

Report to: Place Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 14 July 2023

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Implementation of the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy 2022/23 – 2027/28

Purpose: An update report to outline the current service provision, progress against the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy 2022/23-2027/2028, current challenges and priorities and future developments for the Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Place Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- (1) To endorse the progress that has been made to deliver the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy 2022/23 – 2027/28 as set out in the report; and
 - (2) Note the current service priorities and challenges.
-

1 Background Information

1.1. East Sussex County Council's Library and Information Service delivers library services as outlined in the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy. The current strategy which the Library and Information Service are implementing was approved by the Lead Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Claire Dowling on 13 December 2021.

1.2 It was decided to bring forward the review of the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy 2018-2023 in light of the pandemic. The earlier review and adoption of an updated edition of the Strategy from 2022-2023 was to ensure the Library and Information Service responded to the changing needs identified and supported the recovery of our residents and businesses from the pandemic.

1.3 As part of the update there was a review of the extensive evidence base contained within the Technical Appendices of the Strategy. The review of the evidence base demonstrated that libraries can, and do support a wide range of needs, directly and indirectly. The review also provided strong evidence to support the continued adoption of the Library and Information Service Vision.

1.4 Following the review of the evidence base our Vision, remains unchanged: to provide a Library and Information Service that promotes reading and knowledge as a route to leading fulfilling lives, prioritising our resources and expertise to support the needs of residents and communities in East Sussex to achieve four key outcomes:

- improving child and adult literacy and numeracy
- supporting the economy
- better health and wellbeing
- increasing digital inclusion

1.5 The Strategic Outcomes were developed on the basis that library services support a wide range of needs, directly and indirectly. They enable the team to support the Council's four overarching priority outcomes of driving sustainable economic growth, keeping vulnerable people safe, helping people help themselves, and making best use of resources in the short and long term, as well as enabling us to deliver the Libraries Connected Universal Library Offer which aims to connect communities, improve wellbeing and promote equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity.

1.6 In terms of implementation, each Strategic Outcome is delivered through a range of different offers, or services, provided according to evidence of need.

1.7 The service delivers the offers from the network of 17 library buildings, through our elibrary, our community information service ESICS, website pages, and through outreach activities in community

settings. In addition, it was agreed as part of the adoption of the updated Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy in December 2021 that in order to increase access to books further, free reservations would be implemented so that people can reserve stock from across the whole catalogue and collect it at their local library, making the entire lending stock freely available to all residents.

1.8 As part of the adoption of the updated strategy the Library and Information Service continued to adopt three underlying transformation principles which ensure that the library service works effectively. These are working together, promoting use of libraries and increasing our capacity to add value to what we do. In addition, the Library and Information Service continued to adopt the following practices in relation to the delivery of services:

- targeting spending on stock and resources to ensure they support the delivery of Strategic Outcomes and continue to provide a range of quality materials to meet residents' needs so they can enjoy the pleasure and benefits of reading, as well as the better life chances that literacy and numeracy unlock;
- providing access to library services through our eLibrary, continuing to expand the range of online services and materials that are offered, including the provision of reliable information and services to promote good health, and support people to manage their own health and the health of those they care for;
- continuing to provide, both in libraries and online, training and guidance for people of all abilities seeking to learn and to work, so they are able to build skills and confidence in a supportive environment;
- focusing on outreach provision, working closely with other County Council services and partners to make sure that we directly reach the communities and individuals with the greatest needs;
- continuing to provide a range of services through our Children and Young People's Literacy offer, including literacy support and outreach work for pre-school and school age children and their families; and
- enhancing the role of libraries as cultural spaces within their communities, developing our Culture Offer to support the wider cultural economy of the county.

1.9 The pandemic has had a significant impact on the services which are delivered by the Library and Information Service, hence reviewing the Strategy a year earlier than planned. Libraries were closed in March 2020 as the Country went into lockdown and as services started to begin to open libraries followed national guidance adopting a number of different service delivery models to meet customer needs. Services such as 'click and collect' were developed, where customers could order stock remotely and collect from their local library.

1.10 During 2022/23 the service has been working hard to drive up footfall and has undertaken promotional campaigns with the support of the Communication's Team. Teams have remained committed to ensuring that customers are aware of all the Library and Information Service's available offers. The overarching aim has been to enable customers to return to post-Covid habits and support the four strategic outcomes. However, it should be noted that prior to Covid libraries were seeing reduced footfall and, therefore, when comparing figures to 2019-20 it should be noted that year on year, libraries were seeing a decline in visits. However, the service, through the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy, clearly demonstrates the areas where the service can support local communities and is committed to effectively using the resources available to support community needs.

1.11 Customer footfall and online library joiners continue to be monitored. Efforts continue to build on the success of last year (2022/23), continuing to drive increased footfall to the Library and Information Service within East Sussex.

1.12 Below are some of the Library and Information Services, key performance data:

- By year end 759,005 visitors came to a library in 2022-23, this compares with just over a million visits in 2019-20, meaning that visits are approximately 75% of pre covid numbers, but importantly a 47% increase on visitor numbers in 2021-22. When considering this count, it is important to note planned closures for capital refurbishments and also flooding at Wadhurst and works at Bexhill which would have impacted overall outturn. Additionally, East Sussex County Council takes part in Libraries Connected benchmarking as part of covid recovery and the average return to pre-covid footfall currently stands at 70%, therefore, East Sussex is doing well and in the upper tier of recovery with footfall and visitor numbers nationally.

- Footfall to refurbished libraries in the month of March 2023 increased on average by 500 visits. Teams have cited changes in demographics as a result of the refurbishments, and positive comments at Rye for the change in location of the children's library, so works locally have shown early signs of impact and being well received.
- In 2022-23 487,068 downloads of eMagazines and eNewspapers were achieved, 166% above target. Targets have been updated for 2023-24 to take into account popularity of e-stock, and teams continue to benchmark and watch trends nationally with Libraries Connected.
- Physical stock is up 14% when comparing to last year, with a total of 772,300 issues, currently placing libraries at approximately 81% of pre-Covid volumes.
- In total approx. 1.9 million issues and renewals took place of Library and Information items, both online and hard copy across the 17 libraries.
- In 2022/23 25,802 individuals attended library events. We will continue to offer a range of events to promote reading for pleasure and the strategy priorities for 2023-24 and to support access to the library and wider recovery.

2 Supporting Information

2.1 In light of the new needs analysis, information and evidence, the service produced an updated edition of the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy for 2022/23 to 2027/28 which addresses emerging needs and reinforces the work of the Library and Information Service to support residents who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable, whilst continuing to provide a high-quality range of universal services for everyone in East Sussex. Implementation of the Library Strategic Commissioning Strategy will take place over the lifetime of the strategy. However, significant progress has been made in the first 16 months, with a range of new library services developed and implemented during this period. In addition, the government has appointed Baroness Elizabeth Sanderson of Welton to help develop a new national strategy for libraries to make sure public libraries are providing the best possible service for their communities. It is believed that the national strategy will focus on new ideas to improve library service provision and will help to formulate innovative new policy ideas. This strategy will be published in 2023 and will shape the governments proposed future public library service delivery and will replace the national 2016 strategy.

Key Successes

2.2 The East Sussex Libraries and Information Service offer opportunities to support reading and literacy (from Bookstart programmes for the under 5s to the Step into Reading scheme for emerging adult readers), foster digital inclusion (supporting access to the internet and digital services in libraries), support economic growth (through the British Library business support offer, delivered locally), support health & wellbeing (through Reading Friends, which are groups that come together to read with the aim of tackling loneliness by bringing people together to read, chat and share stories) and are embedded in their communities (early years settings, older residents' homes). Since the adoption of the Strategy and when implementation commenced in April 2022 there have been a number of key successes, which have included:

- Refurbishment of library buildings. Work has continued to ensure that our buildings are safe, in a good state of repair and that they meet the needs of our customers, and we have continued with our extensive refurbishments programme. Work since the adoption of the latest strategy document has taken place at Rye, Newhaven and Hollington. Improvements have been made to the layout to enhance the customer experience and where possible, reduce our carbon footprint and energy costs. Children's areas and study spaces have been upgraded and new seating areas have been created so that customers can browse services in comfort. The improvements will support the library service to deliver its aims, including improving child and adult numeracy and literacy. Additionally, redecoration works have been undertaken, improving the front façade of buildings, assisting with improving the overall street scene and town centre.
- The Summer Reading Challenge continues to inspire many young readers. As part of the 2022 reading challenge children of all ages were invited to join workshop events at libraries across the County. Events included the Tree Fellas, an interactive storytelling workshop, and a Wild World Summer Reading Challenge Tour with children's poet, performer and illustrator Ed Boxall which included a fabulous mix of songs, poems and stories. Youngsters also had the chance to meet two award-winning authors, Tony De Saulles and Rob Lloyd Jones, at special author events. Currently the service is running the 2023 Summer Reading Challenge and over the coming weeks we hope to improve on the success of 2022.

- Support for the East Sussex Refugee community. The Library and Information Service has supported the refugee community through all the library services which are outlined in the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy but in addition bespoke support has been provided through an English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) tutor, support through the Step into Reading Volunteers and a series of dual language Storytimes. External funding has been secured for the next two years to support this ever-growing emerging need and the Service will provide dedicated outreach activity to support the refugee community to access the library service and benefit from the services it provides.
- The service continues to support national library events. The Service follows the Libraries Connected Universal Calendar, and curates an annual plan of events and activities to drive footfall and help fulfil the Strategy aims. In 2022, teams supported national Libraries Week and held a series of events across the county to celebrate. Libraries Week allows the service to benefit from the national campaign, but also highlight what is on offer locally and showcase how libraries can be inspiring and support learning for all.
- Refresh of the Council's People's Network. The Library and Information Service is committed to providing free computer and internet access, as well as access to free WIFI to our customers. The service is also committed to increasing digital inclusion. During 2022 our network of devices were completely refreshed and upgraded. As a Council we have invested significantly over the last year to ensure that our computer provision in our libraries can meet the identified needs. All monitors and desktops were upgraded to an improved specification, operating systems were upgraded to windows 10, software upgraded to more recent versions and new software introduced to the offer. Each customer computer has access to the internet and a large array of new software and digital resources including, but not limited, to the following: internet access, Microsoft Office package, Image editing software, Sound recording/editing software, Video editing software, Web cams, Accessibility options including screen reading and magnifying options, Free in-Library access to paid subscription resources such as Ancestry, Find My Past and other research tools. By improving the range of digital resources available, the libraries team are committed to showcasing this to customers to help promote the free access to these tools to support job applications and completion of homework, amongst other things.
- The service has attracted a number of authors. One of Britain's bestselling children's authors visited Seaford library in April 2023. Jacqueline Wilson, who is best known for creating the cherished characters of Tracy Beaker and Hetty Feather, talked about her books, how she writes and how to become a writer. Jacqueline also read from her new book 'The Other Edie Trimmer', a heart-warming time slip adventure story about family and friendship and answered questions from the audience.
- The Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, chose to visit Eastbourne library in March as part of his decade long tour of UK libraries. The E to G Libraries Tour, ran from March 17 to March 23 and was the latest leg of Simon's ten-year adventure celebrating UK libraries. Using the alphabet as a compass, his journey celebrates the library as one of the great and necessary institutions.
- The service continues to work hard holding a number of events to attract more people back into libraries. A special programme of Christmas events ran throughout December. Adults and children were invited to get into the Christmas spirit and visit their local library to celebrate the festive season. Free events included Christmas craft sessions for adults and children, festive author led storytelling events, seasonal Rhymetime and Storytelling sessions, and a lively orchestral production of 'A Christmas Carol'. East Sussex Libraries also ran a series of events across the county during May half term to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. Free events included Jubilee themed Rhymetime and Storytime sessions, crown making craft workshops and author led storytelling events. Going forward, school holiday activities will be available at all libraries, to further promote the service, supporting children and families to create a habitual routine of library visits.

Strategic Outcomes

2.3 A summary of the progress in implementing the strategy against the four Strategic Outcomes is provided below.

Improving child and adult literacy and numeracy

2.4 Central to this offer has been our continued support to children helping them to recover lost education, build their confidence and increase their social interaction by providing homework clubs with

enrichment activities to support their physical and mental health. Homework clubs have been a popular additional community support service in some areas of the County. We have delivered homework clubs aimed at 5–11-year-olds in selected libraries. These have been targeted to those in need and designed to be accessible. The homework clubs have been supported by a member of staff or volunteer led and provide a dedicated space and time for children to do their homework. In addition, they have provided an opportunity to be heard reading and an opportunity to catch up on their learning, with supervision and support. Children can, of course, use the library at any time for study or reading for pleasure and we have continued to offer enrichment activities to support wellbeing, such as creative writing.

2.5 The Summer Reading Challenge supported 5,714 children in East Sussex to maintain their reading skills during the 2022 school summer holidays by reading six books, and librarians actively supported 74 schools across the county, including in areas of highest need with visits to encourage participation in the challenge. 41% of participants surveyed highlighted the assemblies led by a librarian as the means by which they heard about the challenge in 2022.

2.6 The Library and Information Service provides rhymetimes/storytimes sessions in all libraries subject to the availability of volunteers. Supported by 32 volunteers, 24 rhymetimes and storytime sessions take place weekly across the county. This supports preschool learning and development of speech and language, as well as supporting social skills. Teams always ensure staff and volunteers are trained appropriately to maximise the benefits of the sessions for families.

2.7 In 2022 the Children's book award returned yielding positive results. 1,560 children benefitted from author visits and activities within a school. The service supported schools by selecting a range of titles for them and providing inspiration and ideas for book clubs and related activities which were showcased in the final event. In addition, we have continued with the chargeable service of providing advice on the management of school libraries. The book award again took place in 2023. This year we had 50 schools taking part in the whole award, with approximately 170 attendees attending the celebration event. 5 authors visited 12 schools in March and April. We received 320 competition entries which were marked by the librarian team and prizes awarded. The winner of the East Sussex Children's book award 2023 was Michael Mann with Ghostcloud.

2.8 We continue to provide literacy and numeracy support for adults with low literacy and numeracy skills. We have very successfully developed our Step into Reading programme across the county to help people to improve their reading. Step into Reading matches volunteers with people who would like to improve their reading at their own pace, perhaps to improve their job chances or to be able to support their children's learning.

2.9 We provide fiction and non-fiction reading materials for all ages and needs. We continue to provide a wider range of quality materials and tailored support for people's different needs, so they can enjoy the pleasure of reading and the better life chances that literacy and numeracy unlock for people. We have continued to ensure that our spending on stock is closely aligned to the Strategic Outcomes for this Strategy. We have and will continue to maintain the proportion of our stock spending on children's fiction and non-fiction, to support child literacy and ensure we provide resources to support adults who experience difficulties with reading. We have also spent proportionally more of our stock fund on resources and information to enable people to take greater ownership of their own health and wellbeing, to be more resilient, increasingly independent, self-sufficient and resourceful.

Supporting the economy

2.10 We have increased our services which support people into employment, targeting support for 16–24-year-olds who are experiencing high levels of unemployment. We have provided access to training, skills and qualifications, as well as interview support. We continue to work with East Sussex County Council colleagues and external partners to help job seekers and provide training so they can access websites and information to help with their job search and improve their skills. Library teams have also supported work experience and volunteer placements (supporting initiatives such as Duke of Edinburgh award) for young people, with a total of 45 placements in 2022-23 to give young people experience and workplace skills to support further education and employment opportunities.

2.11 The Library and Information Service offers volunteer led IT for You sessions at most libraries and these support people with developing their IT skills. During 2022/23 over 2,000 adults have been supported through these sessions with IT skills that can help them into work or study. This is supplemented by free online training resources at all libraries to help people look for and secure jobs as

well as improving their ICT skills. Resources include access to job sites, video guides on how to write a CV, as well as support to use different IT packages.

2.12 We have provided Code Clubs in a number of libraries. Our Code Clubs are part of a nationwide network of coding clubs for children aged 8-12 years old. Using specially created Code Club materials, the sessions are designed to build confidence and encourage creativity in 3 different coding languages, helping children learn computing skills that could unlock a wide range of future career opportunities. We also offer other STEM activities to help children learn new skills and build their confidence.

2.13 We continue to offer online accredited courses for individuals to improve their skills and gain qualifications in English, Maths and ICT. We have improved our offer by giving the option of accessing tutor support remotely so that learners have the flexibility to study at a centre or at home.

Better health and wellbeing

2.14 We have worked hard to develop initiatives to encourage people, including our volunteers, to return to library buildings, building social interaction and helping to combat isolation. We continue to support many groups and individuals disproportionately affected by the pandemic and/or other issues including, but not restricted to, people with dementia and people with learning difficulties, people in temporary accommodation, refugees and asylum seekers by working with partners to deliver appropriate services and activities. One popular initiative, Reading Friends (led by the Reading Agency) has been successful in 2022/23, both in terms of volunteers taking part in leading sessions but also for participants. These groups have been well received by customers in five libraries and seen over 55 sessions delivered in 12 months. Additionally, libraries have responded to local need. Uckfield and Crowborough libraries have trialed new initiatives to support wellbeing. Knit and natter and Ukrainian support group sessions have been developed as a result of local needs and engagement with ESCC operational teams.

2.15 As part of the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy's revised offer for better health and wellbeing, a comprehensive range of self-help materials are now provided both in libraries and online. The Library and Information Service has developed Wellbeing Boxes to help people to take ownership of their health. These boxes contain interactive resources, local service information and literature about different areas of wellbeing, using the NHS '5 steps to mental wellbeing' the Library and Information Service also has introduced Teen Wellbeing Bags at Seaford Library. Reading Well stock (delivered by the Reading Agency) also supports this area of the strategy, with a 143% increase of Reading Well stock to 2187 issues in 2022-23. Libraries also have Reminiscence Resources to loan. By partnering with local organisations staff and volunteers have received training on running successful reminiscence sessions for 2023-24. Participants have learnt how Reminiscence can give people with dementia a sense of competence and confidence through using a skill they still have.

2.16 We have worked hard to rebuild the Home Library Service, following the pandemic where we saw our numbers of visits in 2021/2022 fall to around 554. The free Home Library Service continues to seek to improve engagement with vulnerable people who are lonely or isolated. The service is supported by volunteers who deliver books and other resources from the local library to people who cannot easily use a library due to disability or frailty or who are caring for someone who cannot be left. It provides invaluable social contact as well as supporting reading for wellbeing and pleasure. 748 Home Library Service visits took place from volunteers in 2022-23. These volunteers deliver books and other resources from the local library, and visits last year increased by 26% on the previous year. This helps these customers maintain the pleasure and wellbeing benefits that come from reading, as well as the important social contact from a regular visit by a volunteer.

Increasing digital inclusion

2.17 We continue to work to ensure vulnerable people have access to online services, including health services, through our well-equipped and updated People's network computers and Wi-Fi. We continue to provide connectivity to the internet and training for those who need to improve their digital skills.

2.18 The Library and Information Service provides an extensive number of activities, which has grown significantly in the last year, to increase digital inclusion, including the support provided by IT for You sessions which are run by volunteers. In addition, the service provides, a basic course to help people to get online (Learn My Way), and Library and Information Service Tutors support people to gain qualifications in ICT, English and Maths when they undertake online courses.

2.19 We continue to provide free access to the People's network computers and Wi-Fi in all libraries and promote this offer more effectively.

2.20 Volunteers continue to provide personal support in libraries and community settings, prioritised according to local need. This has been expanded to offer support to people to use the eLibrary confidently to support increased access to digital resources.

Capital Investment

2.21 East Sussex County Council has committed to a capital programme of expenditure for libraries until 2030. Each year we will work on projects to refurbish our libraries to ensure they are safe, in a good state of repair and that they meet the needs of our customers.

2.22 In terms of our buildings, our refurbishment programme is providing the vital investment required to maintain the library buildings and ensure they are designed to best meet the needs of customers in the future. When undertaking refurbishments, we will review how the library is used by customers and the needs of the local community. Any work to refurbish library buildings will be in line with the Council's target of achieving carbon neutrality.

2.23 Through the delivery of the current strategy it is estimated that for the 17 library buildings, we will invest around £2.5 million through the refurbishment programme over the life of the strategy or approximately £513,000 per year. This is in addition to the annual maintenance costs of around £241,000. The Library and Information Service continues to assess space within our libraries to ensure they are used to their full potential. Since the implementation of the Strategy in 2018, the way customers use the library space continues to change. The Library and Information Service continue to identify whether library services could be delivered in the same locality in a more cost-effective way. Operational bases and customer facing services for parking enforcement staff have been provided in Hastings, Eastbourne and Lewes libraries since July 2018, with these services expanded to Rye and Bexhill in 2020. This joint venture enables parking services to be delivered at a lower cost due to the sharing of overheads and other operational costs, as well as generating income for the Library and Information Service. We also let space in our buildings to a range of partners including Citizens Advice and the NHS in Uckfield Library as well as additional leases with the NHS in both Heathfield and Seaford Libraries. The Service will continue to seek new partnerships where appropriate to share accommodation with other organisations, in order to reduce costs or to deliver a better service in conjunction with partners, or both.

Outreach

2.24 Outreach sessions continue to be delivered to engage those who are hard to reach. We work closely with other County Council services and partners to make sure that we reach communities and individuals with the greatest needs. We continue to promote and deliver our offer, working closely with other services in different settings including children's centres, schools, youth centres and community venues.

2.25 The Library and Information Service outreach provision has included a dedicated support librarian in Hailsham which was paid for from Section 106 money. The dedicated resource has been able to support regular story and rhyme times in preschool and early years settings. In addition, they have been able to support children's centres in the development and delivery of mixed activities to support literacy in the local community.

2.26 We continue to explore opportunities where outreach will provide the best way to engage with local communities to achieve the strategic objectives set out in the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy.

Stock and eLibrary

2.27 We continue to provide a wider range of quality materials and tailored support for people's different needs, so they can enjoy the pleasure of reading and the better life chances that literacy and numeracy unlock for people. We ensure that our spending on stock is closely aligned to the Strategic Outcomes for this Strategy. We maintain the proportion of our stock spending on children's fiction and non-fiction, to support child literacy and ensure we provide resources to support adults who experience difficulties with reading. We also spend proportionally more of our stock fund on resources and information to enable people to take greater ownership of their own health and wellbeing, to be more resilient, increasingly independent, self-sufficient and resourceful. We provide free reservations so that people can reserve stock from across the whole catalogue and collect it at their local library, making the entire lending stock freely available to all residents. The choice of titles and websites available to download from the eLibrary, the online library service, have been increased and prioritised according to countywide needs.

2.28 The County Council continues to invest significantly (£464,400 for 2023-24) in the stock fund annually and has continued to promote the eLibrary in a range of ways. As loans of eBooks and eAudiobooks from the eLibrary increase, expenditure has also changed to meet emerging needs. Expenditure on materials in electronic formats increased by 30% in 2022/23. New services have been added to online reference resources including Kompass (business directory) and Aptem (employment). In a recent survey, customers rated both the choice of books and the condition of the stock as higher this year compared to 2018, when the last user survey was undertaken (see Appendix 1).

Customer feedback

2.29 The national and independent Public Library User Survey (PLUS) took place in October 2021. This is carried out every three years to give a broad understanding of how customers (over 16) rate Library Services. The results for 2021 demonstrate the effectiveness of the previous new Strategy in maintaining high quality services as planned. 95% rated their overall levels of satisfaction with libraries as very good/good compared to 91% previously, and 97% of customers rated customer care as very good/good, compared to 94% previously. A summary of the findings of the October 2021 can be found at Appendix 1.

Budget and staffing

2.30 The report describes in detail the progress being made to deliver the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy in the context of a reduced budget. The gross budget for the Library and Information Service for 2023/24 is £4,740,600, with a net budget of £3,894,100. This follows on from savings of £240k in 2021/22 and £1.9m delivered through the Libraries Transformation Programme between 2014/15 and 2018/19. Staffing levels have decreased from 168.3 FTE in 2010 to 150 FTE in January 2015 to the current staffing level of 96.5 FTE posts. In addition, we have the support of over 300 volunteers. Library user survey data provides evidence that the County Council continues to provide a high-quality library service, with overall customer satisfaction levels for libraries at 95%.

Future Service Developments

2.31 As well as the continued delivery of the Strategic Libraries Commissioning Strategy, outlined above, there are four areas which are highlighted below which we would like to draw the Committee's attention.

2.32 We continue to seek opportunities to work with partners to reduce our building costs. We continuously review our buildings, space and partnership opportunities to generate rental income to reinvest in services. Income from partners helps to offset the running costs of libraries, whilst helping them to reduce their expenditure on premises by co-locating. We will continue to assess and seek out opportunities to utilise these in the best way possible. Most libraries have movable shelving and furniture which enable the layout to be changed to accommodate a wide range of different potential uses. As a result of continued efforts to maximise the opportunity for leases and medium-term rentals with local partners and other East Sussex County Council teams, the Library and Information Service generates approximately £300,000 per year. The Library and Information Service will continue to identify whether library services could be delivered in the same locality in a more cost-effective way. The Service will also continue to seek out new partnerships to share accommodation with other organisations, in order to reduce costs or to deliver a better service in conjunction with other services, or both.

2.33 The Library and Information Service will continue to support tackling social disadvantage through the free access of services and a wide range of reading material to everyone. The services offered will continue to support reading and literacy and seek to increase skills in disadvantaged communities, addressing the impact of the pandemic on literacy. Through their day-to-day work, the libraries team will continue to support early-years development, giving children a fun and welcoming introduction to language skills. They complement the critical literacy work done in the classroom by providing children with free, universal access to the rich world of opportunity that can be unlocked by reading for pleasure. From comics to classics and reference books to bestsellers, East Sussex libraries will continue to empower independent reading and learning, unconstrained by cost. In addition, the service will continue to support parental literacy, through Step into Reading.

2.34 Another key area of work for the team is promoting the digital offers which are available in East Sussex libraries. The Service offer opportunities to reduce the number of digitally excluded residents in the County and increase the level of digital skills. People without digital skills are at an increased level of disadvantage through unemployment, low wage employment, social isolation, and poverty. Libraries

play an important role in supporting individuals and communities most in need. Key to successful delivery of this is ensuring that people are aware of the services available in their local library.

2.35 Finally, the team will continue to work with Adult Social Care's Partnership Team to support the refugee communities. As mentioned earlier in this report, the service has secured additional funding to ensure that this important area of work is developed in the coming years to ensure that the service is able to support the wider community. The Library and Information Service will provide a programme of targeted initiatives, in libraries and through outreach in community settings, over 24 months, to support the refugee communities to improve their literacy, advance learning to improve their employment chances, improve their ability to access online services for information, to combat isolation and support integration into East Sussex communities.

Challenges moving forward

2.36 Moving forward the service has four key challenges which it will seek to address as part of the work needed to deliver the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy.

2.37 The Library and Information Service has continued to see a reduction in visitor numbers when compared to 2019-20. Although visitor numbers are improving, they are still underperforming when compared to 2019-20. By April 2023, Libraries had approximately 75% of visitors compared to the same period in 2019. Key to increasing footfall will be continuing to work with Communication colleagues to ensure that the work of the Library and Information Service is highlighted throughout the County to raise awareness of services offered and to ensure that the services resources are maximised for the benefit of the whole community.

2.38 A further challenge for the service moving forward will be maintaining our library buildings because of the increased costs of services and building materials. In terms of our buildings, our refurbishment programme has been providing the vital investment required to maintain the library buildings and ensure they are designed to best meet the needs of customers into the future. Increasing building costs will provide a challenging environment in which to work to ensure that our facilities continue to be places people want to visit.

2.39 Another key challenge for the service will be the recruitment staff to the Library and Information Service. Although vacancies attract applications there are still difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified individuals who can support users. Given the ever-developing service offers which are provided by the Library and Information Service, individuals that work in the service need to be community focused and flexible. Recruiting the right people to roles in the Library and Information Service continues to be challenging.

2.40 Finally anti-social behaviour is an increasing problem in libraries. Increasing numbers of incidents are being reported that impact on other customers and our staff. Incidents include throwing of books, drinking alcohol in the library, running around, and refusing to leave premises at the end of the day are just some of the reported incidents. Teams have processes in place for managing incidents and work with the police and local schools, where appropriate, to tackle issues, however, on-going incidents and the impact that they have on wider users should not be underestimated.

3 Conclusion

3.1 This report provides an update of how the changes to the Library and Information Service agreed by Lead Member as part of the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy have been introduced and their positive impact on our customers. The offers outlined in the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy 2022/23 to 2027/28 have been developed following a comprehensive review of the data. The Strategic Outcomes allow for some flexibility in developing offers which continue to meet the challenges that the community face going forward.

3.2 It is recommended that the Committee note the services delivered by the Library and Information Service, the service priorities and the challenges foreseen moving forward and endorse the progress that has been made to deliver the Libraries Strategic Commissioning Strategy as set out in this report and its appendix.

RUPERT CLUBB
Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Contact Officer: Nick Skelton
Tel. No. 01273 482994
Email: Nick.skelton@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None