

**Creative, Inspiring, Inclusive**

**A library and heritage service for  
Oxfordshire now and for the future**

Strategy 2022-27



**OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL**

# Contents

1

## Foreword

Councillor Neil Fawcett

2

## 1. Libraries and Heritage Services

- the National and Local Picture  
The national policy and legal context.  
An overview of Oxfordshire's current provision

10

## 2. Meeting the challenge and seizing opportunities

- developing a strategy for sustaining current services and meeting future need

17

## 3. Our ambition for libraries and heritage in Oxfordshire

18

## 4. Our priorities for libraries and heritage services in Oxfordshire

21

## 5. Delivering our ambition

Monitoring and review  
Action Plan

## Foreword

Oxfordshire County Council's public libraries and heritage services are trusted, free to use and open to everyone in the community.

Like all councils, Oxfordshire has a statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service' but we want to go much further. We want them to inspire, challenge and stimulate those who choose to use them.

Our network of 44 libraries serves both urban and rural communities. Collectively our libraries attracted 2.3 million visits in 2019 and our flagship County Library in Oxford recorded the third highest visitor numbers in England. Alongside our own team, we are supported by Friends Groups and volunteers in 22 of our libraries and in the delivery of museum and history centre services.

Our new strategy sets out how we will create multi-purpose physical and virtual spaces that play a crucial role in ensuring the social, cultural, health and economic wellbeing of individuals and communities – places where people can access a variety of services as well as inspiring cultural assets.

We asked the views of residents from across the county, using their feedback to confirm our strategic approach and design the plan that will enable us to deliver. I'm delighted to introduce this strategy and vision for the future – placing libraries and heritage services as the heart of the fabric of our communities.

**Councillor Neil Fawcett**

Portfolio Holder for Community Services and Safety



Our libraries and heritage services provide opportunities for people to

Connect  
and create,  
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.

## 1

## Libraries and Heritage Services - the National and Local Picture

## 2

Across Oxfordshire our existing network of libraries and heritage services are valued by communities and service users. But no service can stand still and, as social trends change, technology develops and communities grow, so must our services.

This strategy sets out our ambitions for the future development of our services, their wider contributions to the health and wellbeing of Oxfordshire, and the challenges and opportunities we face. To develop the strategy, we undertook a wide range of research and engagement, the findings from which are set out in section 2.

### Developing this strategy

- A review of the national policy framework
- A review of the strategic drivers for change, what factors are likely to have a long-term impact on libraries and heritage services
- A consideration of the county council's wider strategic plans
- A review of our current provision and performance
- A community needs analysis
- Stakeholder engagement
- An externally led peer review

### The national policy and legal framework for libraries and heritage services

Like all councils Oxfordshire 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.

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.

Arts Council England (ACE) is the national agency for creativity and culture, and they recognise the contributions played by libraries and heritage organisations as part of the social and cultural fabric of the country. They offer funding to support the libraries and museum sector, provide capital grants, revenue grants to National Portfolio Organisations and project grants. As such the Arts Council is a key partner and funder

for Oxfordshire County Council in delivering our libraries and heritage strategy.

Their strategy 'Let's Create' ([www.artscouncil.org.uk/letscreate](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/letscreate)) sets out their vision for culture for 2020 to 2030.

**Arts Council 'Let's Create' outcomes:**

- 1 **Creative People:** Everyone can develop and express creativity throughout their life.
- 2 **Cultural Communities:** Villages, towns and cities thrive through a collaborative approach to culture.
- 3 **A creative and cultural country:** England's cultural sector is innovative, collaborative and international.

Of particular interest to Oxfordshire County Council in supporting the development of our libraries and heritage strategy, is the focus by the Arts Council on children and young people. When consulted, the public said how much they value opportunities for children to take part in creative opportunities and they want to see more opportunities for widening and increasing participation. This is reflected by ACE as a key element of the Creative People outcomes in their delivery plan alongside providing high-quality early years activities.

The outcomes set out in 'Let's Create' are directly reflected in the 'Universal Offers' which are promoted by Libraries Connected, the national support agency for libraries. The new Library Universal Offers aim to connect communities, improve wellbeing and promote equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity.



Create

**Libraries Connected Framework of Universal Offers**



## An overview of Oxfordshire's current provision

### A vibrant network of libraries serving all of Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire libraries deliver a universal service for everyone in the community. Whilst many visitors use the library to borrow books and find useful information, libraries are also seen as safe and welcoming places for people to gather and make social connections.

There is growing evidence nationally that participation in library and heritage activities can lead to improved health and wellbeing, with many examples of innovative partnership working between libraries and heritage services with public health, adult social care and the NHS to explore promising new approaches to social prescribing.<sup>1</sup>

Our network of 44 libraries serves both urban and rural communities. Collectively our libraries attracted 2.3 million visits in 2019 and our flagship County Library in Oxford recorded the third highest visitor numbers in England.

We continually seek opportunities to improve our libraries and heritage assets and in the last five years we have refurbished a number of our libraries. In 2016, Bicester library was moved from an outdated building to Franklin House

in the town centre. The new library is larger than the original, houses more computers and has wifi connectivity to enable users to access the internet on their own devices. The new library, developed in partnership with Cherwell District Council and funded by developer's contribution, has been able to support a greater number of events to benefit the community.



County Library in the Westgate Centre was refurbished in 2017. The new library has an improved entrance to increase its visibility, an extended children's area, more study space and a greater number of computers. In addition, the library houses meeting rooms and a dedicated Makerspace – a collaborative workspace for making and learning, using new technology tools such as virtual reality. The library houses the Business and Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC), developed and run in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Library. The BIPC provides new

and aspiring entrepreneurs/small businesses with physical and online networking space and support to grow their businesses and access to online business databases and information, worth thousands of pounds, which is only available through public libraries.

We can see the benefits of co-locating libraries with other services and will continue to do so. Co-locating Charlbury library in the new community centre in 2017 enabled us to deliver longer opening hours than had been possible in the previous site and brought the service closer to local people.

We are supported by Friends Groups and volunteers in 22 of our libraries and in the delivery of museum and history centre services. Benson library was one of the first libraries to start operating under the new model of paid staff and volunteers working together to deliver services in 2012. Working together, the Friends of Benson Library (FOBL), library staff, Incredible Edible, and the scouts delivered a sustainable garden on what was previously waste land in front of the library. When combined with recent work in 2020 to replace the library roof, fit solar panels and turn the library into a carbon-neutral building, Benson can safely be said to be the 'greenest' library in the county!

<sup>1</sup>A March 2020 report by the University of Oxford's Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine (CEBM), Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences and the University's Gardens, Libraries and Museums discusses the ways that cultural venues could contribute to health and wellbeing and be a part of social prescribing.

We are also proud of our home library service, a free service for people who are housebound or find it difficult to get to a library in person. As well as providing books and audio-visual items, our staff and volunteers provide vital social contact to home library service users.

One customer commented:

*“The Home Library Service is invaluable. I do not drive, am not good on technical matters like Zoom and am a total reader as literacy was and is my lifeline. So, thank you and my prayers are it continues.”*

The Home Library Service not only connects people with books, but also people with people. It plays a key role in linking residents who may be isolated, especially in rural areas, with the wider world.

As one customer simply said:

*“Thank you for coming out when a lot of people would have refused, thank you for being there.”*

As centres of learning and information provision, libraries are frequently associated with books, but they also offer much more. From supporting the development of digital skills to signposting a wider range of health and wellbeing services, libraries are places

that provide access to knowledge, local information, practical skills and fun activities.

### We provide:

- Reading as therapy – Reading Well collections
- Home Library Services
- Reminiscence sessions delivered to people in communities across the county
- Making Every Contact Count in partnership with Public Health – signposting library users to health and wellbeing resources (>2,300 contacts in 2020)
- Space for groups to deliver activities, such as Chess Club, Dungeons and Dragons, Knit and Natter
- Volunteering opportunities



## Libraries and museums: contributing to our collective health and wellbeing

The library service, working in partnership with Public Health, is a delivery partner for [Making Every Contact Count](#) (MECC) – an NHS initiative to contribute to improved health outcomes. MECC is an approach that uses opportunistic conversations in everyday life to encourage people to make positive changes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Our libraries stock ‘Reading Well’ collections to help people to understand and manage their health and wellbeing using helpful reading. The books are recommended by health experts and people living with the conditions covered. In many cases health professionals will advise people to visit their local library to take advantage of these collections.

It is recognised by government and other agencies that libraries play a role in reducing social isolation. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that libraries have a significant role to play in mitigating this social problem. In 2020 research conducted by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) in Manchester found more than 80 per cent of library users who experience feelings of loneliness or isolation felt the library helped combat these feelings. Libraries have also been

supported with funding by central government as a contributor to '[A Connected Society: A strategy for tackling loneliness](#)' (2018).

We also run library services in Huntercombe and Bullingdon prisons and, in addition to making books available to prisoners, we run activities that help prisoners stay in touch with their families and support their mental health and wellbeing.

We benefit from over 1,500 volunteers who work in our libraries, the museum and history

centre. Our volunteers not only provide much valued capacity, but we know that they in turn value the experience and benefits to their emotional and physical wellbeing.

### **Libraries and museums: places for children and young people**

Libraries play a significant role in supporting literacy and a love of reading. Starting with the very young, Oxfordshire libraries encourage reading in early years and beyond.

Our libraries offer special tickets for pre-schools, foster carers and child minders to borrow books to support the children in their care. We do not apply charges to reserve books or audiobooks or CDs for anyone under 18 and there are no overdue charges applied to children under five, childminders or looked-after children and those with reading impairments. Looked-after children and those with reading impairments are also able to benefit from free audiobooks on CD. We have special collections (Reading Well collections), including books for parents and carers, dyslexic children, braille and books to support children and young people's mental health.

All libraries encourage school visits and deliver a range of events and initiatives to increase library participation by children – these include author talks, story times, Chatterbooks reading groups and rhyme times for under 3s, and Bookstart where free books are gifted to new parents in partnership with the Book Trust.

Annually, libraries run an ebook short story competition targeted at children and young people, and the Summer Reading Challenge that aims to keep children reading over the summer holidays.

Children and young people can develop digital literacy skills through Code Clubs, robotics and other activities using new technology in the Makerspace in county library.

### **our libraries and museums provide:**

**47,000** children visited our libraries to borrow books

**1,500,000** items were borrowed by children

**9,000** children participated in our Summer Reading Challenge

**1,780** rhymetime, family events and Stay and Play sessions were delivered

**26,000** children and young people attended a class visit with their teacher – for many it was their first visit to a library

**598** events held to support children's reading and literacy

**15,000** Bookstart packages gifted to under 5s

**8,500** school children engaged with the museum service through loans of boxed collections of objects, workshops at the museum and in school

**1,500** children engaged in informal learning activities in the museum





We are working with local academics and young people to develop innovative practice around harnessing the power of virtual reality to enable young people to craft and tell stories.

Children benefit from memorable and immersive learning experiences at Oxfordshire Museum, where our collection and exhibition programme stimulates their imagination and often introduces new worlds and unknown environments. In addition, the museum plays a direct role in supporting learning at Key Stage 1 and 2 across several subjects in the curriculum. We offer a range of workshops run by museum staff, which feature a range of practical, hands-on activities using a wide variety of objects and photographs, either in the museum or in schools. We also supply box loans or museum objects to schools with a teachers' pack, which can be used to develop observation skills, critical thinking, questioning and problem skills and to stimulate creative writing, art and design.



### **Libraries and heritage: at the forefront of digital inclusion and literacy and widening access through digital engagement**

The UK has a 'digital divide' between those who have the ability, skills, motivation or confidence to access the internet and those who do not. Some homes have no internet access, but even in those that do, challenges may arise if that access is limited. For example, 21 per cent of users in the DE socio-economic group are smartphone-only users compared to 10 per cent in the general population.

Libraries have long been recognised as part of the national solution to promoting digital inclusion since the Library Information Commission's report 'New Library: The People's Network' (1997) made the case for all public libraries to be re-equipped with new, modern computers and library staff to be re-skilled. The report recognised that libraries were the ideal vehicle to 'foster the spread of vital new technological skills amongst the population' and it is clear from our own and others' research that this remains true today.

All 44 libraries in Oxfordshire provide free access to computers for people who do not have their own devices and/or sufficient network connectivity to meet their needs,

whether these are for learning, research, job search or active civic engagement.

### **Our libraries provide:**

- Computers in every library
- Library staff provide digital support to everyone without appointments
- 65 volunteer digital helpers provide 340 hours of digital support
- Informal gadget sessions held to help people understand how to use their mobile devices
- 400 Code Clubs delivered to children and young people

Supporting people to use information technology is a key feature of our service. Staff and Digital Helpers across the library network provide support to residents who are not confident. Our support is often at the most basic level and in keeping with national practice. The county council's increased focus on promoting digital inclusion will help enhance the digital offer in our libraries.

Digital delivery has been growing across the libraries and heritage sectors and, in response to the outbreak of COVID-19, our services increased the volume and quality of our digital delivery. During the pandemic, our libraries offered online coffee mornings, language cafés, rhyme time and other activities digitally, including the Summer Reading Challenge.

Digital delivery has the potential to enhance inclusion within the arts and cultural sector by providing opportunities for people to enjoy content and experiences that they would not be able to access in person. It also provides the opportunity to maximise the social benefits of engaging with libraries and heritage (such as improved wellbeing). However, there is a need to implement 'digitally inclusive' approaches to online delivery, so everyone can participate and benefit – including those who struggle to get online. The 2021 report '[Digital Inclusion and Exclusion in the Arts and Cultural Sector](#)' published by Arts Council England and the Good Things Foundation provides a clear framework for the development of our digital offer across libraries and heritage.

## Recommendations from the report are set out below.



**embed and promote digital inclusion at an organisational level**



**promote digital inclusion at a community level through forging local partnerships**



**invest in staff capacity, skills, knowledge, and willingness to deliver digitally**



**design digital inclusion programmes that adapt to the needs of different audiences**

These findings are consistent with our own local research, the [Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion review](#), a collaboration between the University of Oxford and our libraries to collect data-driven insights on the digital needs of people who are under- or unconnected to the internet and other digital technologies.

In addition to offering access to computers and support to build digital skills, Oxfordshire libraries have been offering the opportunity to engage more deeply with digital technologies in the Makerspace, which opened in Oxfordshire County Library in 2018. The concept of a makerspace is to embed STEaM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) into the library offer to the public, aiming to enhance job skills and build people's confidence using digital technologies and crafts through self-directed learning. It is a welcoming, democratic environment, providing a platform for experimentation and is open to all – from beginners to people experienced with digital technologies. It also provides an avenue to explore STEaM outside the boundaries of mainstream education.

The Makerspace in County Library has delivered many successful events, many in partnership, such as a virtual reality taster day, Raspberry Pi jams, code clubs, 3D printing and interactive 'choose your own adventure' storytelling sessions.

## Heritage and History Services in Oxfordshire

In a county with inspirational history and vibrant rural traditions Oxfordshire has a rich heritage offer, with over 40 museums spread across the county. Many of these are staffed by volunteers.

The council supports the collection, preservation and care of Oxfordshire’s heritage directly through four cultural venues: the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock, the Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley, the Museums Resource Centre in Standlake (housing the reserve collection and outreach service) and Swalcliffe Barn near Banbury. The History Centre is the designated Diocesan Record Office for Oxfordshire, which preserves and makes available records of parishes, the Oxford Archdeaconry and Oxford Diocese.



Oxfordshire Museum Woodstock



Swalcliffe Barn near Banbury

Through an extensive programme of workshops in schools and at the museum, programmes of informal creative activities for families, and through collection loans to schools, the Museums Service enables children to experience the inspirational power of learning from the ‘real thing’.

As well as running our own cultural venues, we also support organisations providing access to heritage across the county:

- financial support to the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire Trust, a project to complete the history of Oxfordshire
- storage and care for collections in the ownership of Abingdon Town Council and Cherwell District Council

- collections care and documentation support to enable Abingdon and Banbury Museums to exhibit material from these collections
- provision of objects to the Museum of Oxford
- museum support for the work of the 40+ museum network with mentoring, training and small grants through its work as part of the Arts Council funded South East Museum Development initiative.



## 2

## Meeting the challenge and seizing opportunities

- developing a strategy for sustaining current services and meeting future need

In developing a new Libraries and Heritage strategy, it was important to consider strategic drivers for change, and to research and consider feedback from a number of key sources. This section covers the main elements of research and has led to the development of our ambition, vision and priorities.

The diagram below sets out the strategic drivers for change.

### Community engagement

Opportunities for increased volunteering and community participation in the development and delivery of services to improve outcomes

### Market trends

Reductions in income, increase in working from home, increase in people starting own business

### Widening access

Key groups face barriers to taking up libraries and heritage services for a number of reasons, including geographical access, confidence and education

### Needs of communities

Improving planning for local and targeted needs within a universal service, changing needs/demographics of communities and population growth

### Digital access and modernisation

Increasing the depth and reach of digital services, including opportunity to access and learn about digital technologies

### Better utilisation of the library and heritage property assets

Need to ensure buildings are flexible and can respond to changing community need and provide opportunities for co-location to bring services closer to people and widen user base

### Importance of working collaboratively with other partners and agencies

Improved service resilience (including financial) by sharing data to support innovative developments to meet community needs

### Opportunity to increase benefits of these services to support social, cultural, health and economic wellbeing

Harnessing the contribution of these services to preventative outcomes and demonstrating an impact

### Impact of COVID

Increased use of digital services

## Libraries and Heritage Services – contributing to the long-term vision for Oxfordshire

This strategy directly contributes to the vision and priorities set out by Oxfordshire County Council’s Cabinet to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county.



The services also operate within a wider framework for Oxfordshire and will continue to take account of partnerships and spatial plans, such as those within the health and education sectors, and the Oxfordshire 2050 vision. The action plan to deliver this strategy will be refreshed on an annual basis and provide an ongoing opportunity for this joined-up approach to take place.

## Community Needs Analysis

As part of the development of this strategy, we reviewed a range of data to identify long-term community needs, which our plans should seek to address.

Oxfordshire is a relatively rural county, covering an area of 1,006 square miles and is home to a population of 693,680 (mid-2020 population estimates). Over the next 10 years our housing-led forecasts predict an increase of 16 per cent to a total population of 830,170. There are a significant number of small communities in rural Oxfordshire, with many having fewer than 1,000 residents. 39 per cent of the population live in rural locations (towns or villages less than 10,000 people).

Oxfordshire has one of the strongest economies in the UK, with residents in the main enjoying high incomes and skill levels. Whilst Oxfordshire is one of the least deprived counties in England, there are nonetheless significant health and social inequalities across the county. These challenges are set out in the Director of Public Health's annual report '[Some are More Equal than Others: Hidden Inequalities in a Prospering Oxfordshire](#)'.

When we look more deeply at the data available at county level, we find that there are ten wards which feature neighbourhoods

that fall within the 20 per cent most deprived in England. Residents in these wards experience multiple incidences of deprivation, lower incomes, education and skills, higher unemployment and limiting health conditions. It is also true to say that pockets of deprivation especially in rural areas, can be missed when using these types of indices, so local knowledge is key to understanding.

Oxfordshire's over 65s make up 17 per cent of the population, with the number of people over 85 projected to grow significantly over the next 20 years.

Oxfordshire is becoming a more diverse county and the predicted population growth will see this continue. Most of the ethnic minority population is based in urban areas of Oxford and Banbury. The ethnic minority population of Oxfordshire includes people of Asian/Asian British, 'other white' (many migrants from Europe) and Black origin. Ethnic minority representation is highest in the 15 – 49 age group, with just over a quarter (27 per cent) of primary school pupils from an ethnic minority background, up from 19 per cent in 2011. 25 per cent of secondary school pupils were from an ethnic minority background, up from 15 per cent in 2011.<sup>2</sup>

Working within a context of demographic change, population growth and addressing

inequalities requires a diverse range of specific and targeted services to be delivered across all council services, including libraries and heritage services.

## Stakeholder feedback

During 2021 we hosted a programme of stakeholder engagement to help develop this strategy. These sessions included focused forums with library and heritage staff, existing and new delivery partners, and councillors. Locality Boards across Oxfordshire received a presentation enabling local councillors to have the opportunity to raise local issues. We held virtual engagement sessions with councillors, staff, Friends of Libraries and volunteers. We met with other council services to identify how we could work together more effectively in the future to deliver council and community priorities. We also invited residents to comment on libraries and heritage services through an open consultation on the 'Let's Talk Oxfordshire' public engagement portal.

We are grateful for the constructive engagement of partners in these events, and for the feedback, issues and ideas raised. The headlines are summarised on the following page.

<sup>2</sup> Figures taken from the [Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Joint Strategic Needs Assessment report 2021](#).

## Key themes from our engagement

- the challenge and importance of rural access, particularly for older people

- the importance of libraries in supporting school readiness and children's learning and reading, including school visits

- value and invest in developing staff skills

- quality and range of stock in smaller libraries

- the importance of free computer access and the Digital Helper programme of volunteers supporting people with basic digital skills in libraries

- growth in population in the county and the need to consider implications for libraries and use of S106 (section 106 developer's contributions)

- challenge of access to libraries and heritage services in rural locations

- the richness of Oxfordshire's heritage and the need to promote this more effectively

- libraries as spaces for young people to study

- open plan arrangement of computers means that when a resident is attending a Digital Helper session, other computer users can be disrupted because of talking

- use data and evidence to plan and deliver services and undertake more outreach at local level

- museum objects, archives and local history activities in libraries and increased outreach by local history service

- cost of reservations of books in libraries can be a challenge and may be a barrier to those residents in rural locations

- expand our audience by improving our offer

- promote the services more effectively including making it clearer on library buildings the full set of services/opportunities available



## Current performance

We have reviewed the performance of our services and find that our library services reflect national trends. Over the last five years we have experienced a decrease in visits. This reduction has been slower than the national rate; however the number of items borrowed from our libraries is declining faster than the national rate.

Analysis of our membership and borrowing by age group shows that 47 per cent of books issued in our libraries are to children and

young people. This demonstrates good take-up amongst this group given they represent 23 per cent of the total population.

Visitor numbers at the Oxfordshire Museum fell significantly with the closure of the permanent galleries for 9 months between 2016 and 2017. However, investment in temporary exhibitions and the opening of a new permanent gallery enabled visitor numbers to recover and exceed their former level by 2019.

At our History Centre visitor numbers have remained constant over the past five years,

as have remote enquiries about the centre's collections and researching its resources. While demand for access to the physical collection remains high, visits to the service's digital resources have seen a 33 per cent increase over the past three years. This reflects the increase in the amount of content the service has been making available online, and a shift to digital from some users.

## Libraries and heritage: Our pre-pandemic service use

**2,300,000**  
visits to libraries



**3,400,000** library  
items were borrowed



**159,071** of these were  
e-books and e-audio books



there were **166,255**  
searches for e-magazines



**670** house bound residents  
were supported by the Home  
Library Service



County library is the  
**4th** highest library for  
borrowing in Great Britain



**8,355** events in libraries were  
attended by **98,000** people



**1,200** volunteers  
supported services

**127,092** visits to  
The Oxfordshire Museum



**3,645** visits to Oxfordshire History  
Centre (17% for the first time)

**3,600** remote enquiries  
answered by history centre



## Cultural Services Peer Review 2021

During early 2021 the service was fortunate to host a Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review. An externally led review, the team comprised cultural services professionals and experienced councillors from outside Oxfordshire. The review considered the strengths of the service, opportunities and areas for development and made a series of recommendations. These included ensuring that the foundations of a modern and efficient service are developed, including information technology and business systems to support service delivery as well as staffing arrangements.

The peer team also recommended that partnership working was developed and that the service continued to engage with the community and voluntary sector to support the development and delivery of the service. The [full report](#) is published on the LGA website.

### Meeting the challenge and seizing opportunities – what the evidence tells us

Following a review of the evidence base collected for the development of this strategy, a series of key challenges and opportunities have been identified. Over the lifetime of this strategy, we will need to address them.

- A review of the national policy framework
- A review of the strategic drivers for change, what factors will be likely to have a long-term impact on libraries and heritage services
- A consideration of the county council's wider strategic plans
- A review of our current provision and performance
- A community needs analysis
- Stakeholder engagement
- An externally led Peer Review



Our analysis of demographics, current performance, and stakeholder feedback sets out the importance of:

- Responding to our changing population and the needs of different communities. This includes providing services that are locally relevant and meet the needs of service users of all ages.
- Increasing participation, access, and usage.
- Working with volunteers and service users to continually shape our offer.

Our analysis of national and local trends and the wider policy context demonstrates how we must:

- Work across the public sector to act as a gateway to a wide range of services that support the health and wellbeing of the community.
- Work with partners in the private and education sectors to ensure our services contribute to learning, sustainable economic development and entrepreneurship.
- Recognise the important role of our services in tackling challenges such as social isolation and digital inclusion.

And our own desire to modernise and provide the best possible value means we must:

- Develop an asset management strategy to shape the direction and development of our buildings, including the effective use of developer contributions and working to make sure our buildings are as green as possible.
- Embrace new technology and new ways of working to meet the need of our users.
- Invest in partnership working and skills for staff and volunteers.

## 3

## Our ambition and vision for libraries and heritage in Oxfordshire

### 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, and 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 service 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.

### 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 will champion digital inclusion, broadening access to everything we offer.

*“Always welcoming and friendly. Lovely things going on here – Language café, music sessions, half term and holiday sessions, book group, computer, family history and more. BRILLIANT!”*



## 4

## Our priorities for libraries and heritage services in Oxfordshire

To help set a clear route for our journey we have developed a set of priorities to shape our direction for the future. Our actions will be centred on three themes: people, place and partnerships.



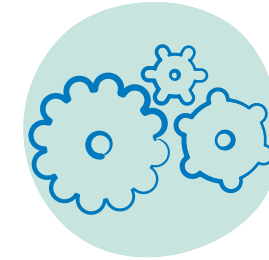
### People

**People – our libraries and heritage services will support people to reach their full potential.**

Libraries are the place where children and adults can find that special book that helps them get the reading habit, and then borrow for free to feed that habit for life. In the museum and the history centre, people can learn new skills, gain information, and participate in activities to support them to live successful and healthy lives. We offer so many free opportunities to everyone – including finding out about family history and the county’s heritage, accessing council services and other benefits, using freely available computers to apply for jobs,



### Place



### Partnership

meeting authors, participating in book groups, volunteering, and learning digital skills.



**Place – our libraries and heritage services will be recognised as valuable community assets and we will strengthen their role in ‘place making’ and their position at the heart of their community.**

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.



**Partnerships – our libraries and heritage services will deliver on national and local priorities, increasing our strategic and operational collaborations with a wide range of partners.**

Libraries and heritage services constantly work in partnership with local and national organisations. We will build on existing partnerships and evaluate existing relationships alongside developing new 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 wellbeing, opportunities for children and young people, vibrant local economies and reducing demand on other services where possible. Our staff will be supported to develop partnerships where relationships and local knowledge is central.

Our consultation shows that our libraries and heritage services are valued by residents; however, we are seeing a decline in physical visits and borrowing in libraries. Whilst the museum and history centre are sustaining visitor numbers, our challenge remains ensuring our services reflect the needs of local communities and are places that inspire visits.



Libraries and heritage services have the potential to contribute to reducing inequality, providing opportunities for children and young people to fulfil their potential, enabling residents to gain trusted access and information to play their role as active citizens and to building a vibrant local economy. Our libraries, history centre and museum are highly valued community assets, offering residents and visitors the opportunity to connect, learn and celebrate together.

Having considered the outcome of our engagement, needs and performance assessments, we have identified what we need to do over the next five years to increase the impact of libraries and heritage on the council's ambition for creating a 'greener, fairer and healthier county'.

By working across our three themes of people, place and partnerships we will:

- ensure services meet the predicted population growth in the next five years
- support access in rural communities
- increase and widen participation in services – physical and digital
- further develop museum and library buildings as vibrant community hubs
- promote digital inclusion and enhance digital access
- support people in the community to gain digital skills, including the potential of advanced technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence
- strengthen our offer for children, young people and families, including support for early years and improving school readiness
- increase programmes and activities to support people to have active and healthy lives, reducing social isolation and loneliness
- build on the role of libraries as providers of trusted information and gateways to other public services
- reduce our impact on the climate by retrofitting our buildings where possible and improving our digital offer
- increase the contribution of libraries to sustainable economic development, innovation, and entrepreneurship across the county
- increase access to heritage in person and digitally
- increase the opportunities for communities to tell the story of their local heritage.



## 5

## Delivering our ambition

Our long-term ambitions for Oxfordshire's libraries and heritage services will be delivered with a focus on the priorities we have set out in this strategy. Our success will be measured through a range of metrics, including the number of physical and virtual users and feedback from our stakeholders and customers.

### Monitoring and review

We will review the strategy annually and publish an update of our action plans. We will report on key performance measures in the council's monitoring reports and we will provide opportunities for service users, volunteers, councillors, and staff to feedback on our service.

### Action plan

A summary of our priorities for 2022 to 2027 is set out on the following pages. A detailed action plan will be updated annually and will be available on our website.



## People

### Priorities

- 1.1** Increase libraries and heritage contribution to learning and promote library's role in fostering literacy and a love of reading
- 1.2** Support children and young people's learning and parents support for their children's learning
- 1.3** Increase the impact of libraries and heritage services on health, wellbeing and active citizenship
- 1.4** Equip libraries and heritage staff with skills to deliver on innovative services
- 1.5** Support people to develop skills and knowledge

## Place

### Priorities

- 2.1** Involve people in the design of libraries and heritage buildings
- 2.2** Identify ways to reduce the carbon impact of our buildings and services
- 2.3** Deliver services to support business start-ups to support economic growth
- 2.4** Use data and intelligence about 'place' to target the specific needs of local communities and drive a culture of service improvement
- 2.5** Work with communities to design services which reach the heart of communities, reflect our rich diversity, engage new audiences and are responsive to local needs

## Partnership

### Priorities

- 3.1** Develop partnerships that support more resilient, fairer and healthier communities
- 3.2** Maximise partnerships at local and national level to improve the sustainability of services
- 3.3** Value and strengthen our partnership with volunteers supporting service delivery





