# Blackpool Council

## Library Peer Challenge

Final Report of the Peer Challenge Team

Date 11-12 June 2019

## 1. Executive Summary

Blackpool Council Library Service (BCLS) was awarded a peer challenge through the Arts Council England and Local Government Association partnership. The scope and focus of the challenge are set out in section three of this report.

BCLS is looking to consolidate following a period of transition (including a restructure of staffing in summer 2017 and the appointment of a new Head of Service (HoS) in 2018). The aspiration is to be ambitious for the future, despite the financial challenges facing the council.

The council continues to demonstrate support for the service – expressing a clear commitment to retaining the existing eight library branches. However, the service has not had a plan or strategy in place over recent years and is not linked to the corporate objectives of the council. There is constructive collaboration with other services, but this appears to be on an ad hoc basis, rather than any strategic alliance.

The Corporate Leadership Team of the council (CLT) agreed to embark upon the development of a Libraries Ambition Plan (LAP) in August 2018. A dedicated steering group was established and tasked with developing a future library vision. The emerging draft plan has a particular focus on early years and community engagement and is underpinned by extensive research, and will be considered by CLT in July 2019. It is envisaged that the LAP be outcomes focused, and delivered in an integrated, strategically focused way with other services and partners.

The draft LAP is a "work in progress", currently reflecting national policy and strongly underpinned through bespoke research (including Mosaic analysis, analysis of library data, user/non-user interview and environment scanning) and wide staff and stakeholder input to its content. The LAP aligns strongly with the corporate objectives of the council (See Corporate Plan 2019 – 2024).

We think that the LAP is achievable, but with certain caveats, as follows:

- the resource implications of the plan have yet to be costed
- the prioritisation of the activities set out within the LAP project is agreed, including realistic timescales
- the final agreement of the LAP will require CLT and political agreement
- a number of inter related library plans will support the delivery of the LAP, and these need to be progressed in parallel e.g. communications and marketing, performance and monitoring, workforce development; plus integration of library service to the strategic planning framework of the council
- the service currently lacks the capacity and skills to address both its operational and strategic ambition for the library service
- further thought is required to ensure the continuing engagement of staff, CLT and politicians, stakeholders and residents as the LAP progresses to its implementation phase.

The HoS is very aware of the above caveats and work is underway to address these points. With the continuing support of CLT the implementation of the LAP should progress well, and help realise the latent potential of the service for the benefit of Blackpool residents.

We encourage the council to progress the library service review, as set out in the proposal entitled "Libraries Ambition Plan: Books and Beyond" (draft agreed summer 2018).

Finally, once the plan is agreed we advocate the identification of exemplar councils that will assist Blackpool on its improvement journey, and as a footnote the peer team expressed their support to help Blackpool move forward.

## 2. Key recommendations

### 1. Determine the approach to resourcing the LAP

The draft library service LAP was reviewed by the peer team and is considered to be a comprehensive statement of intent for future library provision in the town. The plan has a strong evidence base and reflects the guidance of the national Library Taskforce. The plan is presented as a number of themes that will align with council corporate objectives. The draft plan requires further work to identify its key deliverables and necessary resources for implementation. The intention is to take a proposal to the corporate management team in July 2019, with political oversight to follow.

### 2. Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) to agree the prioritisation of the LAP and deliver in line with the Council's corporate objectives.

The current draft plan will require consideration by the CLT in order to ensure it fits into the wider planning framework of the council and to agree resource allocation. In the absence of a library plan, to date, there has been a strategy deficit in library provision, this in turn has led to the absence of any mention of the library service in the recently published council corporate plan. An indicative timetable and resource planning will be considered in the context of the medium term financial strategy and key objectives of the council. The peer team noted that the evidence based approach taken in developing the LAP may provide a viable model for further service review across the council.

### 3. Consider the key factors of change that impact upon the development of LAP

The peer team thinks that the time is right to progress the LAP and review the draft Library Strategy proposal. There are several factors that inform our suggestion, as follows:

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- Political readiness

Blackpool has recently elected a new administration (May 2019) which is committed to maintaining library provision, and the service has strong public and partner support, as evidenced in the recent research exercise. We understand the council has committed to no library closures but observe that several of the existing library buildings are not really fit for purpose to provide a modern library service. Now could be the time to review library provision and consider other models of service delivery. We note the success of other Blackpool libraries in meeting the needs of residents. In particular the Grange is universally recognised as an excellent library/community facility. Although not replicable the Grange model may provide scalable elements that could be considered in remodelling other library buildings.

- Resource availability

The draft LAP has yet to be costed/resourced and this will affect the speed of implementation of any change. The HoS is aware of this and is working up indicative costings/resource requirements for CLT consideration. The peer team think that the LAP is deliverable, but needs investment up front to gain traction for its implementation.

- Staff and partner readiness

The peer team were impressed with the continuing commitment of staff to the service. However the continuous salami slicing of budget has resulted in a discontinuation of staff training and career development. Performance management has also been patchy although it is noted that the new HoS has put systems in place to improve this. This has had an impact on the existing service in terms of customer service and IT skills which require attention. Moving forward, adoption of the LAP and strategy development will require a different skill set, which is not evident within the current staff group.

Relationships with partners seem disparate, albeit with some very satisfactory outcomes. We recommend that partners are engaged in a formal agreement that sets out expectations of both parties and mutually agreed outcomes for the respective parties. The necessary focus has been on keeping the library buildings open, and as a consequence public engagement has diminished. A new model should consider how best to get library services out into the community.

## 4. Progress the strategy for building / service integration

The roll out of the LAP will be supported through the progression of an embedded piece of work, a review of library infrastructure. It is evident that there exists a disparity in the quality of library provision with one facility being described as "a cupboard with a few books inside". Whereas the Grange includes shops, a library, a cafe, a community farm, a theatre, meeting

rooms available for hire and a gallery. The LAP research identifies that people are using different libraries for different reasons and any review will take this evidence into consideration. The council may wish to consider further colocation of other public service alongside the libraries. However, any consideration of future library provision is currently hampered by the lack of agreed strategy. The council should consider the vision around the future library service. This consideration will be assisted through identifying similar library models around the country and using their experiences to help define a new library service for Blackpool.

## 5.      Develop a corporate approach to volunteering.

The library service encourages volunteers but could improve the volunteer offer. Currently volunteers are permitted to work in IT and home services. Different libraries appear to have differing approaches to the recruitment and management of volunteers. The website Do-IT-For-Good identified two volunteering opportunities from December 2018. This is not meant as a criticism and we understand that the focus recently has been around keeping the libraries open. However, other councils have invested in attracting and retaining volunteers as an integral part of their library service and to build capacity and community representation. We understand that engagement with volunteers is being reviewed across the service, corporately, and pan-region.

## 6.      Ongoing stake holder engagement and acknowledgment of staff commitment

There has been a good deal of stakeholder engagement recently, after a period of relative quiet in this area. Now that momentum has been revived we advise you to consider how to keep the energy going. Stakeholders are very supportive of the library service and their continuing support will be important in delivering the desired outcomes of the LAP. Similarly the library staff are aware and committed to the aims of the LAP. They understand the evidence based outcome methodology used to develop the LAP and we suggest that their continuing commitment should be acknowledged by CLT.

## 7.      Learning from others

A good deal of desk research has been undertaken in developing the LAP. We suggest that, when a preferred option for LAP delivery and service integration is agreed, that more time should be given to identifying other library authorities that have developed new ways of working that reflect Blackpool's ambition. The draft LAP desk research does reflect learning from other councils and consideration of good practice. We would suggest that you use peer review colleagues for continuing support.

## 8.      Library Champion

We acknowledge the excellent support given to the library service by the Deputy Leader/Portfolio holder and the suggestion of a library champion in no way negates her efforts. However, we think that the library service is lacking a voice at the top level. If the library profile

and potential is to rise then it needs to have visibility around CLT and Cabinet. Thereby assisting the appropriate interaction with partner organisations at a more strategic level than currently.

# 3.   Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

**The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer 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 at Blackpool were:

- Councillor Guy Nicholson – Cabinet Member for Planning, Culture and Inclusive Economy Hackney Council
- Anthony Hopkins – Head of Library, Heritage and Adult Education Service, Merton Council
- Sean Kelly – Regional Development Officer, Libraries Taskforce, Arts Council England
- Mark Harrison – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

**Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following areas three core questions:

1.   Is the council getting best value from its library assets?
2.   How effective is the library service's contribution to cross cutting agendas of other services
3.   What is the role of the library service and council in the local community?

In addition Blackpool asked the peer team to consider the following questions:

- Is the emerging LAP being put together properly, and including the right people?
- Is the emerging LAP ambitious enough; and is it achievable?
- The service is not trying to be all things to all people in the future, but to be targeted in what it does and what it can be good at. Does it have the right partnerships internally and externally to make this work?
- Does the service have the right skills to deliver on its ambitions?
- What can be done to raise awareness of the library service and its role?

**The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection.  Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs.  They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus.  The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and

information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing.  The team then spent two days onsite at Blackpool, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 41 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.

- Gathered information and views from more than 20 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.

- Collectively spent more than 120 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 4 weeks in Blackpool.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings.  It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (11th-12th June 2019). In presenting feedback to you.  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.

# 4.    Feedback

**Is the council getting best value from its library assets?**

The peer team reviewed the current operational benchmarks, including CIPFA statistics and confirm that, within the current operating structure, the council is getting good value from its library service.

However, the lean structure is operationally focused and this does not allow for engagement outside the library buildings. Various nationally recognised projects involving libraries with other partners are discontinued, for example Wordpool. The LAP aims to address this and expresses an intention to establish a Blackpool wide literacy project.

Library usage and visitor figures are increasing, bucking national trends. This is a positive indicator with both physical and website visits increasing last year (2018 - 2019). The LAP research found that 90% of residents think libraries are important for the town, with user satisfaction up to 92%, a rise of 15% over the past four years.

Further opportunities exists for achieving better value through potential consolidation of building stock with partners and by providing a more integrated service (e.g. the Grange). The location and delivery of the library service is not strategically planned, and the implementation of the draft strategic review will progress this discussion and in turn underpin the ambitions of the LAP.

**How effective is the library service's contribution to cross cutting agendas of other services**

Blackpool residents highly regard their library service.  The LAP research also evidences reach

into the most deprived communities. The annual resident's survey demonstrates increasing satisfaction with the library service.

The recent abolition of fines shows the willingness to innovate and is a good example of Blackpool leading the way. The impact of this initiative remains to be assessed, but is part of a LAP objective, namely to remove any remaining financial barriers to accessing library services. Further action may include reviewing reservation fees and charging for talking books.

There is evidence of library contribution to other strategy delivery but further opportunities exist. A more integrated service approach is set out in the LAP. The plan identifies priority areas for action, including Early Years, Schools, Young Adult, and Adult literacy/reading engagement. There is a history of services working well together at an operational level and this augurs well for a more considered strategic intervention. Partnership arrangements should be formalised to ensure equity across partners, definition of resource contribution and agreement on mutually agreed outcomes. Childrens services are clearly a significant partner in delivering the LAP proposal for a Blackpool literacy project. Good outcomes have already been achieved through Betterstart.

There is however a caveat to the above; there is a feeling that the service falls outside of the council and the corporate family. The perception of staff is that they are left outside of the corporate focus and accordingly do not receive the support or recognition that is often needed to support and develop the service.

The service is linking well with the council's priority stakeholders, to deliver literacy, reading for young people and early years school preparedness. The LAP aims to build upon this activity and to provide the service in a more consistent and coherent way in the future.

The development and communication of the LAP should help with further alignment of libraries to corporate strategies. It will be important to maintain the evident good will from staff and stakeholders. Current cross cutting work provides a good base from which to build a new platform for delivery of the LAP.

**What is the role of the library service and council in the local community?**

The LAP is closely aligned to national strategies, conforms to the council's statutory duty and reflects the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce "areas of purpose". The LAP sets out its ambition across three themes:
- Future Readers; Future Choices, that aims to support every resident to achieve their potential including children's preparedness for school and increased levels of literacy across Blackpool
- Get Connected, that aims to expand and improve digital and community connections through improved digital access and literacy
- Your Library, that aims for libraries to reach out to their communities and meet individual

needs through enhanced engagement activity and wider community participation.

The newly adopted Corporate Plan 2019 – 2024 makes no reference to library services. This may be because of the relatively low profile of the service over the past few years. However CLT acknowledge that the service will make an important contribution to the plan, and will be included in revised versions of the plan.

The LAP environment scan research identifies potential alignment between the libraries and other council plans and suggests that the LAP will need to account for and be reflected in documents including the Council Plan, ICT and Digital Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Early Years and other culture, learning and economic plans.

A renewed focus on marketing and communications was identified in a number of our conversations. Suggestions ranged from easily achieved improvements to signage through to the potential for a major PR campaign associated with the launch of the LAP project.

A comprehensive review of volunteering should be considered. The potential for volunteering is not optimised across the library service. Although good examples exist current activity seems to be restricted to IT and home book delivery. We understand that there are wider corporate initiatives looking at this area, and the LAP will reflect this activity in consideration of the necessary resources required to deliver on the project.

**Is the emerging LAP being put together properly, and including the right people?**

In developing the LAP the HoS has taken a proactive approach to engaging with all stake holder groups and library staff in sharing the content of the plan. In its current iteration it is robust and when the resources and deliverables are identified it will be useful for a little more engagement with CLT. The basic plan is taking shape and provides a good route to reconnect the library service to the mainstream activity of its existing partners in a more strategic way. It will also provide a basis by which new partnerships can be forged.

The LAP is built on a robust evidence base that includes Mosaic analysis that maps out library users and their typology and will be useful in identifying the potential for library service remodeling, which may be an outcome from the strategic review.

The HoS is aware that time scales and resource implications need to be factored into the LAP encompassing defining key deliverables and setting out a consolidated number of actions for member and senior officer decision.

The LAP in its current form sets out a wide range of activities to be undertaken. This list requires further refinement to ensure that a focus on a consolidated number of key deliverables is clear for all to see. Consideration of relative priority and impact between the activities requires attention to ensure that the outcomes align with corporate and partner priorities. The impact of

this work will benefit from a revised performance management framework to keep everyone on track and to ensure effective delivery of the LAP objectives.

When the LAP is agreed it would benefit from the lead member and a nominated senior officer champion to act as a figureheads for its implementation. It may be worth considering other champions in the not for profit sector, university and at regional level. The intention being to encourage advocacy of the library service and to provide high level and visible impetus to ensure the LAP is delivered.

**Is the emerging LAP ambitious enough; and is it achievable?**

The LAP is an ambitious and comprehensive action plan that aligns well with national strategies and good practice. It details a large number of activities that reflect an aspiration to become a progressive modern library service. The LAP is achievable depending upon the availability of resources and a review of both capacity and capability to deliver. Further and immediate consideration should be given to order priorities, and decide on the balance between current service delivery and future strategy development.

The focus groups evidenced a good understanding and buy in from library staff who seem to be aware of the LAP and keen to be actively involved in its further development and delivery. The staff recognise the very positive impact made by the new HoS.

Ultimately, the achievability of the LAP will depend on political and senior managerial input and agreement. The LAP and its consequences will be considered by CLT in July 2019. We suggest the paper accompanying the LAP, will consider the following factors:
• Priority
• Pace of change
• Impact
• Deliverability
• Resource
• Targeted Communications Plan internal/external
• Desired outcomes / evaluation

**The service is not trying to be all things to all people in the future, but to be targeted in what it does and what it can be good at. Does it have the right partnerships internally and externally to make this work?**

The Library Service has established the basis of good internal partnership working. We were told of previous positive collaboration between libraries, arts and heritage. They have been involved in the LAP, have a good understanding of LAP, and are keen to reestablish joint project working that will aspire to reach the acknowledged success of the Wordpool's project (A nationally recognised festival of the spoken word).

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The LAP acknowledges that external partner engagement needs developing (e.g. Health, University). The objective is to reduce levels of social isolation by increasing community connections and promoting local empowerment e.g. social prescribing, drop in sessions with key agencies and chance to chat sessions.

The current service provides a traditional offer that will require some cultural change to move on through the rationale of libraries being beyond books. The core offer is well regarded but requires modernisation, and this will require a review of the staffing structure to make it fit to deliver future service requirements. This process may require consideration of activities that the public no longer require or have a low impact and the resource would be better used in another part of the service.

Some of the "partnership" arrangements seem unbalanced, with some library staff feeling junior/less important within the arrangements. Merton Council addressed a similar situation by establishing clear partnership agreements, with each of their 40 plus delivery partners, resulting in clarity about shared outcomes and individual and collective responsibility for achieving deliverables.

**Does the service have the right skills to deliver on its ambitions?**

The new HoS has made a universally acknowledged positive impact and is recognised as a force for progress. He has commissioned the LAP and thinks strategically about the future service potential. His efforts are dissipated by the constant demands of the day to day operation of eight libraries. He has the right skills to deliver the LAP but will need support within the service and corporately to ensure its roll out is managed in an effective and impactful way.

Of late, circumstances have resulted in the service being operationally focused. This inertia is caused by historic salami slicing, lack of strategic planning and absence of performance management. The new HoS has gone a long way to addressing these issues at an operational level. There is now an opportunity to move the service on but barriers have been identified that will make the full realisation of opportunities difficult.

The service has identified a skills gap both for the current service and that envisioned in the LAP document. Time will need to be factored to allow and encourage staff to undertake some core training and development activity, this is difficult with the current levels of staffing and the requirement to keep the libraries open. The Libraries task force sets out in its Public Library Skills Strategy areas that it expects progressive libraries to consider (https://archive.cilip.org.uk/about/projects-reviews/public-library-skills-strategy.

A small resource injection, post LAP agreement would signal support for frontline staff and begin to provide the flexibility necessary to deliver service improvement. There is no headroom currently for staff to think through their contribution and role in the implementation of the LAP.

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The HoS is keen to devise a Workforce Development Plan, which will require input from the council's Human Resources department, and to include elements around online and physical training. This will aim to address the lack of a career pathway progression and ensure that staff have the right skills and knowledge to serve customers and work in a more strategic way. The CILIP workforce development strategy 2019 – 2024 sets out the skills required by everyone working in knowledge, information, data and librarianship.
https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/WorkforceDevelopment.

If a review of the library service infrastructure identifies the opportunity for further improvement and corporate integration work, then this will need to be considered as capital funding becomes available. Again a consolidated action plan will be necessary to progress this element of the work.

All of the above will require revenue or corporate support to free up operational constraints and to enable focus on delivery of LAP.

**What can be done to raise awareness of the library service and its role?**

Now is the time to review the terms of reference of the original Strategy Development proposal. One of the embedded  intentions being to engage with stakeholders and residents on the future role of the library service, and to further raise awareness of the current and potential service offer.

Once the LAP has approval by the senior leadership of the council. Its development can be used as the vehicle for your communications plan. A good level of engagement has been engendered through the research phase of the LAP, it would be a shame to let that energy and interest wain. Key stakeholders and CLT should be targeted on progress. We understand that the corporate communications team are primed to work on this project.

The senior managers and politicians that met with the peer team are committed to the library service. They are expecting for the HoS to set out within the LAP a proposal that includes consideration of a more effective engagement mechanism with CLT and senior managers of other relevant partner organisations.

Front line staff act as ambassadors for the service. It would be appropriate for this to be recognised by the senior management team, and for there to be more visibility from CLT across the service. Regular staff bulletins are going down well, and focus will need to be maintained to ensure the information flow continues and upward dialogue encouraged.

The implementation of the LAP provides an opportunity to develop a programme of community engagement. This is a key theme emerging in the LAP. However, keeping both the library doors open and the need to get out into the community is proving problematic because of low staffing levels and possibly a lack of skills to deliver these activities?

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# 5. Next Steps

**Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Claire Hogan, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her contact details are:  claire.hogan@local.gov.uk

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge.  We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

**For more information please contact**

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