Libraries Review Report

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	9 February 2023
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Howard Woollaston
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	3 January 2023
Report Author:	Felicity Harrison / Jude Thomas / Nicola Peacock
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4106

1   Purpose of the Report

1.1   The purpose of the report is to present the findings of the 2021/22 Libraries Review. This follow-up review sets out to ensure that the service remains fit for purpose and meets community needs after the library transformation work which took place in 2016/17.

2   Recommendation

2.1   To consider the proposals in the report on the future development of the Library Service.

3   Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	If it is decided that additional investment is needed, this funding will be secured accordingly.
Human Resource:	As above, if it is decided that additional staffing is needed, funding will be secured accordingly.
Legal:	N/A
Risk Management:	The future of the Mobile Library service. Revenue gap relating to town and parish council contributions.
Property:	There could be potential implications for all libraries depending on which recommendations are progressed.

Policy:				Libraries Connected Universal Offers
	Positive	**Neutral**	**Negative**	**Commentary**
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		
Environmental Impact:	X			Any changes will be undertaken in line with the Council's Environment Policy and net zero carbon emissions target.
Health Impact:	X			A number of the recommendations specifically aim to have a positive impact on health and wellbeing.
ICT Impact:	X			Dependent on which recommendations are accepted.
Digital Services Impact:	X			Dependent on which recommendations are accepted.
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			Ensure that vulnerable children and adults achieve better outcomes. Support everyone to reach their full potential.
Core Business:	X			Culture, Leisure, and Libraries.

Data Impact:		X		
Consultation and Engagement:	See detail below.			

4   Executive Summary

4.1   A review of the Library Service was undertaken in 2016/17, resulting in significant transformation of the Service. It was recommended, as part of the review, that the impact of this transformation was evaluated, after three years, to ensure that the Service remains fit for purpose and meets community needs. This exercise was delayed due to the Covid pandemic.

4.2   The follow up review has now taken place, and was conducted in three phases:

Phase 1: Community Needs Assessment and community engagement

Phase 2: LGA Peer Review

Phase 3: Compiling the Libraries Review report

4.3   Areas of priority have been identified through the review process, with recommendations made as to how to respond to priorities.

4.4   Proposed actions to improve and develop the Service to meet the future needs of residents are set out under each priority area.

4.5   The development of a new Library Service vision and action plan is proposed, aligning with national and local strategic priorities. This would clearly communicate the commitment to, and priorities for, the Service in the short, medium and long term.

4.6   This marks the beginning of a wider programme of engagement with stakeholders to turn the outcomes of the review into an action plan linking to agreed strategic priorities.

5   Supporting Information

Introduction

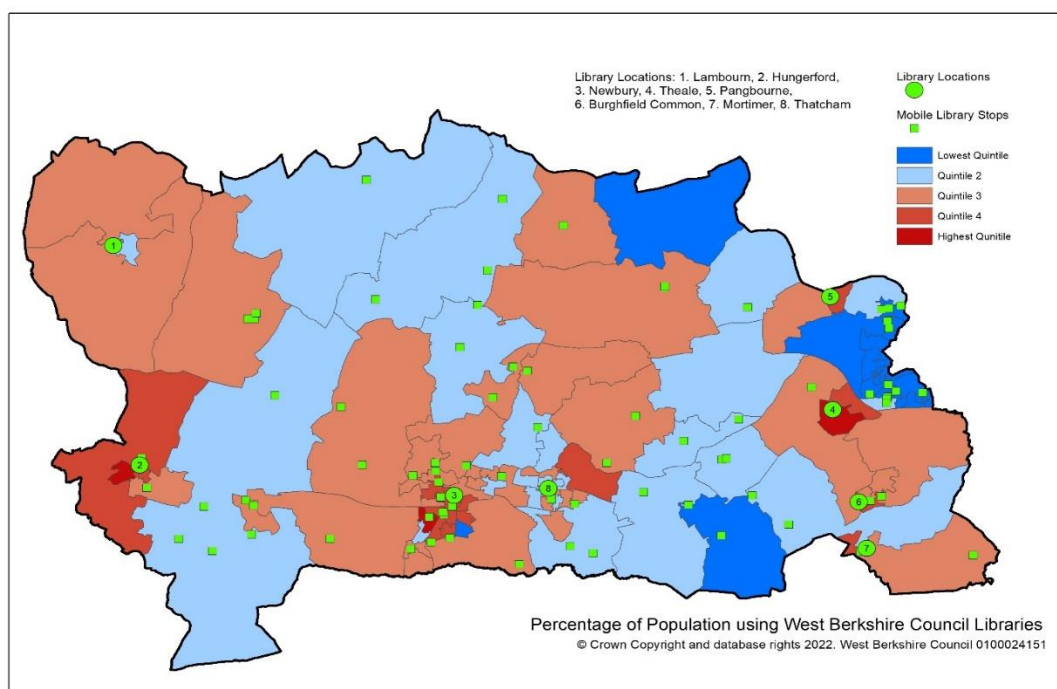**5.1**   This report sets out the findings of the recent Libraries Review undertaken to understand the impact of the significant changes to the Library Service following the previous review in 2016/17. In doing so, it provides:

1. Details of the 2016/17 Libraries Review and the resulting changes to the service;
2. Context of other factors that have impacted on the service since the 2016/17 review;
3. Key findings of the current review;

4. Proposed priorities and options for the future service.

Background

5.2 West Berkshire Libraries currently operate eight libraries within the District, a mobile library and an At Home service. The libraries are situated in:

- Burghfield Common
- Hungerford
- Lambourn
- Mortimer
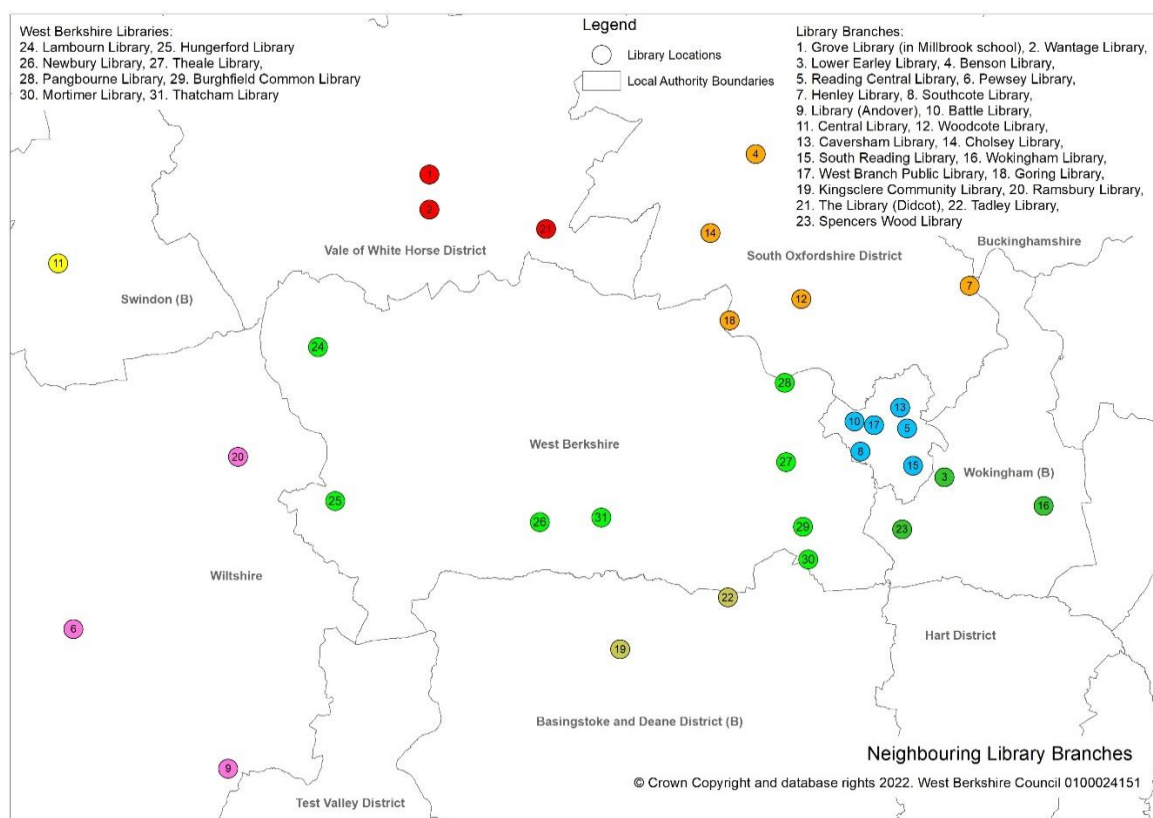
- Newbury
- Pangbourne
- Thatcham
- Theale

Percentage of Population using West Berkshire Council Libraries
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5.3 Geographically, Mortimer and Burghfield Libraries are three miles apart and there is a gap in provision in the north of the District, as shown in the diagram above.

5.4 In addition, there is an e-library offering access to e-books, e-audio, e-magazines and e-newspapers.

5.5 The libraries in neighbouring local authority areas are shown in the diagram below.

West Berkshire Libraries:
24. Lambourn Library, 25. Hungerford Library
26. Newbury Library, 27. Theale Library,
28. Pangbourne Library, 29. Burghfield Common Library
30. Mortimer Library, 31. Thatcham Library

Legend
○ Library Locations
▭ Local Authority Boundaries

Library Branches:
1. Grove Library (in Millbrook school), 2. Wantage Library,
3. Lower Earley Library, 4. Benson Library,
5. Reading Central Library, 6. Pewsey Library,
7. Henley Library, 8. Southcote Library,
9. Library (Andover), 10. Battle Library,
11. Central Library, 12. Woodcote Library,
13. Caversham Library, 14. Cholsey Library,
15. South Reading Library, 16. Wokingham Library,
17. West Branch Public Library, 18. Goring Library,
19. Kingsclere Community Library, 20. Ramsbury Library,
21. The Library (Didcot), 22. Tadley Library,
23. Spencers Wood Library

Neighbouring Library Branches
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Libraries Review 2016/17

5.6 In 2016/17 West Berkshire Council conducted a review of Library Services based on an independent assessment of needs carried out by consultants *Red Quadrant*. The review resulted in major changes to the service which were implemented in 2017/18.

5.7 In 2017/18, the revised budget for the Libraries Service was set at £1,046,000, resulting in an annual saving of £690,000.

5.8 The outcome of the 2016/17 Libraries Review resulted in a level of library service that could not be met by the Council's service budget allocation alone. It was agreed that the £150k funding gap could be met by requesting that town and parish councils make a voluntary contribution of £1 per resident, based on the population of each parish, for the next 3 years.

5.9 One of the recommendations from the 2016/17 Libraries Review was that there should be a further review of the library service after three years. The purpose of the follow up review is to ensure the service meets the needs of residents, including any Covid-19 impacts, and delivers on wider outcomes across the Council and those identified in the new Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy and the Cultural Heritage Strategy.

Service remodelling following Libraries Review 2016/17

5.10 As a result of the Libraries Review in 2016/17, a decision was taken to make the following significant changes to the service:

- A budget reduction of £690,000
- A 42% reduction in library staff, from 42.11 to 24.32 FTE
- The closure of one library service point, at Wash Common, which is now run independently by the community.
- The reduction of the number of mobile libraries from two to one.

5.11 In response to this, the following transformation took place:

- A new operational model was established with volunteers supporting staff.
- A Community Hub was created at Hungerford Library.
- A commitment to more partnership working with local communities and town and parish councils, to include the introduction of a voluntary contribution of £1 per head of the population, from town and parish councils.
- The development of positive relationships with other Council services, in particular targeting Early Years and Education.
- A mini re-structure of the professional staff team to align with priorities.
- The West Berkshire Libraries brand was created.
- Significant capital investment for building improvements.
- The location of the WBC Public Protection Partnership at Theale Library to maximise income and secure the future of the library in the current location
- Capital investment in digital improvements; new public PCs, self-service kiosks, introduction of Libraries App.

Impact of Transformation

5.12 Demand / Performance

5.12.1 In the two years prior to the pandemic, library usage in the District increased, which is in the contrast to the gradual decline in library usage nationally. In 2019/20, there were 346,895 visits and 571,352 items borrowed. Visitor numbers have still not recovered to these levels, post pandemic. The pandemic, inevitably, disrupted patterns of library use, with periods of library closure. For this reason the 2020/21 library data has been excluded from this report as it would give a misleading impression of trends as visits and borrower numbers were greatly reduced. The Library Service is now in recovery and this is reflected in the data which we now have for 2021/22, when there were 201,657 visits and 553,903 items borrowed.

Library usage data trends:

Library Service KPIs/Measures of Volume	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2021/22
Visitor numbers - physical visits	380,527	332,241	349,364	346,895	201,657
Number of library events held	*	*	2194	2248	776
Items borrowed including e-library items	619,146	539,473	534,968	571,352	553,903
Number of website hits	131,828	91,981	102,499	114,528	151,117
Volunteer hours	3,039	10,147	12,034	12,935	10,001

* Data not available

5.12.2 We have one remaining mobile library. Of a total of 670 'active borrowers' using this service in 2019/20, 313 used only the mobile library. An Active Borrower is someone who has borrowed at least one physical item in the preceding 12 month period. The existing diesel vehicle is 15 years old and reaching the end of its roadworthiness. The Mobile Library Service is perceived as essential by parish councils, but low usage, combined with the age of the vehicle, means that consideration needs to be given to how this service is delivered. In 2020/21, the usage of this service had further declined, with 486 'active borrowers' having used the service that year. Of these only 258 only used the Mobile Library Service which gives a more accurate reflection of demand.
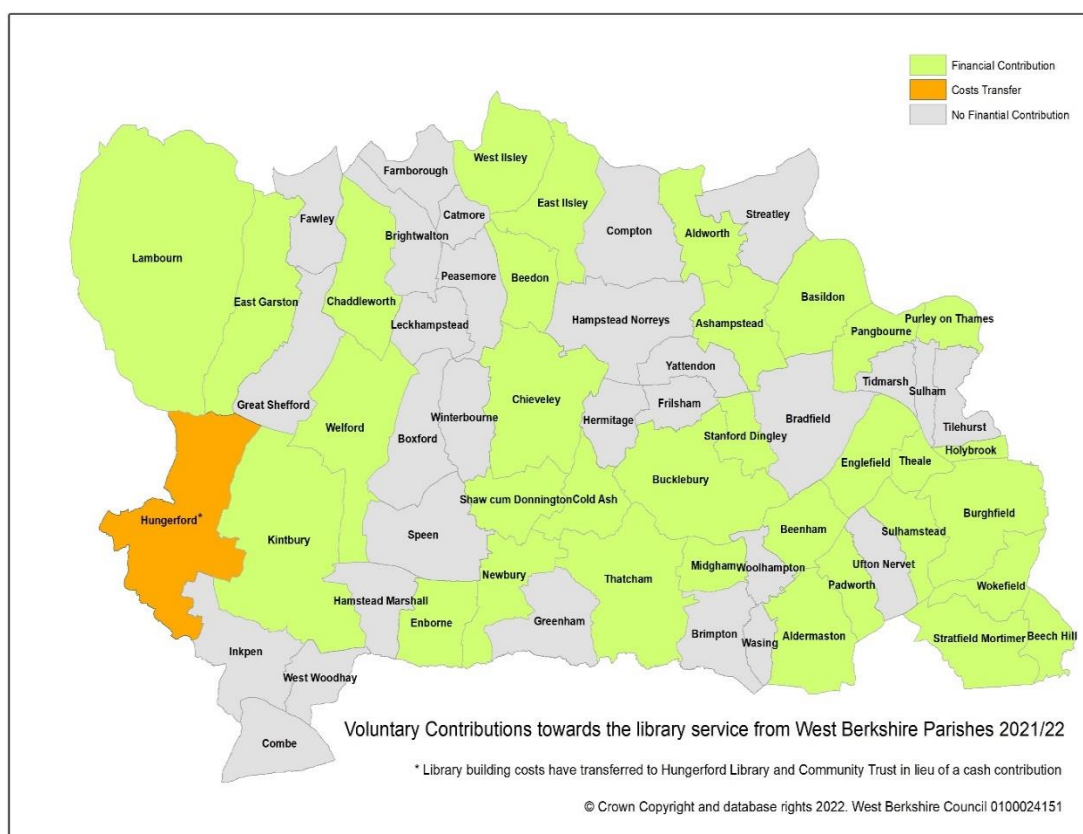
5.13 Finance

5.13.1 The revised budget for libraries was set at £1,046,000 for the new Library Service, an annual saving of £690,000. As the existing level of library service could not be met by the Council's service budget allocation alone, it was proposed that the £150k gap should be met by requesting town and parish councils to consider making a voluntary contribution of £1 per resident, based on the population of each parish for the next 3 years.

5.13.2 The target for town and parish council contributions is based on £1 per head of population, which totals £150k. Contributions averaged 90k per year for the first three years which created an annual budget pressure/deficit of £60k. Since then voluntary contributions from some town and parish councils have decreased, and

we anticipate more parishes may reconsider the level of their contributions in the future, increasing the need to explore alternative options.

5.13.3 The map below shows the contributions made by town and parish councils in the financial year 2021/22. It should be noted that those councils that do make voluntary contributions towards the library service varies each year. This impacts on the ability to plan services, and is a constant pressure on the revenue budget.

Voluntary Contributions towards the library service from West Berkshire Parishes 2021/22

* Library building costs have transferred to Hungerford Library and Community Trust in lieu of a cash contribution

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5.14 Staff / Volunteers

5.14.1 The new model relies on volunteer support and works particularly well in smaller branches, and where there is a volunteer organiser to prepare rotas, although it has been more difficult to integrate volunteers into the teams in larger libraries, particularly Newbury Library. This is possibly because there are a number of younger volunteers, fulfilling requirements for Duke of Edinburgh or university applications, resulting in a higher turnover. It has been identified that the role of the volunteer at Newbury Library would benefit from review.

5.14.2 A Volunteers Officer recruits and manages volunteers across Culture and Libraries and supports the volunteer organisers.

5.14.3 The staffing is so lean that casual cover is needed for every staff absence, and current staffing levels at Newbury Library are a cause for concern as they impact on the capacity to provide additional outreach services. As a result, outreach work has been targeted and aimed primarily at Early Years and Primary Schools.

5.14.4 The Newbury Library Manager post has been increased by five hours to full time, to create more resilience within the team.

5.14.5 There is a routine reliance on casual staff to be able to operate the service safely, in compliance with fire evacuation requirements, and this sometimes results in unplanned closures, if health and safety requirements cannot be met.

5.15 Digital

5.15.1 Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding has been used to make investments in digital technology including new public PCs, self-service kiosks and introduction of Libraries App.

5.15.2 Further improvements are needed in the ICT infrastructure and back-office support so that library staff and users can make the best use of new ICT equipment.

External factors

5.16 Since 2016, a number of external factors have affected the nature of library usage and the type of services. Some of these are the continuation of long-term trends, such as pressure on housing and technology evolution. It is clear that Covid-19 has accelerated a number of these trends and has had a profound impact on health, deprivation, education and the workplace.

5.17 Population and Housing

5.17.1 The population of West Berkshire is forecast to remain stable over the next decade, with the 'over 65' population increasing by approximately 25%, the 'under 10' population falling by about 12%. One third of the population is classified as rural.

5.17.2 The Local Plan forecasts 4,500 new homes, principally in the Thatcham and Newbury areas, with 300 new homes in rural areas. The cost of housing, both owned and rented, has accelerated faster than inflation over the last decade. As a result, families and young people, particularly those on average incomes, tend to be living in smaller properties.

5.17.3 The growth plan indicates that the libraries are in the right location, but may need to be expanded, especially in Thatcham.

5.17.4 The continued high rurality means that current access challenges will remain and, with the population ageing, accessibility issues are likely to grow.

5.17.5 Smaller houses, combined with increased home working, may increase the demand for low-cost, quiet working spaces for both adults and secondary age children.

5.18 Technological evolution

5.18.1 Since 2016, consumer technology has been ever more focussed on mobile devices and applications. This trend, when combined with increased data speeds and volumes, has created a fully mobile capability for many, reducing even the need

for PCs and connection to broadband. Most companies, service providers and users have fully embraced this trend, which has increased the 'digital divide' for those who do not have this technology and now find non-digital options increasingly difficult to access. This trend can be seen in usage trends in our libraries, with declining hours of use of hardware.

5.18.2 The implication is that hardware use will remain important for a smaller number of otherwise digitally-excluded residents and that high broadband speed and suitable workspaces will be increasingly important.

5.19 Deprivation indicators

5.19.1 West Berkshire is a prosperous district, with low levels of relative deprivation. There are a small number of wards in Newbury and Thatcham with higher levels of deprivation. Areas of higher deprivation have good access to a library.

5.19.2 The rural areas (the west and north) have low overall levels of deprivation, but have limited local services and public transport connections, which impacts those without access to a car and those on lower incomes.

5.19.3 West Berkshire does have an education gap for disadvantaged children above the national average. While this is being addressed through strategies in Education and Family Services, there is a potential role for library services to play in supporting the drive to reduce the gap.

5.19.4 Library fines have been a long standing arrangement in public libraries, but they potentially impact disproportionately on those who are most vulnerable (financially or as a result of cognitive disability or mental ill health). They are a known barrier to people joining and retaining library membership. The fear of incurring fines and building debt with the Council is a reason often cited for not using the otherwise free library service.

5.19.5 An increasing number of other authorities have already removed this barrier for their residents, helping to reduce the widening gap of 'haves and have nots'. By removing library fines, WBC would be supporting its most vulnerable residents who may be at risk of poverty, giving them access to a wide range of books, information and digital access to enable job searches, benefit applications, study support, school readiness, and reading for pleasure.

5.19.6 The current income target for library fines is £28,490.

5.20 Covid-19 recovery

5.20.1 Aside from the direct impact of Covid-19 on closing services, it is likely that it will have a longer term impact in a number of areas.

5.20.2 While home working was on the rise pre-2020, many employers, including West Berkshire Council, are now embracing it more actively. Although this is proving attractive for many, it can be challenging for some people without an appropriate workspace at home, or where digital connectivity is expensive and/or limited.

5.20.3 There has been a rise in mental ill health and issues of social exclusion, even in the recovery stage, with those who are clinically vulnerable concerned about mixing in public areas while the virus continues to be common, even in a less dangerous form.

Libraries Service Review 2022 methodology

5.21 In carrying out this review, the Council undertook a number of engagement exercises, as detailed below.

5.22 Public, staff and volunteer surveys

5.22.1 An on-line public consultation exercise with library users and non-users, was carried out, between October and December 2021, with hard copy versions made available for those without internet access. A total of 896 responses were received. The majority of responders were library users, and in employment or retired/not working through choice, aged 65 and over, and identified as being White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British.

5.22.2 Feedback and suggestion boards were also placed in some library branches and comments were taken into consideration.

5.22.3 Online staff and library volunteer surveys were carried out.

5.22.4 Online engagement sessions with town/parish councils took place in January 2022.

5.23 Community Needs Assessment 2022

5.23.1 In January 2022, consultants, Shared Intelligence, were commissioned to undertake a Community Needs Assessment which included interviews with representatives of community organisations and selected West Berkshire Council Service Directors, and a workshop with Library Service staff.

5.23.2 Information and feedback gathered through this engagement process, combined with library data analysis, informed the findings and recommendations in the Community Needs Assessment.

5.24 Local Government Association Peer Review

5.24.1 In April 2022, a Peer Review was undertaken by the Local Government Association, funded by Arts Council England.

5.24.2 The Peer Review provided an external, objective overview of West Berkshire Council's current Library Service, and recommendations in relation to the following priority area:

> *Based on the changing needs of the community which have been identified in our new Community Needs Assessment, how can we deliver the Library Service more efficiently in a largely rural area, including innovative ways in which to ensure access?*

5.24.3 The findings of the Peer Review have been documented in a separate report.

Key Findings of Review 2022

Public, staff and volunteer surveys

5.25 Liaison with selected community groups was undertaken, prior to commissioning Shared Intelligence to undertake the Community Needs Assessment.

5.26 Findings included that library fines were considered as being a barrier to some residents using the library service as people worried about missing the return date and being unable to pay the fine. Refugees/asylum seekers cited this in particular and, with the increase in numbers, this was considered of importance by organisations such as Educafe.

5.27 Increased understanding of, and support for, those with learning disabilities regarding access to the library service and provision of activities for these residents.

5.28 Public Survey Key Findings:

5.28.1 Responses to the public survey showed that a good quality library service, which is accessible to everyone in the community, is highly valued. The Library Service should be providing facilities and services which are designed to reduce social isolation, and should support health and wellbeing.

5.28.2 Engagement with children, young people outside of school through provision of young people focussed activities was also seen as important. Increased engagement with schools was a common theme, as was increased arts, culture and heritage activities.

5.28.3 Helping people who do not have access to digital technology and applications, or cannot use them, was also flagged up as being a priority. There were several comments about wanting a better e-library offer which suggested the need to explain factors such as the limitations of digital rights, and the reasons for the two different services.

5.28.4 There was also a deep appreciation of the 'At Home' service and the mobile library service by regular users. Some respondents stressed the need to prioritise the core service, providing a good selection of physical books.

5.29 Volunteer Survey Key Findings:

5.29.1 Some volunteers felt that they would like to have the opportunity to undertake a broader range of duties and believed they could do more to help paid staff. One example was they could undertake more tasks on Spydus, the library management system. In contrast though, some volunteers reported that they did not feel comfortable supporting customers with ICT queries because of a lack of experience and confidence.

5.29.2 Volunteers clearly recognised that low staffing levels were an issue and that this has an impact on the number of events and activities that can be delivered in libraries.

5.30 Staff Survey and Staff Workshops Key Findings:

5.30.1 Staff expressed concern about low staffing levels in the service, and how it impacted on their ability to help library users. They stressed the importance of creating opportunities for young people to gain experience of working in the Library Service through apprenticeships.   More ICT training and career progression opportunities were also acknowledged as being needed, as there was felt to be a lack of flexibility within roles to allow staff to 'try' other work within the service.

5.30.2 A common theme was the need for increased support from ICT when equipment/networks were not working.

5.30.3 Many staff felt that library fines should be removed as they were a barrier which stopped people using the library service.

5.30.4 It was also felt that there was a need for a clear vision and improved communication within the Library Service.

5.30.5 In addition to the staff survey, workshops were held with a range of Library Service staff and the key findings are detailed below.

5.30.6 Staff felt that lower staffing levels had reduced capacity to develop and undertake work which could strengthen the service. This had also led to reduced delivery of cultural heritage outreach activities.

5.30.7 It was also felt that community engagement activities, particularly with rural communities, had been severely impacted with the reduction of staff delivering outreach work.

5.30.8 It was also reported that there was a lack of capacity to meet the increasing demand from library users for ICT support and assistance. This was exacerbated by the insufficient support for library ICT issues which required an understanding of the service and requirements.

5.30.9 Staff also reported that they were undertaking duties outside of their primary skill set and experience, with concerns regarding resulting impact.

Online engagement sessions with town and parish councils

5.31 The key findings from the on-line engagement sessions held with town and parish councils are outlined below:

5.32 Digital

5.32.1 Access to digital provision for all was considered to be a key element of the service requiring improvement, particularly support and training in using library PCs.

5.32.2 The need to be able access on-line services, particularly when access was not available at home, was also identified as important, particularly in rural locations.

5.32.3 The development of the Council's Digital Strategy was suggested to encourage use of e-magazines, e-books and digital formats, particularly for young people as a means of attracting them to use the Library Service.

5.33 Libraries as a community space

5.33.1 The importance of libraries as a place for people to meet others, in a safe space, reducing isolation and loneliness was acknowledged, but views were mixed as to whether this should be in a traditional 'quiet' library space or a more diverse community hub environment.

5.34 Mobile Library Service

5.34.1 Despite user numbers of the Mobile Library Service being low in comparison to town and parish council populations, it was considered to be an important service, and one which town and parish councils were currently prepared to support financially, recognising that it was a 'lifeline' for those people who did use it. It was suggested that the Mobile Library Service should offer a wider range of services, in response to the needs of residents, and that stop-off points should be reviewed and revised and the duration of stops extended to improve access and use.

5.34.2 It was acknowledged that, whilst other councils had abolished their Mobile Library Services, this was not supported by the parish and town councils of West Berkshire.

5.35 Voluntary Contributions

5.35.1 Feedback was split between those that understood the financial pressure upon the Council, and were willing to contribute, recognising the importance of the library service, and those that believed the Council had a duty to provide the statutory service, and that it should be funded by council tax contributions. Although in a minority, it was reported, that some thought the voluntary contribution represented a 'double taxation' and represented the Council "shirking their responsibilities".

5.35.2 It was raised that parish councils who make a voluntary contribution of £1 per head of population can feel a sense of unfairness, knowing that neighbouring parishes receive the same level of library service even if they don't make a contribution. It was recognised this would be a challenge to resolve.

5.35.3 There was a question over whether, in future, town and parish councils could justify the contribution if user numbers remained as they were. There was also a suggestion that, in making the voluntary contribution, parish and town councils had become 'stakeholders' and this gave them 'control over what happens', and this was seen as a benefit.

5.36 Increased engagement with schools

5.36.1 The value of increased working with schools was raised, including involving parents/carers with their children's use of the library to encourage their own use of it. A programme of regular school visits, from pre-school to secondary, was suggested, to encourage future use, as was a familiarisation programme for

secondary and sixth form students to assist them in using the library, and making the transition to further/higher education.

5.37 Post-Pandemic Services

5.37.1 Post pandemic requirements were discussed including that, with more people working from home, there may be greater demand for libraries to be used as work spaces, and hours of opening may need to be reviewed and revised to be more flexible.

5.38 Communicating what the Library Service has to offer

5.38.1 Increased use of social media and digital platforms, particularly to reach young people, was suggested as a way of raising awareness of the service, as was the use of parish newsletters and posters, although resourcing issues were acknowledged for the former. Promotion of activities and services through community groups was also suggested.

Community Needs Assessment 2022

5.39 The key findings of the LGA Library Service Community Needs Assessment (CNA) for West Berkshire, undertaken by Shared Intelligence, were structured around themes in the cross agency West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Vision for 2036 and are outlined below.

5.40 Realising potential

5.40.1 Although West Berkshire is a generally prosperous area, with high life expectancy, strong economic sectors and good employment, there are pockets of deprivation and a number of people with needs that are easily masked by the general picture. This is manifested through wide gaps in areas such as secondary school attainment; social mobility challenge, particularly for children; and gaps in the employment market, particularly for those with a learning disability or mental health illness. A further aspect of need in West Berkshire relates to refugee populations.

5.40.2 This points to a key role for libraries in helping to engage harder to reach children, young people and their families and in providing information about the full range of education and training opportunities, and making a wider range of foreign language material available.

5.41 Health and wellbeing

5.40.1. Overall population health in West Berkshire is good. However, the population is ageing at a faster rate than nationally, with forecast sharp growth in the over 75 population, and the gap between the healthy and overall life expectancies is significant. There are also high numbers of people with mental health problems and, reflecting the rural nature of the area, there are problems with limited access to public transport, public services and cultural facilities.

5.40.2. Health and wellbeing needs are, therefore, very important for libraries - libraries can help as sources of information, places for social connection and safe public spaces.

5.41. Employment and economy

5.41.1. Although West Berkshire's employment rate (aged 16 to 64) is higher than the equivalent figure for the south east region and England, and residents are highly skilled with the rate of education (NVQ4 level or above) higher than the levels for the south east region and England, there still exist clear employment and economic based needs, with eleven Local Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the three most deprived deciles nationally for education, training and skills. Underemployment is a challenge with people working fewer hours than they would like, or in roles not making best use of their skills. The pandemic has impacted on the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, which employ 16% of local people, many of them young people, women or people from ethnic minorities.

5.41.2. The pandemic has also accelerated changes in patterns of work. A third of West Berkshire workers were able to work from home during the Covid-19 period and there is known to be a growing demand nationally for co-working space. The Economic Development Strategy, as refreshed in 2021, recognises the need to help start-ups and small businesses grow, including by providing incubator space and 'one stop shop' advice for new and viable small firms.

5.41.3. This suggests a role for libraries as a location for access to information about training, for delivery of training in smaller towns, and to be an environment that supports older and disadvantaged people looking to participate in the workforce. There are also implications for library space as a facility for workers otherwise based at home, and for small and start-up businesses.

5.42. Sustainability and quality of life

5.42.1. The *Health and Wellbeing Vision* includes a strong sustainability and quality of life agenda. This relates to more partnership working, increased links with cultural organisations and, as evidenced in the public survey, a desire to see libraries as places which have a strong cultural element including events, exhibitions, courses and classes.

5.42.2. There is a role for libraries in holding information and hosting events and exhibitions to engage people in and promote sustainable choices.

5.43. Cross-cutting themes

5.43.1. The CNA concluded that the generally prosperous nature of West Berkshire masks some pockets of disadvantage and the wide gaps between the best and worst performing figures in areas such as secondary school attainment and healthy life expectancy. The Covid-19 pandemic has further shone a light on needs in areas such as social isolation, including of carers and people with learning disabilities, and the number of people with secondary mental health needs. Drawing on this, four cross-cutting themes were identified that the Library Service can do more to support:

▪ **Engagement**. There is an important role for libraries to support wider efforts to address the difficulty of engaging hard to reach communities, through a focus on intergenerational learning and wider prevention work. Outreach work requires resource to keep refreshing relationships with key partners, such as schools, so approaches to marketing and the creation of staff capacity for engagement and community activities will need to be considered.

▪ **Access to information and services.** With a large rural area and increasing digitisation of public services, there is a need to promote digital inclusion. For libraries this means building offers of assisted digital support, particularly to older people and vulnerable groups, who lack the confidence to use self-service channels, or do not have access to suitable devices or reliable internet connection. Serving this need will also require more tailored support for public facing information technology equipment and creates a staff training need.

▪ **Community resilience.** Particularly in the context of an ageing population, there is a growing need for communities to identify and harness their own strengths in connecting people to peer support, social interaction and community action. Libraries can support this by functioning as community hubs. This will need co-creation with communities and other public service organisations and requires consideration of factors such as whether a library building can be open outside of library opening hours for wider community uses.

▪ **Skills and employment**. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated changes in the pattern of work, creating a need to provide space and facilities to support home workers, micro businesses and job seekers. More widely, there are the challenges of younger people's social mobility and the participation in the labour market for older and disadvantaged groups. These issues can be supported with changes to the configuration of physical library space and equipment and by encouraging support networks, with partners to use libraries.

5.44.   Library locations

5.44.1. Needs that affect the nature of the library locations were also identified. In addition to the 10,000 new homes built between 2000 and 2018, concentrations of new housing will be built in the next few years around Thatcham, Newbury, in the east of the District and in parts of the Downs area. The Health and Wellbeing Vision 2036 recognises the importance of creating a sustainable housing mix, including an increase in affordable housing, to help meet the challenge of attracting and retaining young people. Additional provision of residential care bed spaces for the ageing population, as well as adaptations to help older people remain living at home, are also required.

5.44.2. This has important implications for libraries; while the overall population level of the District is set to be stable into the 2040s, existing patterns of population will change and it will be necessary to adapt as these changes take place in the medium term. Space needs to be flexible. Points identified for consideration are laid out below.

5.44.3. **East.** There are four libraries relatively close together with varied patterns of use. The potential for partnership should be explored, to create more community hub style facilities that can promote engagement with the community.

5.44.4. **Newbury and Thatcham.** Masterplanning work in the town centres was identified as an opportunity to tailor library provision better to local needs including extending the current facility in Newbury in a way that would support the employment and skills agenda, and creating a new facility that can better meet needs in Thatcham; the current facility is considered to be poorly located and constrained by its small size.

5.44.5. **North.** A large area of the north and centre of the District is not served by a local West Berkshire library and active library borrowers mainly travel to Newbury or Pangbourne. Although deprivation levels are low in this part of the District, access to housing and services is limited, due to its rural nature, so opportunities to linking some library provision with a wider community hub idea were identified.

5.44.6. More detail of the findings of the Community Needs Assessment can be found in Appendix A.

Local Government Association Peer Review

5.42 The key findings from the LGA Peer Review of the Library Service are detailed below.

5.43 The recently completed Community Needs Assessment (CNA) provides a comprehensive analysis of library usage and demographics, and identifies cross-cutting themes which the library service should be well placed to address to help achieve wider priorities for West Berkshire. It provides a helpful body of evidence on which to base the current review.

5.44 A new West Berkshire Council Strategy will be launched following the May 2023 local elections. This provides an opportunity to position the library service to support delivery of Council priorities. There is political support in West Berkshire for the library service, and an understanding of its contribution towards the achievement of wider outcomes in the community. However, there is a keenness for the service to deliver more from within its existing resource base, including meeting the challenge of providing access to the service in a predominantly rural area.

5.45 There may be scope to secure additional capital funding. The peer team heard that the Council had an appetite to invest in buildings as part of a 'one public estate' approach to asset management across West Berkshire. This gives scope for more co-location and joined up service delivery with Leisure and other services, leading to greater engagement with library service users along with efficiency gains.

5.46 The Council has an ageing mobile library vehicle and recognises that decisions will need to be made around a replacement or alternative approaches. This gives an opportunity to re-think service provision to ensure an accessible and cost-effective service in rural areas.

5.47 There are opportunities to enhance the Libraries Services' engagement with other Council departments and external agencies. This should build on existing successes, such as that of the EduCafe in Newbury library in providing access to advice and

support for a range of communities and increasing footfall through the library; the role of library staff in helping to maintain contact with vulnerable residents during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the early work the Service is doing to promote the Health and wellbeing agenda. Such activities help to cement the perception of the Libraries Service as a potential solution to other services and partners' challenges in accessing residents and communities.

5.48 The report presents some options for consideration to build on the opportunities outlined above in providing strategic direction for the Libraries Service, including providing an accessible service in rural areas, increasing the usage and reach of the services and potential efficiency gains.

5.49 The Peer Review Challenge full report can be found in Appendix B.

Priorities

5.50 Giving consideration to the data and feedback analysis from all engagement exercises undertaken as part of the review, the key priorities, detailed below, have been identified.

5.51 Developing a clear Vision and Strategy for the Libraries Service

5.51.1. A Vision and Strategy for the Libraries Service should be developed, aligned with the West Berkshire Vision 2036 and the new Council Strategy due in 2023, the Cultural Heritage Strategy and the Leisure Strategy. There is also a need to develop the use of the library offer to deliver other Council agendas.

5.51.2. The Service should link more effectively with the Libraries Connected Universal Library Offers – Culture & Creativity; Reading; Information & Digital and, in particular, Health & Wellbeing.

5.52 Reviewing Library Locations and Opening Hours

5.52.1. As part of the master planning work in the town centres, the opportunity to extend provision in Newbury to co-locate services should be explored, to contribute to wider objectives including the employment and skills agenda. In Thatcham, the opportunity to create a new facility that better meet local needs, should be considered.

5.52.2. It is important that the potential for more partnership working and co-location throughout the District is explored, e.g. developing a dual use library facility with Willink School.

5.52.3. A large area in the north and centre of the District is not served by a library. There is a need to investigate, through consultation with stakeholders, whether library provision here could be linked to a wider Community Hub.

5.52.4. Libraries should be included in a Council overview of assets.

5.52.5. Reviewing library opening hours, where necessary, to fit in with community needs will enable better use of our library facilities. For example, supporting post pandemic changes in people's working patterns and the rise in home working.

5.53 Delivering the Service Effectively to Rural Areas

5.53.1. There is a need to review and clearly identify the purpose and outcomes to be achieved by the mobile or equivalent library service, providing access to library services in the more remote rural areas.

5.53.2. The current mobile library needs to be replaced with a vehicle which is more efficient to run. Consideration needs to be given as to whether this could be a more tailored 'enhanced' service linking in with parish councils who are making financial contributions towards our service.

5.53.3. Other possible locations for pop up libraries such as village halls, community centres and leisure facilities should be explored as alternative ways of delivering the service to our communities.

5.54 Digital Improvements and Inclusion

5.54.1. Linking into the Council's Digital Strategy and the Libraries Connected Information and Digital Offer, we need to ensure that our libraries provide quality information and digital support to West Berkshire residents. With a large rural area and the increasing digitisation of public services, there is a need to promote digital inclusion.

5.54.2. The Library Service needs to make it easy for people to find the materials, information, and technology they need. Community members are not always aware of the wide variety of materials and information that the library has in various formats. There is a need to increase awareness of all that the library provides for the community, which includes technology access at the library and at home, through remote services. This will enable individuals and communities to develop learning skills to find answers and inform life choices, as well as providing technology access that is vital to many community members.

5.54.3. Building offers of digital support to older people and vulnerable groups is important. There is also a need to evaluate how the pandemic has changed the requirements of our residents. For example, there is an increased demand for workspace in libraries and access to video conferencing software.

5.54.4. Improving and increasing communication and awareness of the Library Service and its offer is also a key priority. The Library Service should be more aligned with the Culture and Libraries brand. Embedding library events and activities into the Heritage website will enable more consistency in providing access to, and promoting events and activities effectively across the wider service.

5.54.5. Increased support from central ICT is vital to support the services we are currently offering in libraries such as access to public PCs, printing, photocopying, and scanning. The turnaround time for fixing faults is very often slow, which results in customer frustration

5.54.6. Continued capital investment is needed in technology to improve the services we offer e.g. Wi-Fi printing.

5.55 Developing Work with Schools

5.55.1. The Library Service has an important role in developing a reading culture, and a lifelong love of reading. Good links have been built with Early Years and primary schools through the very successful Bookstart programme and the Summer Reading Challenge. There is now a need to improve links with secondary schools and develop a library user education programme.

5.56 Increasing Engagement and Inclusion

5.56.1. There is an important role for libraries to focus on engaging with hard to reach groups through community contacts.

5.56.2. There are already some effective library 'Friends' groups in existence, but they are not all constituted. Working with existing groups to become constituted and developing groups where they do not currently exist will be advantageous. This will enable the Council to work in a greater capacity with these groups, and increase advocacy with parish councils as well as increasing a sense of community ownership of the library. This is also a way of accessing funding opportunities which are not open to local authorities.

5.56.3. There is a need to increase outreach provision with a focus on those areas where engagement with the Library Service is low and/or requires ongoing support to retain use e.g. Lambourn. This is dependent on increasing staff capacity.

5.56.4. There is also a need to increase the use of arts, culture and creative activity as a means of engaging new and existing library users.

5.56.5. Consideration to remove library fines should also be explored. Library fines have been a long standing arrangement in public libraries, but they potentially impact disproportionately on those who are most vulnerable (financially or as a result of cognitive disability or mental ill health). They are a known barrier to people joining and retaining library membership. The fear of incurring fines and building debt with the Council is a reason often cited for not using the otherwise free Library Service.

5.56.6. An increasing number of other authorities have already removed this barrier for their residents, helping to promote inclusion. By removing library fines, WBC would be supporting its most vulnerable residents who may be at risk of poverty, giving them access to a wide range of books, information and digital access to enable job searches, benefit applications, study support, school readiness, and reading for pleasure.

5.57 Developing Our Workforce

5.57.1. Providing a confident, competent, and resilient workforce and linking in to the WBC Workforce Strategy is a key priority. This can be done by ensuring that library staff are trained and upskilled, where necessary.

5.57.2. Recruitment and co-ordination of digital champions liaising with staff across the service to build capacity in the team and ensure that they are making the best use of new ICT equipment.

5.57.3. It is important to reframe existing staff roles, as and when the opportunity arises, to align with the Library Service's strategic vision.

5.58 Addressing the Gap in the Revenue Budget

5.58.1. The current funding model, which relies on voluntary contributions from parish and town councils in order to deliver a balanced budget, needs to be urgently reviewed. At the moment, the same level of service is delivered to the whole district, without consideration of whether or not a town/parish council has made a voluntary contribution towards the running costs of the library service. This level of library service provision is not sustainable without voluntary contributions being received, particularly in the more densely populated areas of the district where the equivalent of £1 per head of population is substantial. Closer and more effective partnership working with town and parish councils to confirm what they want from the library service, and how they can help us deliver it, is an essential part of future development.

5.58.2. Community Transfer of library buildings should be actively pursued where this would be appropriate.

5.58.3. In order to make most effective use of financial resources, further opportunities to capitalise spend on library stock should be explored. This has the potential to make savings on revenue spending in 2023/24.

5.58.4. The potential of accessing additional funding through fully constituted 'Friends Groups' is also a factor here.

Recommendations

5.59. Based on the findings of the Libraries Review, along with a recognition of the current economic climate, we believe that there is a need to make changes to our Library Service, and recommend that the following steps are implemented over the next three years.

Libraries Review Recommendations

Our work on the libraries review has highlighted the need to develop a vision for libraries which aligns with national and local strategic priorities, followed by a longer-term action plan to deliver the following outcomes:

1. **Innovative use of space across the district**. Seek co-location with community partners so that several services can be accessed in one visit, and explore the need for additional provision in the North of the district.

2. **Access to services**. Put in place locally accessible library services which meet the needs of local communities and reduce rural isolation.

3. **Inclusion.** Work more closely with communities/hard to reach groups to continually improve awareness of library services, and remove known barriers such as library fines to encourage residents to join and retain library membership.

4. **Improve links with secondary schools**. Encourage and support literacy and reading for pleasure, and promote independent learning.

5. **Digital Inclusion.** Enhance access to digital services in line with community needs, by providing access to equipment, the internet and enabling communities to improve digital skills and reduce digital poverty.

6. **Addressing the revenue budget gap**. Review the current funding model which relies on voluntary contributions from town and parish councils, and explore other funding opportunities available through library 'Friends Groups'.

5.59.1. The next stage will be to consult with a range of stakeholders to seek their views on these recommendations and how we can implement them. This feedback will enable us to drive forward improvements to the library service and produce a library vision and strategy. We are currently building a work programme which will confirm the timescales for this.

Financial Summary

5.60. The tables below shows the current revenue and capital budget positions for the Library service.

Revenue Budget 2022/23

Cost Centre Description	Original Budget	*Gross Operating Income Target	Planned Net Expenditure
Libraries Central Costs	266,310	0	266,310
Newbury Central Library	448,180	-77,880	370,300
Library Volunteers	19,020	0	19,020
Library Professional Services Team	107,150	0	107,150
Burghfield Common Library	36,180	-8,550	27,630
Hungerford Library	44,690	-5,890	38,800
Lambourn Library	39,070	-5,930	33,140
Mortimer Library	36,100	-8,170	27,930
Pangbourne Library	34,620	-8,460	26,160
Thatcham Library	55,330	-34,680	20,650
Theale Library	68,760	-35,510	33,250
Mobile Library and At Home Service	78,300	-2,310	75,990
**Library Stock Unit	83,880	0	83,880
Library IT Systems	100,900	0	100,900
Grand Total	**1,418,490**	**-187,380**	**1,231,110**

*Includes income from library charges, venue hire,
  rent and voluntary contributions from town and parish councils.
**Includes stock unit staff salaries, online resources, e-library costs including e-newspapers and e-magazines.

Capital Budget 2022/23

Cost Centre Description	Original Budget
Libraries Book Stock (physical items)	152,690
***Planned maintenance - library buildings	141,900
Grand Total	**277,420**

*** Includes £41k CIL funding for Thatcham Library building improvements project

5.61. The table below shows the proposed service developments for the next three years.

Opportunities for Future Investment in the Library Service

	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Proposed service developments with cost implications	Capitalise expenditure on e-books and e-audiobooks in order to release revenue funding to achieve savings.	Increase opening hours at Lambourn Library by 4 per week (total opening hours would be 20). Consider the impact of removing library fines which are a known barrier to people joining and retaining library membership.	Create additional Assistant Librarian post to increase outreach provision.
Comments	E-books and e-audiobooks are now classified in CIPFA guidelines as 'intangible assets', which makes this a legitimate use of capital funding.	Community need in Lambourn identified for additional opening hours.	Would provide a focus on those areas where engagement is low or requires ongoing support to retain library usage levels.
Potential issues/risks	None identified.	Loss of income from library fines and charges.	None identified.

6 Other options considered

6.1 This report lays out proposals for how the Library Service could be developed. There is the option to maintain the service 'as is'.

7 Conclusion

7.1 In order to act on the findings from the Libraries Review, Members are requested to consider the recommendations laid out in this report.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – Community Needs Assessment

8.2 Appendix B – LGA Peer Review

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: ☒   No: ☐

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval	☐
Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council	☐
Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position	☐
Considered or reviewed by Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee or associated Task Groups within preceding six months	☐
Item is Urgent Key Decision	☐
Report is to note only	☐

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