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| Report to: | EXECUTIVE |
| Relevant Officer: | Alan Cavill, Director of Communications and Regeneration |
| Relevant Cabinet Member | Councillor Gillian Campbell, Cabinet Member for Tourism and Culture |
| Date of Meeting: | 15 June 2020 |

LIBRARIES AMBITION PLAN

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 Blackpool Libraries has undertaken a robust programme of research and consultation over the last year to develop an ambitious 4-year plan (1 April 2020 to 31 March 2024) that will see the service make a significant contribution to key corporate priorities. This report seeks Executive approval to move into the implementation phase of the Libraries Ambition Plan. At this time of upheaval, due to the coronavirus pandemic, it is crucial that the service does not lose momentum and can focus on the medium term, and on being in the best place to meet corporate and community priorities and needs.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To approve the Libraries Ambition Plan, as attached at Appendix 5c and 5d, with effect until 31 March 2024.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1a The service has adopted an objective, evidence-led approach, including widespread engagement, external review (including an Arts Council/Local Government Association funded Peer Challenge, see Appendix 5a) and scrutiny (including discussion at Scrutiny Committee in September 2019), in order to ensure that the Libraries Ambition Plan is fit for purpose, and will deliver real benefit for the people of Blackpool.

It is widely acknowledged that Blackpool needs to improve Early Years/Children's provision; tackle low levels of literacy (i.e. reading, digital and information); and meet challenges around social isolation and mobility, health and well-being. Libraries have a proven track-record of reaching a diverse range of people; functioning as accessible community hubs, which are trusted, well thought of, and well-used by residents (see Appendix 5b); and providing value for money/'downstream' impact and savings – making them ideally placed to help achieve positive outcomes for the town/Council. The Libraries Ambition Plan (see Appendices 5c and 5d) is focused on doing just that; targeting 5 priority areas, aligned to key corporate goals, i.e.:

- Early Years/Children's - improved levels of school readiness (specifically re. speech, language and communication) and child/parental engagement;

- Literacy - increased active usage of libraries, and literacy/reading engagement across the town
- Digital access - increased participation in digital activities and related skills courses; and,
- Well-being - improved mental health and decreased social isolation.
- Community engagement - wider engagement with and participation within local communities

The current COVID-19 situation emphasises all the more, the benefit that the service can bring to residents, especially in terms of providing reading and digital access and support, improving people's health and well-being, giving children the best start in life and assistance with their education, and as a portal for accessing council services/delivering council priorities.

At present, there is minimal scope for Service development due to immediate operational constraints, and a general lack of resource/capacity. The investment plan (see Appendix 5e) will enable the service to achieve the changes outlined above.

Plus, the money spent on libraries will effectively generate greater savings in other areas, such as Children's and Public Health; in helping reduce problems caused by poor literacy, children not in the best position to make the most out of school; adults with no digital access/skills, people with mental health and social well-being/isolation challenges.

Finally, it has been recognised that this statutory service has lacked strategic direction, alignment, and ambition in recent years; and, alongside the impact of austerity, this has left Blackpool Libraries simply focused on 'keeping afloat'. The Libraries Ambition Plan addresses these issues and will bring the service into alignment both locally and in terms of national best practice (as acknowledged by the recent Peer Challenge).

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| 3.2a | Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? | No |
| 3.2b | Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? | Yes |

A supporting investment plan has been produced for the *Ambition Plan* (see Appendix 5e), where the 'ask' in terms of both ongoing revenue and one-off capital elements is clearly set out. Many of the activities included in the draft plan are achievable without any additional resource; and the service has already progressed, and will continue to pursue, both internal efficiencies/re-direction of current budget allocations and external funding opportunities to ensure that the demand on corporate resource has been/is kept at the minimal level.

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

- 4.1 The proposed Ambition Plan could be rejected in its current form and be revised in light of feedback from Executive.

The proposed Ambition Plan could be rejected, and the service move forward with an existing/updated basic service plan.

5.0 Council Priority:

5.1 The Ambition Plan is relevant to both Council Priorities:

- Priority One – The Economy – Maximising growth and opportunity
- Priority Two – Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience

6.0 Background Information:

6.1 The Libraries Ambition Plan (LAP) development programme started in August 2018, with a steering group put in place to oversee its governance and progress. A comprehensive research phase was undertaken through to spring 2019; and then, following analysis and stakeholder engagement (including an external Peer Challenge, see 6.3 below), a draft plan was produced. The draft plan was taken to Scrutiny Committee in September 2019.

6.2 **Scrutiny Committee:** The draft plan was presented to Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee on 18 September 2019. The plan met with positive feedback and the panel unanimously endorsed it for approval. Points raised by the Committee included:

- Opportunities to review Libraries' property portfolio, especially in terms of Mereside, Layton and Revoe libraries (non-co-located sites)
- Potential to expand the digital access, content and skills offer
- Localism agenda, and specifically enhanced local ownership and identity of branch libraries
- Health benefits of reading, and role of libraries in combatting social isolation; and
- Need to have more 'library champions' and positive advocacy within and outside of the Council

- These comments were taken into account in completing the final draft version of the Plan.

Following feedback from Scrutiny, the plan was finalised and taken to CLT in October 2019, where the investment plan was fully discussed ahead of Council budget setting.

6.3 **Peer Challenge:** The original *Strategy Development Proposal* (August 2018) emphasised the need for evidence-led, objective analysis and decision making. A key dimension of this was to bring in external challenge, and the service was successful in gaining an ACE/LGA-funded peer review in December 2018. The Peer Challenge team visited Blackpool in June 2019, and their full and final report is included as Appendix 5a. Their four key findings were:

- The Libraries Ambition Plan aligns strongly with the corporate objectives of the council, has a strong evidence base, and reflects the guidance of the Libraries Taskforce.
- The Libraries Ambition Plan is achievable and should be progressed, with the main caveats being the need for investment and the current lack of staff capacity/skills deficit.
- Relationships with partners (internal and external) seem disparate, albeit with some very satisfactory outcomes.
- There is a need for continuing engagement with key stakeholders (e.g. staff, senior officers, Councillors, partners and residents) as the Libraries Ambition Plan progresses to implementation.

6.4 **Evidence Base:** The Peer Challenge team noted the robust evidence base that has been established by the Libraries Ambition Plan programme. The key elements of this included (separate full reports are available on request for all of the below):

- Desktop research – an ‘*Environment Scan*’ at national, regional and local level
- Survey of residents
- Analysis of Library performance/users data
- MOSAIC/mapping analysis of library users/non-users, cross-service and per library
- Community Engagement sessions
- Partner and Stakeholder workshops
- Theory of Change session and survey with Library staff

Appendix 5b sets out the main research headlines.

6.5 In summary, the current service is reaching the vast majority of communities across the town at a reasonable level, and has been particularly successful in attracting those ‘hardest to reach’. In the last three years, the service has been used by c.40k people (c.28% of the population). The service is highly trusted and well thought of by residents; it has very strong brand recognition and a well-spread network of well-maintained, ‘neutral’ community venues.

6.6 However, strategically, there has been a major lack of direction, planning and alignment with the Council’s priorities. Capacity, consistency and operational culture issues have all been identified as limiting potential. There is an apparent need for more engagement/outreach activity, a review of opening hours, and an overhaul of the staffing structure to make it fit for (future) purpose.

6.7 **The DRAFT Libraries Ambition Plan 2019-2024** (Appendices 3a and 3b) is based on analysis of all the evidence outlined above and the subsequent challenge and ‘feedback’ sessions (including the Peer Challenge and Scrutiny Committee). Ultimately, the Libraries Ambition Plan sets out how, over the next 4 years, Blackpool Library Service will change and further develop to help shape/improve lives, communities and places; and, as the encompassing vision states, ‘support every resident to achieve their full potential’.

Two versions of the plan have been prepared for Executive – the activity plan (Appendix 5c), which sets out all the core activities that will be carried out over the next few years in order to deliver on the identified priority outcomes. Plus, an ‘overview’ version (Appendix 5d), that is designed to cover the main aspects of the plan and fit the general corporate template; with a view to possibly using this document with stakeholders and the public in due course.

Strategic Outcomes: In summary, the plan, and all the embedded activities, repositions the service around 5 strategic outcomes. These outcomes were established through a theory of change model and align closely to council priorities:

- Blackpool children being better prepared to start school
- Increased levels of reading and literacy across Blackpool
- Improved digital access and literacy

- Reaching more ‘harder to reach’ and/or isolated residents to increase social and mental well-being
- Wider engagement with communities, leading to wider participation within them

6.8 There is an additional ‘internal’ strategic outcome, focusing on ensuring that the service is best-placed to deliver the Ambition Plan by improving operations; staffing structure; policies, plans and practice.

Also, whilst it is important to concentrate efforts on achieving the above outcomes, it is important to note that Libraries will still play an important role in supporting learning and employability, and as a local point of contact/gateway to other Council and partner services and information.

Ultimately, as a result of delivering the plan, Libraries will be more focused on delivering access, opportunities and outcomes; they will be places to connect people to resources, information, ideas and each other; and they will become more collaborative and personalised/targeted.

A supporting Investment Plan has been produced (see Appendix 5e) that sets out how, with funding from a variety of sources, the service is looking to take each core action forward over the next 4 years.

6.9 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? **No**

7.0 List of Appendices:

Appendix 5a: Blackpool Libraries Peer Challenge - Final report
 Appendix 5b: Blackpool Libraries Ambition Plan - Research headlines
 Appendix 5c: Blackpool Libraries Ambition Plan- Activity Plan
 Appendix 5d: Blackpool Libraries Ambition Plan - Overview version
 Appendix 5e: Blackpool Libraries Ambition Plan - Investment plan

8.0 Legal considerations:

8.1 Under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, local councils in England have a statutory duty to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service for all people working, living or studying full-time in the area who want to make use of it.

In providing this service, Councils must, among other things:

- Have regard to encouraging both children and adults to make full use of the library service
- Lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area

9.0 Human Resources considerations:

9.1 The Libraries back office and management team is currently working under temporary arrangements pending a permanent service-wide restructure (and has been since June 2018), which will be directly informed by the Libraries Ambition Plan. Regardless of the agreed additional investment in this area, the whole staffing operation will need to be reviewed and revised in light of emerging priorities and a review of opening hours over the next 2 years.

10.0 Equalities considerations:

10.1 In the course of developing the Libraries Ambition Plan, the service/steering group has considered whether there could be unintended adverse impacts on people because of shared characteristics protected by the Equality Act. The Council's Equality Manager has been an integral member of the steering group.

10.2 The service is confident that the proposal will not have any discriminatory effects, and has identified, and embedded within the plan, a number of positive future initiatives that will promote more inclusion of vulnerable and minority communities.

10.3 As we move into implementation, the service will continue to reflect this practice and conduct full Equality Analysis on any relevant work streams arising from the plan.

11.0 Financial considerations:

11.1 As mentioned above, a supporting investment plan has been prepared (see Appendix 5e) and revenue elements agreed with CLT and embedded within the Service budget for 2020 onwards. The service will, as part of this plan, continue to pursue internal efficiencies and budget re-alignment, and also seek external grant funding opportunities to complement the requested additional internal resource.

11.2 The investment plan has been discussed with Claire Courtenay, Council Accountant and all provisional identified amounts verified as far as possible at this point in time.

11.3 The recommended review of current property and ICT infrastructure (and any resulting decisions/developments) may result in supplementary capital investment requirements; these will be brought forward for decision on a case-by-case basis and dovetail with any wider property review/town or neighbouring planning.

The total additional revenue investment requested for the core Libraries budget is £97k/year (current budget is c.£1.8M/year). The areas this investment will be focused on are:

- Engagement activity (to provide matched funding and deliver Wordpool Family Day) £2.5k/yr
 - Comms. and Marketing (for 2 or 3 targeted campaigns/year – during term of Plan) £2.5k/yr
 - Staffing (to increase engagement capacity and ease general operational pressures) £90k/yr
 - Removing barriers to access (removal fines/request charges + remote access) £2k/yr
- TOTAL £97k/yr**

12.0 Risk management considerations:

12.1 The Peer Challenge highlighted that the risks around the Libraries Ambition Plan largely centred on maintaining staff buy-in to the change process and the ability/skills to deliver the envisaged service transformation. As the Libraries Service move into the implementation phase, the service will be mindful of this and conduct full Risk Analysis on any relevant work streams arising from the plan.

13.0 Ethical considerations:

13.1 No; the Libraries service is firmly based on equitable and accessible provision and is aligned to the Council's core values in this respect.

14.0 Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:

14.1 An extensive amount of research has been undertaken, including:

- Residents street survey (575+ people)
- Customer focus groups/interviews
- Partners and Stakeholder engagement workshop (June 2019)
- Strategic discussions with Public Health, Children's, Better Start, Headstart, Inter-faith forum, Economy and Culture management team
- Review of Libraries customer data
- Mosaic analysis of users and non-users per library
- CIPFA benchmarking (national, regional and benchmarking group)
- Visits/discussions with Head of Services in other authorities
- LGA/ACE Peer Challenge (June 2019)

15.0 Background papers:

15.1 Not applicable

16.0 Key decision information:

- 16.1 Is this a key decision? Yes
- 16.2 If so, Forward Plan reference number: 20/2019
- 16.3 If a key decision, is the decision required in less than five days?
- 16.4 If **yes**, please describe the reason for urgency:

17.0 Call-in information:

17.1 Are there any grounds for urgency, which would cause this decision to be exempt from the call-in process?

17.2 If **yes**, please give reason:

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

18.0 Scrutiny Committee Chairman (where appropriate):

Date informed: 5 June 2020

Date approved:

19.0 Declarations of interest (if applicable):

19.1

20.0 Executive decision:

20.1

21.0 Date of Decision:

21.1

22.0 Reason(s) for decision:

22.1

23.0 Date Decision published

23.1

24.0 Executive Members in attendance:

24.1

25.0 Call-in:

25.1

26.0 Notes

26.1

