lead Member, Corporate Director, Customers, Organisational Development and Resources and supporting officers

## Developing a Library and Heritage Strategy

4. In April 2021, Cabinet approved the development of a strategy for Oxfordshire County Council's libraries and heritage services. See Appendix 1 for the list of services in scope.
5. 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.
6. 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 holdings. This is delivered 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.
7. In developing the strategy, the service undertook the following engagement activities;
  - A review of the national policy framework
  - A review of the strategic drivers for change, what factors will likely to have a long-term impact on libraries and heritage services
  - A consideration of the county councils' wider strategic plans
  - A review of our current provision and performance
  - A community needs analysis
  - Stakeholder engagement (including presentations to all Locality Boards, workshops with staff, Friends of Libraries, volunteers and external stakeholders and the public through the Let's Talk Oxfordshire portal)

### **SERVICE INSIGHT** (see Appendix 2 for further details)

8. Our library services reflect the national picture in that we are seeing a decrease of 'in person' visits. Whilst we have seen decline over the last five years, Oxfordshire's libraries decline at 12% has been slower than the national rate of 17%. However, the number of items borrowed from our libraries declined by 27% in that period which is faster than the 22% decline in issues nationally. An analysis of membership and borrowing by age group shows that 47% of books issued in our libraries are to children and young people, which demonstrates good take up amongst this group given they represent 23% of the total population.

9. Visitor numbers at the Oxfordshire Museum fell significantly with the closure of the permanent galleries for 9 months during 2016/17. Investment in temporary exhibitions over the next 3 years and the opening of a new permanent gallery, enabled visitor numbers to recover and exceed their former level by 2019/20.
10. Visitor footfall at the History Centre has remained constant over the past five years, as have remote enquiries about its collections and researching its resources. Demand for access to the physical collection also remains high. A 33% increase in visits to the service's digital resources for Oxfordshire history site over the past three years reflects the increase in the amount of content the service has been making available, and a shift in demand from some customers

## **KEY AREAS OF CONSIDERATION**

11. The outcome of the engagement sessions, assessment of community insight and horizon scanning identified the following key issues / ideas that the council needs to address to improve the sustainability of the libraries and heritage service and increase their impact on council priorities. In the next five years we need to:
  - ensure services meet the predicted population growth
  - ensure access in rural communities
  - reduce the decline in services and widen participation to reflect the community demographic
  - increase partnership working and services targeted at specific and/or local needs and attract resources to support delivery
  - further develop library building as vibrant community hubs
  - promote digital inclusion and support people in the community to gain digital skills, including the potential of advanced technologies
  - strengthen our offer for children, young people and families, including improving school readiness and early years
  - increase programmes and activities to support people to have active and healthy lives, reduce social isolation and loneliness
  - build on libraries role as providers of trusted information
  - improve our buildings and digital offer to reduce impact on the climate, including increasing digital access to heritage collections
  - increase libraries contribution to sustainable economic development, innovation, and entrepreneurship across the county

## **OUR AMBITION AND VISION FOR LIBRARIES AND HERITAGE IN OXFORDSHIRE.**

### **12. Ambitious for our communities, ambitious for our services**

Over the next five years we want to work with our residents, visitors and partners to ensure our services are operating at their best, addressing the challenges and opportunities identified in this strategy, offering people of all ages and backgrounds a chance to explore, interact and imagine.

This long-term vision is set out below. It directly reflects what services users and stakeholders have told us about what they value about our services, and their aspirations for its future.

In the next section of the strategy, we set out our priorities for service development to deliver our shared ambitions.

### 13. **Our Vision**

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.

Working in partnership we will provide valued and trusted routes to a wide range of services, information and activities that reflect local needs.

Our buildings will be open and welcoming spaces, our services will be accessible and available, and we champion digital inclusion, broadening access to all we offer.

A new set of strategic themes and associated action plan will position our Libraries and Heritage Services to maximise their contribution to community outcomes, enable internal and external partners to have a clearer understanding of benefits of working with libraries and heritage services, enable local communities to influence the development of their libraries as vibrant community hubs, ensure services are using data and effective evaluation to improve performance and support the council to attract investment from the widest range of possible sources.

#### **Strategic themes**

- 14.1 **People** - our libraries and heritage services will support people to reach their full

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.

- 14.2 **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.

As communities needs change so must libraries and heritage services to ensure that our physical spaces are integrated with our digital services. We will increase our visibility in communities to ensure delivery of the vital social benefits of companionship, support, and inspiration. Co-design where we listen to and learn from our communities to design these spaces and services will be crucial to success

- 14.3 **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 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.

## **NEXT STEPS**

14. The draft strategy will be considered at Cabinet on 21<sup>st</sup> December. Public consultation on the draft strategy will take place during January/February 2022 through the Let's Talk Oxfordshire engagement portal. Consultation feedback will help shape the final version of the strategy which is intended to return to Cabinet in spring 2022.
15. Key actions in the strategy will be taken forward through an engagement programme involving partners, including the Arts Council and other funding agencies, existing users of services and the local community in each library location. Actions that will be implemented through this process of engagement include
- the delivery of an asset development plan for the long-term future of libraries and heritage assets to ensure they meet projected population growth and aspirations as vibrant community
  - a refreshed volunteer strategy
  - review of events and activities programmes

## **Financial Implications**

There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

Prem Salhan  
Interim Finance Business Partner

## **Legal Implications**

Any new strategy must comply with the statutory duties set out at paragraph 6.

All final proposals for change to existing services will need to be the subject of equality impact assessments in addition to public consultation referenced at paragraph 23.

Jonathan Pool  
Solicitor (contracts)

**CLAIRE TAYLOR**, Corporate Director, Customers Organisational Development and Resources.

Background papers: None

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## **Appendix 1 – List of services in scope**

- 22 libraries managed by county council staff
- 22 Community Supported Libraries run by staff with the support of volunteers
- Home Library Service supporting 670 clients
- Prison library Service in Huntercombe and Bullingdon
- 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 Swalcliffe, providing accessible storage for large agricultural and trade vehicles
- Oxfordshire History Centre in St Lukes Church, Cowley
- all three museum locations and the History Centre are Accredited (meeting nationally agreed standards for museum and archive services to inspire the confidence of the public and funding and governing bodies)
- Victoria County History, a literary charity whose purpose is to publish the complete history of Oxfordshire
- The museum service also has a legacy responsibility for the remains of the Bishop's Palace in Witney

## **Appendix 2 – Libraries and Heritage service insight**

These services are highly valued and used by residents. Key performance data in 2019 as the last full year of operation before the pandemic is set out below:

- 2.3m visits to libraries
- 3.4m items borrowed from libraries
- 159,071 of these were e books or e audio books
- 166,255 searches for e magazines
- 670 housebound residents supported by the Home Library Service
- County Library has the 4<sup>th</sup> highest borrowing figures in Great Britain
- 8,355 events in libraries attended by 98,000 people
- >1,200 volunteers supported delivery of services
- 127,092 visits to the Oxfordshire Museum
- 3,645 visits to the Oxfordshire History Centre (17% of visitors were first time visitors)
- 3,600 remote enquiries answered by the history centre

Services for children are well attended.

- 47,000 children visited libraries to borrow books
- 1.5m items were borrowed by children
- 598 events supporting children's reading and literacy
- 9,000 children participated in Summer Reading Challenge

- 1,780 Rhymetime, family events and Play and Stay sessions were delivered
- 26,000 children and young people (early years to Year 12) attended a class visit with teacher – for many of these it was the first visit to a library
- 1,900 Bookstart packages gifted to under 5s
- 1,500 children engaged in informal learning activities in the Museum
- 8,500 school children engaged with the museum service through loans of boxed collections of objects, workshops at the Museum and in school

### **Appendix 3 – Engagement sessions**

The engagement process is set out in para 8. Two workshops were held with staff, two with Friends of libraries groups, 2 with volunteers and 1 with external stakeholders. Councillors were invited to a workshop and presentations were made to all Locality Groups. Officers across the council were also engaged through a series of presentations. The public were invited to share ideas for libraries, museum and history service through the Let's Talk Oxfordshire portal.

### **Appendix 4 – Impact of the pandemic**

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 Rhymetimes and activities for children, Reading Groups and some library activities for adults. Museum activities to support children learning and history centre website content were also significantly enhanced.

The library service saw an exponential 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.

All libraries, the Museum of Oxfordshire and the Oxfordshire History Centre are open to the public. The Museum Resource Centre and Swalecliffe Barn are not open to the public on a daily basis and have returned to the pre-covid pattern of opening days.