1 Executive Summary

Wiltshire Library Service has some strong foundations that can be built on when developing a vision and strategy for the future. This peer challenge is one of the steps in the review process.

Both employees and volunteers are an asset to the service with partners, customers and other council services recognising them for their flexibility, inclusivity and adaptability. They will be a key group to engage in the review process. Not only are they the face of the library (and the council) but they are also embedded in their communities and have the knowledge of what works in their library for the area it serves. The new senior management team will provide the drive to ensure the service is focussed on being the best it can be.

The Leader and Cabinet Member are strong advocates for the service and despite the financial challenges are ambitious for the future and what the library can do to support the Council priorities.

The Library Service embodies the guiding themes of the Council Business Plan and contributes across a range of priorities from Best Start in Life to the skills agenda. There are opportunities to contribute even further by engaging with local business and creative industry to support the wider economy.

Libraries are recognised as a key community asset and their response to the pandemic ensured their profile was raised both within the council and with external partners. At a service level, there is a good understanding of how libraries can be used to support priorities. More work to ensure all managers in the Council 'Think Libraries First' should be a key consideration.

There is positive engagement with both internal and external partners to the council. A range of initiatives are delivered from libraries to support Public Health, Children's Centres and Family Learning. Libraries are seen as non-judgemental, safe spaces that support a range of groups, many of whom are vulnerable and need support.

There is a need to articulate the vision and purpose of the library service mapped against the council's aims and the national universal library offers. This can be achieved by working with all stakeholders and the wider community to co-create the vision and the strategy.

The vision and purpose needs to be aligned to how you will deliver the service through a range of both physical and digital spaces. There is already a mixed delivery model with co-location, library buildings, mobile libraries and the use of volunteers. Assets can also be used to provide income, and this should be explored as part of the review. This should be in conjunction with the council's review and rationalisation of assets.

Volunteers are a key part of the library delivery model, and they value the opportunity to work in their community. The offer could be expanded to a wider age range, particularly young people and those wanting to return to employment. This will enhance the skills and experience for future employment.

Children and young people should be involved in the review process, and this was a voice that was 'silent' during the peer challenge process.

There is an opportunity as part of the review and strategy development to consider the establishment of 'Friends of Library Groups' who can access funding. It will be

important to ensure that the constitution of these groups is agreed and that they support library priorities.

Engagement with communities by the library service is under-developed and the library review is a good opportunity to open new channels of communication with a wide range of groups, users and non-users. Tapping into existing council mechanisms for community engagement such as 'Community Conversations' and the Youth Council will be a starting point. Going out to communities will be key, particularly as Wiltshire has almost half of its population living in rural towns and villages. A range of suggestions are included in the report.

Marketing and publicity around library services and events is limited to Facebook pages, X (formerly Twitter) and some local radio exposure. The council website is difficult to navigate to access library pages. As part of the library review, consideration will need to be given to a range of outlets for publicity including ones that are accessible to those parts of the community who do not have internet access or transport.

Going forward, the service should follow up with partners and the communities involved in the peer challenge. They are interested in the future of the service and the co-creation of the vision and strategy can be developed by continuing these conversations.

2 Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the virtual conversations, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations and Arts Council England (ACE). The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

1. Take the learning from the Peer Review as the starting point for conversations and co-creation with staff, councillors, volunteers, communities and partners to develop the vision and purpose for the library service. This will lead to the creation of the library strategy and will ensure that all stakeholders, internal and external, have contributed to the future direction of the library service and have ownership of it.

2. Identify your library offer which considers staffing capacity, but articulates how, by connecting with partners and volunteers you can expand that offer and capacity.

3. Clearly define the purpose and requirement of library delivery and the possibility of revenue streams from the use of assets. This is through council owned buildings, co-location, community buildings, mobile libraries and virtual spaces. There are already some excellent examples of good practice re co-location e.g., the Campus facilities and community hubs.

4. Embed the voice of your communities in your strategy, especially the voice of young people. They need to know that their council is working to ensure they develop their potential, provide a place they can live and work and enjoy the beautiful area they live in.

5. Ensure the value and purpose of the library service is clearly stated. It is a library first and foremost that delivers community support, information and signposting.

6. At all levels of the organisation 'Think Library First' when considering services that contribute to the Council's Business Plan.

3 Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

This peer challenge is part of a programme of on-line peer challenges of councils' culture and library services supported by the Arts Council England ACE) and provided by the Local Government Association (LGA). These challenges follow the recognised principles adopted across the LGA's range of peer challenges, both corporate and service specific. They are intended to help councils improve their cultural and library services and generate wider learning for the sector.

3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced 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 for Wiltshire Council were:

- Julie Bell, Interim Director of Education, Skills & Culture, Lancashire County Council
- Councillor Henry Higgins, London Borough of Hillingdon
- Lynne Taylor, Relationship Manager, Libraries (South West), Arts Council England
- Jill Scarr, Peer Challenge Manager, LGA Associate

3.2 The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that the peer challenge 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. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met 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 2 days meeting people from Wiltshire Council in an online visit, conducted on Microsoft Teams, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 60 people including a range of Council and library staff and volunteers together with councillors, external partners and both users and non-users of library services.
- Gathered information and views from more than 15 meetings and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 70 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of 1 person spending nearly 2 weeks in Wiltshire Council.

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 the online visit on 26 July 2023. In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members and bringing Arts Council England experience, and not as professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time.

The peer team appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

3.3 Scope and focus

The purpose of the peer challenge is to help Wiltshire Council begin to define the Library Service's purpose, vision for the future and highlight opportunities to make meaningful transformational change and further align with the vision of the Council's Business Plan.

In particular, the Council asked the peer team to focus on the following issues:

- How can the library review process be improved to ensure the new library strategy is fully adopted across the council and able to deliver a vision for the service for the next 5 to 10 years?

- Is the library service's contribution to council strategic objectives understood by the whole council?

- How can we engage with library users, non-users and other stakeholders to help inform the strategy and ensure it meets the needs of the communities the libraries serve?