

Libraries Ambition Plan 2019-2024 Review Panel Meeting

18 September 2019

On 18 September 2019 the Committee held a Review Panel meeting to consider the draft Libraries Ambition Plan 2019-2024.

The following Members were in attendance;

Councillors Paula Burdess, Paul Galley, Martin Mitchell (in the Chair), David Owen, Gerard Walsh, Paul Wilshaw

The Plan had been developed to set out the ambitions for the future development of the libraries service to ensure it remained relevant to residents going forward. This would take the form of a strategic vision to align the service with the priorities of the Council Plan 2019 – 2024.

Mr Mark McCree, Head of Libraries, presented the draft plan supported by Mr Peter Legg, Head of Economy and Culture, Mr Scott Butterfield, Strategy, Policy and Research Manager, and James Mulvaney, Research Assistant.

The Plan had been developed following an extensive consultation with residents, both service users and non-users. This had allowed the emerging themes and the priorities of residents to inform the ambitions contained within the Plan.

The Panel was informed that the library service had been used by approximately 40,000 people over the past three years and that the breakdown of service users had shown that it was reflective of Blackpool's demographics and age groups. The service also reported that customer satisfaction was at 92% up by 15% since 2014.

Despite these positive aspects it had been recognised that there remained areas for improvement, such as poor links to other Council services and a lack of focus on the impacts. It was also noted that the service currently operated on a one-size-fits-all basis, which did not therefore reflect the communities in which they were based. In order to address these the Plan outlines the following priorities for the service;

- Early Years/Children – Improving children's readiness for school.
- Literacy – Improving levels of literacy for Blackpool's residents and increasing the number of people reading.
- Digital Access – Improving resident's access to digital services and developing their digital skills.
- Wellbeing – Supporting resident's mental health and decreasing social isolation.
- Community Engagement – Widening the engagement with local communities.

It was noted that supporting employability had been removed as a priority during the consultation as it did not rate highly on service user feedback. This however did not mean that Libraries would no longer provide help in improving resident's employability going forward, such as through services like the "Jobs Club".

As part of developing the plan the Libraries Service had undergone a Peer Review by the Local Government Association (LGA). The review had endorsed the priorities set out within the Plan but noted that at least two libraries were not fit for purpose. Mr McCree informed the Panel that this

related to Mereside and Layton. It was recognised that Mereside currently occupied a building that was too small and therefore could not stage community events, consideration therefore would have to be given in the future to if it currently was situated in the best location. Issues of space at Layton library had also been identified. The library had recently been reconfigured to make better use of its space but the service was continuing to look at alternative ways of developing the location to make best use of it. Issues with unclear signage at a number of locations had also been noted.

The Panel also discussed the role of libraries in improving resident's Information Computer Technology (ICT) skills. This included holding "Coding Clubs" where young people could attend and learn computer programming. Mr McCree informed the Panel that the service would be looking to expand its ICT offer to users through guidance in using the internet for business, the "Job Club" to improve users' employability, staying safe online and using the internet for personal enrichment, such as by researching a family history.

It was noted that the Plan included aims such as improving the consistency of the digital offer across the libraries in Blackpool. This would ensure that ICT help could be delivered at all the services locations to a high quality.

The role of Libraries in engaging with the communities in which they were located had been identified as a priority as part of the consultation. It had been noted that when the Central Library had been built it had been in the central shopping area of Blackpool, however, this had since moved south leaving the library disconnected from the town centre. The Plan therefore had identified the work needed to improve its relevance to the local community. This included expanding the use of the building by methods such as encouraging its use by groups for community events. The Library service also made a wide use of volunteers who assisted in delivering services such as the Job Club and improving users' ICT skills. Mr McCree also advised that the Home Library Service, where deliveries and collection could be made to residents unable to physically access a library, was a service run by volunteers.

Panel Members also highlighted the health benefits of reading and queried what work was being undertaken to promote libraries to help with this. In response Mr McCree explained that doctors could refer patients with low-level mental health issues to library books that could be helpful. These could be borrowed using the self-issue service, helping to maintain the patients privacy. He also added that the service ensured that the books stocked in relation to mental health were reputable. Mr McCree also informed the Panel that Blackpool Council's Public Health had previously provided funding for supporting events such as the "Get Vocal" mental health awareness campaign.

Discussion also took place regarding the role of Councillors in promoting the work of the library service. Mr McCree noted that many Councillors were already engaged in supporting local services, such as through the use of ward budgets and that the service would welcome their involvement in localised planning for libraries going forward. The Panel noted that communication was an issue and that greater use could be made of social media in promoting events and informing communities of the services offered. Mr McCree agreed that the service quarterly newsletter would be circulated to all Councillors going forward to highlight events and what was happening with Libraries within Blackpool.

The Panel thanked those involved in the preparation of the plan and noted the following outcomes of the meeting;

- That the Libraries Ambition Plan 2019-2022 be endorsed for approval; and

- That an update on the implementation of the Plan be added to the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee Workplan for its 9 September 2020 meeting.