

Report title: Essex Libraries Pre-Draft Consultation – further opportunities for People and Families to support the strategy.	
Report to: People and Families Scrutiny Committee	
Report author: Cllr Louise McKinlay – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance	
Date: 9 September 2021	For: Discussion and identifying any additional input
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County Divisions affected: All	

1. Introduction

In a post covid world there is a need to review and update the Future Library Strategy and set out a new and ambitious vision for the service. Essex County Council (ECC) propose to use a set of guiding principles that shape the new direction for the service.

ECC intend to engage with residents on changes in a two-pronged approach. Firstly, to set the scene and gain feedback on the principle and direction of the service, and secondly to introduce the draft strategy and launch the consultation process.

2. Action required

The Committee is asked to consider and provide input to how the library service both now and in the future can support People and Families and the wider Council strategy.

3. Background

ECC were one of the first in the country to re-open library services and staff have gone above and beyond to deliver services through very challenging times. During lockdown the service developed over one hundred virtual sessions which included which has attracted over 100,000 views. This included:

- Rhymetime/Rapid Rhymetimes (for families in a hurry!),
- children's author events
- children's creative writing workshop
- various online craft sessions

ECC have adapted the face-to-face school class visit pack to online and engaged live with primary aged children via Zoom. As well as attended virtual Summer Read assemblies via Zoom with a number of primary schools. With face-to-face sessions now re-opening ECC still have a commitment to providing online, virtual sessions to complement our existing offer.

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Our library staff and volunteers continued with the Home Library Service during lockdown and carried out befriending calls to those who were potentially socially isolated.

ECC promoted our e-resources through various social media platforms with guides on how to access these services plus a podcast on how to keep on reading. Find My Past and Ancestry were made available from home and proved to be very popular.

Since re-opening ECC have restarted our popular activities including book-clubs, rhyme-times and the Summer Reading Challenge of which 16,000 children have signed up. ECC have introduced a really different offer, which includes things like mindfulness sessions aimed at new parents and children, free theatre events that promote books and reading and have taken part in outreach attending the Holidays Activity Food programme to run events.

Reading Friends has helped those who may feel isolated and this has been particularly successful with the partnership we have Colchester Refugee Action. For our Essex Book Festival we ran 12 events (11 in person, 1 online) with 332 attendees (numbers were limited due to socially distancing).

ECC have developed a calendar of new and existing events including;

- Winter Reading Challenge for children to continue reading over the winter,
- Love Your Library days,
- Family Learning Fayres in partnership with ACL and Talk, Listen, Cuddle. We have more author events across the county as well as Essex Authors day that will involve workshops for writers.
- We are planning to be part Silver Sunday which is national day for older people which helps tackle loneliness and social isolation.
- We will be celebrating Black History Month.
- From September we are launching Reading Well where all libraries will be promoting and displaying books on mental health and well-being for children and adults

ECC have joined TLC (The Libraries Consortium) which means that Essex residents have access to an additional 6 million items of stock.

The ambition for the Library service is to focus on three key areas:

The aim for the library service is to build on the Councils agenda of Renewal, Equality, Ambition and Climate Change by focusing on three key areas:

- **Service Delivery:**
Strong offer of core activities that we know communities value. A strong focus on recovery, growing footfall into the service, both online and a new and exciting digital offer.

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- **Improvements to Library Infrastructure:**

Buildings and equipment that support our ambition and provide great spaces for communities to use.

Buildings that are welcoming and accessible places at the heart of communities. Technology enabled to support communities access services and stay connected.

- **Supporting communities and families:**

ECC aim is to deliver on the broader Council agenda and the strategic priorities.

To support equality of opportunity and the Levelling Up agenda ECC will promote and market the comprehensive library service offer to all residents to make them aware of the wide range opportunities. This offer ranges from preparing children to start school through initiatives such as Bookstart, Baby and Toddler Rhymetime sessions, free access to Wi-Fi and public network computers in all libraries to the extensive online offer which includes access to reading and learning materials.

Libraries support the climate change ambition of ECC with the aim of **'a high-quality environment'** by encouraging residents to consider the environment through events and activities, using libraries as recycling drop points, distribution of cloth nappies through the Registration Service points, working with partners such as 'Active Essex' to encourage children and families to explore nature and the outdoors. The mobile library service will look to review its current operation in terms of routes and vehicles ensuring we are reaching all communities and those most at risk of isolation. We aim for libraries to be the building block to re-connecting with residents and support revitalising communities.

Libraries represent all segments of our communities. We will use data and insight to encourage residents from low use demographic segments to use their library through targeted services and events.

Libraries support **'health, wellbeing and independence for all ages'** through our 'ShelfHelp' pre-selected resources for adults covering areas such as Mindfulness, CBT, coping with anxiety etc. Libraries support those in the community most at risk of loneliness and social isolation through projects such as 'Reading Friends' and through our long standing 'home library service' which brings the service to those that can't visit a physical building.

Libraries will support 'a strong, inclusive and sustainable economy' through job clubs and back to work support, enabling residents to work and study in our spaces, providing good technology that enables free access to a wide range of online and physical resources to support learning and development.

We are collaborating with ECC functions to ensure that Essex is a **'good place for children and families to grow'** We aim to support this further through the transition of various life stages including starting school, moving from primary to secondary school and leaving full time education to enter the world of employment

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We have made significant progress modernising and improving technology, we have piloted and introduced tablets, we are supporting residents to self-serve and helping residents become digitally connected.

4. How We Will Deliver

Our strategy will set out how we will work and makes a clear commitment to working in a joined up, collaborative, open-minded and evidence-based way. This is essential if we are to continue to deliver our priorities and work hard to deliver against the Council's broader strategic aims. We are supporting our front-line staff and equipping them with the right skills so that they are best placed to support residents and deliver on the aims and ambitions of the strategy.

ECC will seek out opportunities to put libraries at the heart of our communities and identify how they can be used more and provide a modern offer including to those who are currently not using them.

To reach new customers (non-library users) and make them aware of the library offer (both physical and online resources) outreach events and activities will be undertaken. These will include working with partners/stakeholders and attending events such as school fetes, community events and having a presence at places of high footfall e.g. Colchester Zoo and shopping centre.

5. Update and Next Steps

The first step will be to consult on our key principles which is planned for September and following this we will consult on the draft strategy in October 2021. To identify what would attract non-users and encourage them to access library services it is planned to undertake a questionnaire, via social media, in order to gain insight to potential new library users.

We want the People and Families Scrutiny committee to give your valuable input at this pre-draft stage so that we can work together to meet the Council's strategic aims.

In supporting the County Council's strategic aims, the Committee is invited to contribute to the development of policy and strategy on the proposed ambitions and objectives of the library service in relation to supporting communities and families.

Delivery of the core library service and the library infrastructure are not directly within the remit of this Committee and are overseen by the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee. It is acknowledged that there could be some overlap with the other key strategic areas during discussion but it has been agreed in advance with the PAF Chairman that this should be limited to where it is considered relevant to the remit of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee.