Libraries peer challenge
West Berkshire Council

April 2022

Feedback Report

1.   Executive Summary

The Council's previous review of library services in West Berkshire (conducted in 2016/17) recommended that there should be a review of the library service after three years. The purpose of this review is to ensure the service meets the needs of residents, including any Covid-19 impacts, and delivers on wider aims cited in council strategies and plans. Phase 1 of the current review has now been completed, with the production of the Community Needs Assessment (CNA) by the consultants Shared Intelligence in December 2021. This peer challenge represents Phase 2 of the library service review. The findings of the peer challenge, along with the CNA, will inform the development of options for future service delivery for decision by elected members in September 2022.

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.

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 support from leading councillors in West Berkshire for the library service and an understanding of its contribution towards the achievement of wider outcomes in the community. However, they are looking 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.

There may be scope to secure additional capital funding. The peer team heard that the Council has 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.

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.

There are opportunities to enhance the library 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.

We present some options for consideration to build on the opportunities outlined above in providing strategic direction for the library service, including providing an accessible service in rural areas, increasing the usage and reach of the service and potential efficiency gains.

2. Recommendations - suggested options for the way forward

The following are the main recommendations of the peer challenge, intended to help West Berkshire Council to develop future service options through the Library Service Review. There are further suggestions for improvement in the body of the report.

Strategic direction

a) Establish and share a clear vision and strategy for the library service, which supports the delivery of the refreshed Council Strategy from May 2023 and provides the basis for the development of a combined Culture & Leisure strategy for West Berkshire

b) Consider the location and future use of library buildings as part of a wider review of the Council's property assets, taking advantage of co-location with other council and partner services and informed by the evidence gathered in the Community Needs Assessment 2021

Providing accessible library services in rural areas

c) Consider further partnership working with Town and Parish councils, including more shared use of village halls and the use of 'pop-up' library facilities

d) Clearly identify the purpose and outcomes to be achieved by the mobile or equivalent library service to provide access to library services in the more remote rural areas of West Berkshire

e) As part of any review of the mobile library, consider the potential for alternative approaches to achieve these outcomes including a tailored home delivery service which is integrated with the existing At Home service and digital offers.

Increasing usage, including engaging and retaining current non-users of the library service

f) Ensure that libraries provide appropriate facilities and spaces for personal learning and flexible working

g) Consider additional service offers to increase the footfall through libraries, building on recent successes such as the Educafe and develop a clear strategy to promote the library service to these new visitors

Potential efficiency gains to re-invest in service delivery

h) Consider opportunities to make efficiency savings in the stock ordering, delivery and handling processes including the potential for stock delivery direct to branch libraries

i) Consider opportunities for cost savings and reduced environmental impact as part of the review of the mobile library service

j) Consider formally constituting Friends of Library groups so that they are in a position to bid for additional funding to support the delivery of library services

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

This peer challenge is part of a programme of on-line peer challenges of council's cultural and library services supported by Arts Council England (ACE) and provided by the Local Government Association (LGA). These challenges follow the recognised principles adopted across the LGA's range of peer challenges, both corporate and service specific. They are intended to help councils improve their cultural and library services and generate wider learning for the sector.

3.1 The peer team

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

- **Julie Bell**, Interim Director – Education, Skills & Culture, Lancashire County Council (substantive role Head of Libraries, Museums & Culture)
- **Councillor Henry Higgins**, member of London Borough of Hillingdon Council (formerly Cabinet Member for Culture, Sport & Leisure)
- **David Armin**, LGA challenge manager

3.2 Scope and focus

The purpose of the peer challenge was to enable West Berkshire Council to develop options as part of its Library Services review. The Council has commissioned a Community Needs Assessment, now completed, and intends to use this alongside the findings of the peer challenge to develop options for the future of the library service for decision by elected members in September 2022, to be followed by an action planning and implementation phase. These options may range from refining the current service delivery model to ensuring best use of resources, and to a more ambitious approach to re-shaping the service to increase engagement and drive improved outcomes. All options will be evaluated in the context of the constraints of existing budgets and competing Council priorities for investment.

In particular, the Council asked the peer team to focus on the following issue:

- **How can we deliver the library service more efficiently in a largely rural area, including innovative ways in which to ensure access?**

- This should include consideration of:
  – awareness raising amongst current users of what the existing service offers
  – how to engage with non-users to encourage them to use and remain using the library service.

3.3 The peer challenge process

The fundamental aim of each peer challenge is to help councils and their partners reflect on and improve their services and the outcomes they achieve for their communities. It is important to remember that a peer challenge is not an inspection, rather it provides a critical friend to challenge councils in assessing their strengths and identifying their own areas for improvement, along with opportunities to learn from practice elsewhere. The main elements this peer challenge were:

- A review of data and key documentation, including the Council's Community Needs Assessment

- Virtual meetings and interviews on 21st to 22nd April 2022. The peer team met with leading members and senior officers from the Council, managers from within the Library Service and from other services who work with the Library Service n West Berkshire.

- Discussion of emerging findings and potential service development options with managers from the Library Service and presentation of the team's key messages to leading members, senior officers and managers

By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing. The peer team would like to thank colleagues in West Berkshire for their assistance in planning and delivering the peer challenge, and for their engagement and openness during the process.

4.   Feedback

Context

West Berkshire is a unitary authority with a population of 158,500 (2019). It is 272 square miles in area, which is over half of the geographical area of the historic county of Berkshire. Nearly three quarters of West Berkshire is classified as part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). West Berkshire is predominantly rural area, with the market town of Newbury being the urban centre of the district. Getting public transport to library branches can be difficult, and this presents challenges regarding levels of accessibility to those who are not car owners or who do not otherwise have access to private transport.

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.   These changes included:

- 44% reduction in library staff.
- The introduction of a new operational model where volunteers support staff to deliver the library service.
- Closure of one library service point which is now run independently by the community.
- Reduction of mobile libraries from two to one.
- A commitment to more partnership working with local communities and town and parish councils

The Council considers that the transformation of the library service following the 2016/17 Library Review has been largely successful. 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.

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. There was a £150k funding gap, and it was agreed that this budget shortfall could be met by requesting that town and parish councils consider making a voluntary contribution of £1 per resident based on the population of each parish for the next 3 years. Contributions averaged 90k per year for the first 3 years which created an annual budget pressure/deficit of £60k. Since then voluntary contributions from some town and parish councils have decreased.

West Berkshire will seek to learn from the experience of other library authorities in sharing funding pressures on the library service with town and parish councils through other aspects of the ACE / LGA culture and libraries support programme, rather than through the peer challenge. However, this does demonstrate the continuing pressure on funding for the libraries service in West Berkshire which the peer challenge should take into account.

The current library service

The library service is run out of eight static libraries (the principal library being in Newbury) together with one mobile library and an At Home scheme. There is an e-library offering access to e-books, e-audio, e-magazines and e-newspapers.

The net budget for libraries for 2021/22 was £1,206,580. The library service is run by 46 staff (25.06 full-time equivalent posts) and 187 volunteers. The libraries budget is comprised of 65% for staff costs and 35% for services and premises costs. Some costs are centralised (for example book stock and IT systems).

In 2019/20 the library service had 15,648 active borrowers (who have been loaned at least one item in the preceding 12 month period). This equates to 9.88% of the West Berkshire population. (The Council considers the 2019/20 pre-pandemic active borrower numbers to give the most representative picture of library usage).

The 2021/22 Library Service Review

The 2016/17 Library Service Review recommended that there should be a 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, delivers on wider aims cited outlined in council strategies and plans, including the 2036 Vision for West Berkshire produced by the Health & Wellbeing Board, the Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy for Berkshire West and the new Cultural Heritage Strategy.

Phase 1 of the current Library service review has now been completed, with the production of the Community Needs Assessment (CNA) by the consultants Shared Intelligence in December 2021. As part of their analysis, Shared Intelligence conducted interviews with relevant West Berkshire Council Heads of Service, representatives of community groups and services. In addition, the Council conducted surveys with the public (users and non-library users), library staff, and library volunteers.

This peer challenge represents Phase 2 of the library service review. The findings of the peer challenge, along with the CNA, will inform the development of options for future service delivery for decision by elected members in September 2022 (Phase 3). Following this, a Library Service Strategy and Delivery Plan will be developed to implement the agreed options (Phase 4).

The findings of the peer team are presented in the following sections and provide some reflections which should assist West Berkshire in developing options for future service delivery.

4.1 Opportunities to build on

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. These themes are:

- Engagement (especially to address the large secondary education gap)
- Access to information and services
- Community resilience
- Skills and employment.

The peer team consider the CNA to be a significant body of evidence which should be used to inform the development of options for the future of the library service, with the cross-cutting themes placing it in an appropriate strategic context.

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. The new Chief Executive, who joined the council within the last year, has a clear ambition for a joined-up Culture & Leisure strategy which needs to incorporate a clear direction for the libraries service. The 2036 Vision for West Berkshire also provides a helpful framework of outcomes to which the libraries service can contribute.

There is support from leading councillors in West Berkshire for the library service and an understanding of its contribution towards the achievement of wider outcomes in the community. There is also an appreciation that the library service needs to deliver value for money and that there will be greater priorities for increased investment of finite council resources. Councillors are looking 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.

However, there may be scope to secure additional capital funding. The peer team heard that the Council has an appetite to invest in buildings as part of more 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 more potential library service users along with efficiency gains.

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 library service in rural areas.

There are opportunities to enhance the library services' engagement with other Council departments and external agencies. This should build on existing successes, such as that of the EduCafe in Newbury library (which the peer team understand is to be expanded into several other libraries) in providing access to advice and support for a

range of communities including the local black and minority ethnic population; the role of library staff in helping to maintain contact with vulnerable residents during the lockdowns due to 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 partner's challenges in accessing communities.

4.2   Challenges to address

Leaders and managers need to build and sustain the confidence of library staff through the current service review and beyond. They have experience of previous reviews that have led to a reduction in resources, in particular staffing, due to wider budget challenges. This confidence will be aided by developing and communicating a clear vision and ambition for the future of the service and its role in supporting wider Council priorities.

The library service has made good and imaginative use of section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds to invest in new ICT equipment in libraries and wider provision of study spaces with USB ports so that visitors can make use of their own devices to access the internet etc. This has also included self-service machines to take out library books and access other resources. However, the peer team heard that staff feel some frustration about aspects of the ICT infrastructure and in particular the availability of back-office support so that library staff and users can make the best use of the new ICT equipment. The peer team recognise that the service has taken steps to provide more on-going support in the use of these ICT systems, which should be sustained and further developed if possible.

There needs to be something of a shift in mindset so that the library service is more willing to promote what it is doing to a wider audience, not just internal stakeholders within the service so that libraries potential as a service delivery partner is better understood by both other council services and external partners. The opportunities to highlight existing successes and potential to do more with other Council services and wider partners have been identified above.

The service can build on the progress made to deliver the Universal Library Offer. As promoted by Libraries Connected nationally this identifies the four key offers as Culture & Creativity; Reading; Information & Digital and Health & Wellbeing. Following the Covid-19 pandemic Health & Wellbeing has acquired particular importance, along with supporting children to catch up on missed education and development opportunities through support with reading and school readiness work (given the adverse impact on young children in particular). The service has focused on the important issue of school readiness, but the peer team believe there is scope to do more around wellbeing and the ICT agenda. The library service should build on its existing work with partners to achieve these aims, and could link more with colleagues in other services and volunteers to supplement its limited resources.

A key challenge will be to address the revenue gap whilst maintaining an accessible library service. The service should seek to generate savings through efficiencies to invest in front line, accessible services. It should also be mindful of the potential

revenue impacts of changes to service arrangements and policies which might exacerbate this gap. Opportunities should be taken to reframe the responsibilities of existing staff in support of efficiency gains where this is possible. The peer team understand that the service has taken advantage of vacancies when they arise to review the most effective use of a post.

4.3   The way forward – strategic direction

To take advantages of the opportunities presented to the service and to address the challenges being faced by West Berkshire's libraries, a clear vision and strategy is needed for the service. This needs to be well communicated so that it is understood and shared across all staff to ensure continuing commitment. The service strategy needs to align well with the Council Strategy due in 2023, the Cultural Heritage strategy and Leisure strategy and support the creation of a combined culture and leisure strategy in due course. This will provide the 'golden thread' from Council priorities to service delivery. The commitment of the Leader and Cabinet members to the library service as a vehicle to help drive forward wider council priorities will be facilitated by such strategic coherence.

It is estimated that about 80-90% of the population read and make use of books. It is well understood that those who read contribute to society and to our culture. This is what makes the library service important and its role in promoting print and digital literacy remains key. It falls to senior councillors to continue to give strong leadership so that the whole essence and ethos of the value of public libraries is recognised and maintained.

With this strategic framework established (as envisaged in Phase 4 of the Library Review), existing staff roles should be reframed as opportunities arise to align with the strategic vision for the library service. That vision should also enable more proactive collaboration with partners, both within the Council and externally. Enhanced partnership working could include greater use of volunteers to engage with specific groups or communities and establishing more Friends of Libraries groups with clear constitutions and terms of reference.

The peer team understand that there may well be a desire across the Council for a more corporate approach to property management. This presents the opportunity for the library service to be part of a wider review of assets with the potential to co-locate in more accessible locations for library users, and to engage with a wider market of potential users who are accessing other services through those locations. Librarians are information management professionals so they should be able to offer sign posting and access to other services and information as part of such co-location.

4.4   Future service delivery options – accessible library services in a rural area

The Community Needs Assessment (CNA) provides a strong analysis of existing users and the demographics of the communities served by Newbury and the seven branch libraries across West Berkshire. This has also highlighted the lack of a branch library to serve large parts of the north of the area (across the North Wessex Downs). The service has sought to help ameliorate this lack of provision by providing joint library cards with neighbouring authorities.

The CNA provides the evidence needed to review the provision of fixed libraries across West Berkshire. However, this needs to be aligned with opportunities to deliver alternative provision and decisions on other aspects of service delivery. The main factors here are:

- Potential for co-location with other council services (or other agencies);
- Partnership working with town and parish councils; and
- Decisions on the future of the mobile library service.

Further partnership working with town and parish councils should be explored. This could include more shared use of village halls, including the potential for 'pop-up' libraries provided at certain times of the week. More generally, flexible shelving can be used to release space in a library for creative, performance and other uses.

As noted previously, the Council needs to review its mobile library provision as the vehicle is ageing and will be in need of replacement. This review needs to begin by considering the outcome that the mobile library service is intended to achieve – this may well be access to library books and other library and information services in the more remote, rural areas of West Berkshire. A secondary objective could be social engagement for users of the service.

There may be different ways of meeting this need, such as envisaging a tailored home delivery service linked to on-line selection of books through amalgamation with the existing At Home service. This could be more cost effective and have a smaller environmental footprint than a large mobile library vehicle on which users select a book or service. This may be a more familiar concept to residents now given the experience of service delivery through the pandemic. Figures on use of the existing mobile library provided by West Berkshire show that of the 670 active borrowers using the service in 2019-20 (i.e. pre-pandemic), 319 only used the mobile. By inference, the remaining 351 were accessing the library service by other means too which could in turn be accommodated within a tailored home delivery approach. The Council would need to explain the purpose of any re-configuration of the mobile service to local communities and town and parish councils, and how the desired service outcomes are achieved by a different approach.

4.5 Future service delivery options – increasing usage, engaging and retaining current non-users

It is widely recognised that when the library service is delivered well, people love and use their libraries a great deal and can become ambassadors for the service to others. The key elements of a well delivered service are outlined below. Some or most of these elements may well be in place across West Berkshire's libraries – the peer team were not in a position to form a view on this – but the Council should ensure that the following are in place across all points of access to library services.

Buildings need to be attractive, safe, well stocked and welcoming for all residents and display attractive collections of stock. The books need to be clean, abundant, well selected and clearly laid out. They should provide facilities and flexible spaces for personal learning and flexible working which are clean, private, dignified and well equipped. The experience through the Covid-19 pandemic and the more widespread adoption of hybrid working

arrangements suggests a growing demand for flexible working spaces, which could help underpin the local economy and economic activity, including among more disadvantaged groups.

Libraries are an ideal resource to encourage children of all ages to find what they might enjoy reading. Popularity with children is a powerful way to market the library service, to their parents, other family members and beyond.

Libraries need to make sure their collections address the needs of all the cultures in their local community - at all ages and for all purposes. The success of the EduCafe in Newbury demonstrates how to meet these needs and increase footfall through the library by a different approach, which is now to be extended to other areas. The service then needs to ensure that these new potential users passing through the library become regular users through promotion of the wider service offer. Although West Berkshire has found the installation of hot drinks machines in some libraries to be unsuccessful, in the experience of the peer team the provision of café facilities offering coffee and cake etc. can increase visits to libraries and provide valuable social and community engagement. Friends of Libraries groups can be helpful partners in providing such café facilities.

The library service should continue to monitor and evaluate digital resources as they are required to maintain a modern library service, to provide appropriate accessibility and take account of any longer term trends emerging following the Covid-19 pandemic. The library website is an important resource as people have become accustomed to finding their reading material on the web. It should offer the means to find things quickly and provide information on the full range of library services, whilst maintaining a clear link to West Berkshire Council as the funder and responsible authority for the library service. West Berkshire's Libraries app is an important development to assist users in finding and reserving books and e-books, as well as monitoring their library accounts.

4.6   Potential efficiency gains to invest in service delivery

There is scope for efficiency gains that can support reinvestment in the library service. The following are suggested examples that flow from the previous analysis of service delivery options.

The Council could consider different arrangements for stock deliveries, with new stock potentially going directly to branches rather than initially to a central point for re-distribution. This may release staff time that could be directed towards other priorities. There will be further opportunities to continue to evaluate staff roles and reframe these so that they can be utilised for a specific or emerging needs as the service develops.

In terms of the mobile library, we have suggested that the Council consider a smaller, more cost-effective vehicle as part of a tailored delivery service. This vehicle (potentially a Transit van or similar) would have scope to be used for multiple purposes, more flexible in routing along narrow country lanes, be less expensive to run and have a lower carbon footprint. Wakefield Libraries provides an example in practice of how smaller vehicles have been used to replace a mobile library. With developing technology, adopting a smaller vehicle now offers the potential that such a vehicle could be electric, with the associated environmental benefits.

Friends of Library groups can be used to raise funds for additional investment in local libraries, alongside being a source of volunteer support. With an appropriate constitution to confirm their legal status and to operate a bank account, Friends Groups can access sources of funding which may not be open to councils. Lancashire County Council have experience of such arrangements and will be able to share an example constitution for a Friends Group.

4.7 Signposting to additional LGA support

The LGA has a range of free-to-access support, across the themes highlighted in the report. It is recommended that relevant strategic officers register for the programmes highlighted below:

Economic growth

- In July the LGA is running an economic growth round table. The topic is: supporting small businesses with digital skills – to join the waiting list email productivity@local.gov.uk
- A bank of economic growth case studies is available to access on the LGA economic growth web pages

Library and cultural improvement

Working with Arts Council England, the LGA is running an online senior officer leadership pilot, running between 6 June and 18 July 2022.

The pilot will support lead/senior officers for culture and libraries to:
- Develop a greater understanding of the role of cultural and library services in the future economic growth of the local area
- Develop skills to lead entrepreneurial thinking within their services and the confidence to apply those skills
- Build and strengthen their peer networks, share information, knowledge and expertise. The pilot will be attended by both library and culture senior staff supporting a unique opportunity for peer to peer learning across these specialisms.
- Develop a vision about how their services can contribute to tackling social challenges in the post-COVID context, for example, mental health challenges and social isolation
- Develop an understanding of change theory and how to apply it
- Refresh the tools and knowledge officers have to be cultural and library leaders through peer to peer learning.
- Learn from a wide range of inspiring case studies presented by LA peers and external speakers.
- Be more aware of the strategic work of ACE and the opportunities to work more closely
- Explore the potential for arts, culture and libraries to work with officer and political stakeholders to deliver across council agendas

- Access a learning pathway through the LGA (for officers who have taken part in a Peer Challenge or Recovery and Renewal Panel).
- Identify how to share their learning within the organisation and with partners

To find out more email cts@local.gov.uk

Digital

As digital services and systems have been mentioned within the recommendations, we are including signposting to further digital support offered by the LGA:

- Join the transformation and Digital Inclusion Networks as an opportunity for peer to peer learning and networking with other like-minded councils
- Find out more about a cyber resilience review:
- The LGA Cyber Security Programme is providing grant funding for a cohort of Chief Executives, Deputy Chief Executives and those who have been through the SOLACE Springboard and Total Leadership programmes, to improve their understanding of cyber security. The funding should be used to enrol on a university-led course for leaders. For example, Oxford University's Cyber security for business leaders programme, for which they have offered a discounted rate. We're currently taking expressions of interest from those wanting to enhance their understanding of cyber risk to enable better strategic decision making for a cyber-resilient future. Places are limited and will be funded on a first come first serve basis. For further information and for expressions of interest please email LGAcybersecurity@local.gov.uk

5. Next steps

We appreciate you will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions with your senior managerial and political leadership and partners in order to determine how the Council wishes to take things forward through its Library Services Review.

As part of the peer challenge, there is an offer of further activity and signposting to support you in taking forward the findings of the peer challenge. The regional Principal Adviser, Mona Sehgal, is the main contacts between your authority and the LGA. Her contact details are: mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk or tel. 07795 291006. Helen Hull, Adviser, is the specific point of contact in respect of the culture and libraries peer challenge programme. Her contact details are helen.hull@local.gov.uk or tel. 07825 531558.

In the meantime, we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with you and colleagues through the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide additional information and signposting about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform your ongoing consideration.