Review of the library service performance and funding model

Committee considering report:	Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee
Date of Committee:	16 September 2025
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Nigel Foot
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	8 September 2025
Report Author:	Felicity Harrison

1   Purpose of the Report

1.1   The purpose of this report is to review the performance of the library service since the introduction of its new funding model in April 2025.

1.2   The new offer to develop additional library services which are chargeable, is set within the context of the current financial challenges faced by the Council.

2   Recommendation(s)

To review the performance of the library service since the introduction of the new funding model in April 2025.

3   Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	3.1 The net expenditure budget for libraries in 2024/25 was set at £1,265,540, and this increased to £1,414,190 for 2025/26. 3.2 In both 2024/25 and 2025/26 the library service has received a contribution of £60k annually from Public Health in recognition of the work by the library service to increase the public health offer: (a) To implement, support or develop services and projects to tackle social isolation, improve school readiness and increase levels of self-reported wellbeing in the community.

				(b) Activities undertaken by libraries to support the outcomes of Public Health can be split into the 3 main life stages; Starting Well, Living Well and Ageing Well.
Human Resource:				Not applicable.
Legal:				Not Applicable
Risk Management:				Not Applicable
Property:				Not Applicable
Policy:				Not Applicable
	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?				Not applicable.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?				Not applicable.
Environmental Impact:		X		Not applicable.

Health Impact:	X			Positive links to health and wellbeing.
ICT Impact:		X		Not applicable.
Digital Services Impact:		X		Not applicable.
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			5.B. Help our residents lead fulfilled and active lives. 5.5. Increased number of visits to Council-owned culture, arts and heritage facilities
Core Business:		X		
Data Impact:		X		Not applicable.
Consultation and Engagement:				Not applicable.

4   Executive Summary

4.1   This report sets out how the West Berkshire Libraries Vision is being delivered in the context of a new funding model which took effect from April 2025. As the new funding model has only been in place for a few months, the review period is limited to Q1 of 2025/26. More information about the Libraries Vision can be referenced in Appendix 1.

4.2   The main West Berkshire Libraries offer is delivered through eight libraries, along with the library At Home service. The libraries are situated in:

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

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

4.4 All the libraries in West Berkshire are an integral part of the Council's new "Let's Talk" Community Hub Outreach Programme, providing information, advice and support for residents. This is being organised in conjunction with the Building Communities Together team.

4.5 All West Berkshire libraries are also part of the national Safe Places Scheme.

4.6 Usage of the West Berkshire library service has continued to rise over the past few years. In 24/25 library loans increased on the previous year by 3.46%, and visitor numbers increased by 3.31%.

4.7 The net expenditure budget for libraries in 2024/25 was set at £1,265,540, and this increased to £1,414,190 for 2025/26.

4.8 In both 2024/25 and 2025/26 the library service has received a contribution of £60k annually from Public Health in recognition of the work by the library service to increase the public health offer:

   (a) To implement, support or develop services and projects to tackle social isolation, improve school readiness and increase levels of self-reported wellbeing in the community.

   (b) Activities undertaken by libraries to support the outcomes of Public Health can be split into the 3 main life stages; Starting Well, Living Well and Ageing Well.

4.9 The previous funding model for libraries was based on asking Town and Parish Councils (T&PCs) to make a voluntary contribution of £1 per head of population each year to bridge the revenue funding gap in the library service budget. The total amount received in voluntary contributions had diminished over the years leaving the library service with a continuing deficit. In the Libraries review of 2021/22, it was noted that this funding model needed to be urgently reviewed as it was not a fair system and not financially sustainable. In the 2025/26 budget, the T&PC contributions to the library services and the Council supported an investment bid of £92,900.

4.10 Up until the end of March 2025, the service also included a mobile library which travelled around the district, but because of declining usage this was discontinued at the end of the last financial year.

4.11 The new funding model and the new chargeable offers to T&PCs have put in place a much fairer system where those contributing, receive a tangible benefit for their parish. This is particularly relevant in rural areas throughout the district.

4.12 New chargeable services in place since April 2025:

   (a) Since April 2025, two libraries are now offering additional opening hours to their communities, and this is being funded by parish councils. There has been a marked upturn in visitor numbers and new library members as a result.

   (b) There are three pop-up libraries in place across the district and all of them are thriving and helping to reduce isolation in rural areas.

   c) One community bookshelf is in place at a pre-school.

4.13 The library service is in discussion with several other parishes, and the intention is to increase the number of pop-up libraries in the coming months.

4.14 The new services have been warmly welcomed by residents, and the pop-up forums will be used to provide other services to residents e.g. distributing food waste bags to residents in rural areas on behalf of the Waste Team.

5   Supporting Information

Introduction

5.1 West Berkshire Council ("the Council") has a statutory obligation to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" library service under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

5.2 This report sets out how the West Berkshire libraries vision is being delivered in the context of a new funding model, particularly in rural areas across the district. The cessation of the mobile library service at the end of March 2025 because of declining usage, is inherently connected to the new libraries offer.

5.3 Library Trend Data

Library Service KPIs/ Measures of Volume	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Visitor numbers - physical visits	201,657	277,754	311,168	321,507
Library loans including e-library	553,903	665,546	726,712	750,721
New library members	4,891	5,648	6,220	5,627
Volunteer hours	10,001	12,278	12,458	13,259

Background

5.4 Since 2017/18 the Council had asked T&PCs each year to consider making a voluntary contribution of £1 per resident, based on the population of each parish, to support the delivery of library services throughout the district and bridge a gap in the revenue budget.

5.5 This funding model proved not to be sustainable because of the voluntary nature of the contributions. The fluctuations in the amount of money received from T&PCs from year to year made it difficult to manage services and created a constant pressure on the revenue budget.

5.6 Many parish councils continued making voluntary contributions because of the mobile library service, even though the usage of the service was very low.

5.7 Voluntary contributions from T&PCs decreased significantly after the first three years. The libraries review report from 2021/22 noted that alternative options should be explored and the funding model urgently reviewed.

West Berkshire Libraries	Financial Year			
Revenue	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Library Service Net Expenditure Budget	£1,228,580	£1,231,110	£1,295,110	£1,265,540
Income target for voluntary contributions from T&PCs	£92,900	£92,900	£92,900	£92,900
Contributions received	-£75,227	-£38,030	-£14,390	-£38,398
Revenue Budget Shortfall	**£17,673**	**£54,870**	**£78,510**	**£54,502**

5.8 In November 2024, it was confirmed that the Council would no longer ask for voluntary contributions, and a new library offer was put forward to T&PCs for the financial year 2025/26 where instead of making voluntary contributions, they could purchase additional library services which would benefit residents. Extra council funding of £92,900 was added to the 2025/26 libraries revenue budget to cover this, through an investment bid.

(a) **Purchasing Additional Library Opening Hours**: T&PCs with a library in their catchment area can purchase additional library opening hours at their local branch in line with community requirements e.g. extending Saturday opening hours or opening in the evening. **Charge:** Amount charged based on actual running costs of each library rather than £1 per head of population. Will be reviewed annually.

(b) **Pop-up Libraries**: Suitable for those parishes without a library branch in their locality. A pop-up library is a collection of 350+ books and resources made available on a regular basis to the community at a venue chosen by the parish e.g. village hall or community centre. This option is staff/volunteer supported to provide added value and establish a rapport with residents to develop a community hub feeling. Services offered include:

- Book reservations made online can be collected at the pop-up venue.
- Advice available on what to read next.
- Advice available on how to use the e-library service.
- Advice available on encouraging children to read.
- Link with existing events such as pre-school sessions.
- Advice drop-in sessions with other Council services.

Charge: Based on staff time/travel costs/support costs/venue hire fees

(c) **Community Bookshelf:** A collection of books (in the region of 150 books), delivered to a suitable venue identified by the parish council. Book collections are changed and replenished quarterly with new titles. **Charge:** Based on staff time/travel and book stock purchased (WBC can purchase books at discounted rates through consortium membership therefore providing better value for money).

5.9 In addition to the chargeable offers to T&PCs, the following free services continue to be part of the new libraries offer:

(a) **At Home Library Service**: For those residents who find it difficult to visit their local library because of age, disability, lack of access to transport, or caring responsibilities, we will bring the library service to them. We match each person with a DBS checked volunteer who will find out about their reading tastes, choosing and delivering books to their home every three weeks at a pre-arranged time. Favourite authors or particular titles can be requested.

(b) **Community Outreach Visits:** Linking in with existing events e.g. village hall coffee mornings, community cafes. Pre-ordered book reservations can be dropped off to residents by a volunteer.

(c) **e-Library Services**: A wide selection of e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines and e-newspapers are available to read and download.

5.10 At the same time as developing the new library offers to T&PCs, plans were moving forward to end the mobile library service because of declining usage – only 239 customers used this service in 2024/25. After a public consultation which took place in February 2025, this service was withdrawn on the 1st April 2025, allowing the Council to reduce expenditure by £42,080 annually.   As part of the consultation process an Equalities Impact Assessment was drawn up and the mitigating factors for this are intrinsically linked to the new library offer as outlined above.

6   Review of Current Situation

6.1 For the financial year 2025/26, the Libraries revenue budget was increased to £1,414,190, and the income target linked to T&PC voluntary contributions was removed.

6.2 This means that any additional income received through the chargeable library offers, is over and above the base budget.   To date, £14,393 of gross income has been received through this new initiative.

6.3 The new chargeable library services offers have been costed as follows:

(a) Additional opening hours at existing libraries: the amount charged is based on actual running costs per hour.

(b) Pop-up libraries: the amount is based on staff costs; travel costs, hall hire costs.

c) Community Bookshelf: the amount charged is based on staff/volunteer costs, travel costs, book stock costs.

The £14,393 gross income received so far is offset by the cost to the Council of providing these additional services, and the costs are calculated on a charge recovery basis specifically for each parish. There are so many different variables to consider for each different location and a one size fits all cost would not be appropriate.

6.4 **Purchasing Additional Library Opening Hours:** two West Berkshire libraries are now offering additional opening hours.

(a) **Lambourn Library:** from 01/05/2025 the library opening hours have increased from 16 to 18 per week. As a result of a resident survey carried out

by the Parish Council, the additional hours are being used to target an after-school audience 3.30-5.30pm each Thursday, offering an additional day option for residents. A children's book club will be launching in September as a targeted activity to add value in this extra session. In the two months of Q1, library loans remained in line with the previous year, but visitor numbers rose to 3,204 (+27%). The additional hours have been funded by East Garston Parish Council, Lambourn Parish Council and the Friends of Lambourn Library.

(b) **Pangbourne Library:** from 1/04/2025 the library opening hours increased from 22 to 23.5 per week. The 1.5 additional hours are used to extend the Saturday hours from 10am to 2pm after an analysis of footfall and library loans was carried out. In Q1 library loans increased by 2%, visitor numbers increased by 5.14%. New members increased by 56%, indicating that the extended opening hours are attracting a new tranche of residents who were not previously using the library. Additional activities are now offered on Saturdays, including children's author sessions, board games club and a poetry in the library read aloud group. The additional hours have been funded by Pangbourne Parish Council.

6.5 **Pop-up libraries**: three pop-up libraries are now up and running across the district, and discussions are taking place with another two parishes interested in providing this service to residents.

(a) **Compton**: The pop-up library trial ran from September 2024 – March 2025, for 2 hours every second Thursday morning at Compton Village Hall at the same time as a pre-school session for under 5s

Good links with the pre-school developed, and children were able to choose books and have a Storytime as part of the pop-up session. Library membership and interest in the pop-up began to grow. The initiative was warmly welcomed by the Compton community.

Compton Parish Council carried out a survey towards the end of the trial period, and the feedback received reinforced the positivity from the community regarding the provision of the pop-up library. This resulted in funding being made available by the parish for this service to continue for the financial year 2025/26, although the frequency of visits was reduced to monthly, and the visit time reduced to 1.5 hours per session. For the three library sessions at Compton in Q1 of 2025/26 there were 71 visitors, 188 library loans, 21 reservations made and 5 new library members.

(b) **Basildon:** Pop-up library takes place at St. Stephen's Church for two hours each month, 10am-12pm and is funded by Basildon Parish Council. Between April and June 2025, the Upper Basildon Pop-up Library was open for three sessions: 32 visitors, 39 library loans, 14 book reservations, and 4 new library members. It is part of a valued community hub, providing access to books and friendly support running alongside the post office drop in and the weekly coffee morning.

(c) **Leckhampstead:** Pop-up library takes place at the village hall for 2 hours each month, 10am to 12pm. Since its launch in May 2025, two library sessions have

been held: 21 visitors, 60 library loans,13 book reservations, and 6 new library members. The library offers book browsing, collection of reservations ordered online, and friendly support. It operates alongside the weekly coffee morning, which helps to create a warm, inter-generational community atmosphere. Feedback from residents and the Parish Council has been very positive. The pop-up has been funded anonymously by a resident for this financial year, and the library service is in discussion with the Parish Council and the Village Hall Committee to determine whether funding will be made available to continue into 2026/27.

6.6 Community Bookshelf:

(a) Basildon Children's Community Bookshelf

The Children's Community Bookshelf at Basildon was stocked with 200 books in April 2025 and then refreshed in July with a new selection of 200 titles, ensuring a diverse and engaging range of reading materials for young readers. Two storytime sessions have been held with the toddler group, both warmly received and instrumental in promoting early literacy and fostering community engagement. At the July session, families were encouraged to participate in the Summer Reading Challenge. This service is funded by Basildon Parish Council.

6.7 The library service is providing quarterly updates to all parishes receiving additional chargeable services, outlining the community benefits as well as the performance statistics. Discussions with parishes will be instigated in the near future to make a case for the funding to continue into 2026/27.

7 Other services offered through libraries

7.1 In addition to the chargeable offers to T&PCs, the following free services are part of the new libraries offer:

7.2 **e-Library Services:** The e-library service was recently re-tendered to simplify the offer for residents and offer access to e-books, e-audiobooks, e-magazines and e-newspapers through one digital platform. There is now just one e-library supplier, and during the transition period to the new supplier in Q1 there were 71,257 e-library loans, a slight dip of -2%. e-Library reservations surged by over 35% during the transition period and further growth is expected in the number of loans in Q2.

7.3 **At Home Library Service**: The At Home service has been promoted widely, particularly to those residents who were mobile library customers and may find it difficult to visit their local library. In Q1 library loans through this service surged by 104% to 2,427, and 535 At Home visits were carried out – an increase of 166% on the previous year. The criteria for the At Home service was broadened to include lack of access to transport.

7.4 **Community Outreach Visits:** Linking in with existing events such as village hall coffee mornings and community cafes.   Pre-ordered online book reservations can be dropped off to residents, and engagement with the library service is encouraged through social interaction.

Location	Frequency	Average number of visitors per session
Beech Hill Memorial Hall	3 weekly	5
Beenham Village Hall	monthly	5
Benedict Court, Newbury	3 weekly	7
Curridge WI Hall	monthly	8
Inglewood House, Kintbury	3 weekly	6

7.5 **Community Hub Outreach Programme "Let's Talk":** All West Berkshire libraries are key venues as part of this new programme which aims to improve access to advice and support within local communities. Customers already recognise that libraries:

• Are trusted spaces for accessing information.
• Are digital access points for residents who lack personal devices.
• Offer support with form filling and applications through digital support sessions.
•Provide health and wellbeing advice through Reading Well books and Wellbeing bags.
• Provide opportunities for social connection and engagement with customers in daily interactions and through the regular events programmes.

7.6 **Safe Places Scheme**: All West Berkshire libraries are part of the national Safe Places Scheme, offering a secure location for individuals who feel anxious, scared, or at risk.

8 Outcomes

8.1 The new funding model is a fairer system, as parishes receive additionality through a clear service benefit for their residents, if they choose to subscribe.

8.2 Closer and more effective partnership working with T&PCs has been enabled to confirm what they want from the library service, and how they can help us deliver it. In effect the participating T&PCs have become stakeholders in the service, and it has given them a sense of control in the future development of the library service in their parish.

8.3 The funding model is now sustainable as it doesn't rely on voluntary contributions.

8.4 Engagement with residents has clearly increased in participating parishes and this has provided a forum for the Council to further develop the concept of a community hubs in a variety of new settings through the "Let's Talk" Community Hub Outreach Programme.

8.5 Rural isolation is being reduced in specific parishes by the new library initiatives.

8.6 The public library contribution to the positive health and well-being of local communities is being formally recognised through the receipt of annual grant funding.

9 Conclusion

9.1 The previous library funding model which commenced in 2017/18 relied on voluntary contributions from T&PCs to balance the libraries revenue budget.

9.2 There was no incentive for T&PCs to make the contribution as they were not receiving a tangible benefit for their parish, and the level of contributions diminished after the first few years. The library service was left with a continuing budget deficit year on year ranging from £17,673 - £78,510 and it was clear that this funding model had become unsustainable. The Libraries Review in 2021/22 called for an urgent review.

9.3 In this financial year 2025/26, the new sustainable funding model was put in place and the libraries base budget increased by £92,900 to cover the running costs of the 8 libraries across the district, plus the At Home service.

9.4 T&PCs now have the choice to purchase bespoke library services for their parish. As a result, we now have 6 additional library offers which are benefitting those parishes, and early indications are that they are being well received and well used by residents.

9.5 Delivering library services to rural areas can be both a challenge and an opportunity to innovate. The new funding model has created an opportunity for creative solutions to be put in place in West Berkshire through using different venues as pop-up libraries

9.6 The future challenge will be to replicate this early success across more parishes in the district and to progress alongside this the new "Let's Talk" Community Hub Outreach Programme for residents.

10 Appendices

Appendix A – Libraries Vision Graphic

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 Scrutiny Commission or associated Committees, Task Groups within preceding six months	☐
Item is Urgent Key Decision	☐
Report is to note only	☐

Wards affected: All

Officer details:

Name: Felicity Harrison
Job Title: Culture and Libraries Manager
Tel No: 01635 503087
E-mail: felicity.harrison@westberks.gov.uk

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