Forward Plan reference number: FP/284/01/22

Report title: Adoption of the new plan for libraries: 'Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026'	
Report to: Cabinet	
Report author: Cllr Louise McKinlay, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships, and Performance	
Date: **19** April 2022	**For:** Decision
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County Divisions affected: All	

1. Everyone's Essex

1.1. As part of the Everyone's Essex, a refreshed strategy for the Library Service has been developed, which covers a range of agendas, but with a specific focus on Levelling Up and Climate Change. The new plan, "Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026", sets clear outcomes to support the wider ambitions of Essex County Council (ECC) for its residents.

1.2. The high-level aims set out in the plan are built on three pillars: Library Service and Literacy; Communications and Infrastructure; Supporting Communities and Levelling Up.

1.3. Underpinning these, are themes of equality of opportunity, empowering communities, harnessing technology, and making the most of our resources, to deliver a service that is modern, vibrant, and sustainable. It commits to keeping all 74 libraries open with investment in training and the upskilling of library staff.

1.4. The plan is ambitious in its aims to improve literacy for all as a source of pleasure and a key life skill, to encourage more people to use their library services for leisure and learning, to create safe welcoming spaces and to be a service which helps people on their way to fulfil their goals and aspirations.

1.5. There are no additional climate impacts created by the plan. Through its aims to improve infrastructure, develop electronic resources, and its contribution to recycling initiatives and the Circular Economy, it will support ECC's net zero commitments.

1.6. The full draft plan is in Appendix 1

2. Recommendations

2.1. Adopt the plan for Everyone's Library Service 2022- 2026 as at Appendix 1.

2.2. Agree that the plan supersedes Essex Future Library Services Strategy 2019 – 2024, and the remaining Transformation Reserve funds set aside for that previous strategy (£2.4m) should be directed towards Everyone's Library Service.

2.3. Approve the drawdown of £800,000 from the Transformation Reserve to support delivery of the elements of Everyone's Library Service set out in paragraph 6.1.2. The profile of spend for financial years 2022/23 and 2023/24 is set out in paragraph 6.1.3. Further formal requests will be made against the remaining £1.6m allocation as the detailed business cases are prepared.

3. Background and Proposal

3.1. The current libraries strategy, Essex Future Library Services Strategy 2019–2024, (FLS) has three main elements:

- Library refurbishments,
- Refresh of the library management systems (LMS) and
- Community Run Libraries (CRL).

3.2. Since 2019 this strategy has delivered some important refurbishments, including improvements to Wi-Fi and technology. The LMS work is nearing completion with highlights including a new staff system, joining the Libraries Consortium and launching a new content platform later this spring. However, the strategic decision to not close any libraries along with the global pandemic suppressed any appetite to establish community run libraries, and this element has not been delivered.

3.3. With a new Cabinet in place and the adoption of Everyone's Essex as well as the changes brought about by what we could see during and after the pandemic, we needed a new plan.

3.4. In September 2021, we drafted ideas for what a new plan would look like. The Deputy Leader / Cabinet Member engaged with stakeholders and held public webinars, where she outlined the direction. A draft plan was then developed for consultation.

3.5. An 8 week public consultation was launched on 26 November 2021 and closed on 21 January 2022. Essex residents and organisations gave their broad support to the Plan. Key internal and external stakeholders were also engaged and gave broad approval and helpful feedback. A summary of the feedback appears later in this section. The Consultation Analysis Report is in Appendix 2.

3.6. The draft plan has been updated to take account of the consultation feedback. While there were no major changes, the insight told us where individuals feel most passionately, helping us to prioritise the ambitions.

Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026: the three pillars

Pillar 1: Library Service and Literacy

3.6.1. Working to improve literacy for both children and adults is our top priority. Alongside families, schools, internal and external partners, we will help with school readiness, education catchup and literacy for life. By having up to date, appealing book stock, resources in a wide range of formats and delivering a programme of exciting events, we will encourage reading for pleasure and as a life skill.

3.6.2. Giving our staff the right skills and support while also exploring roles for volunteers to enhance our service will be part of delivering service excellence.

Pillar 2: Communications and Infrastructure

3.6.3. Our top priority in this pillar will be to improve communications with Essex residents to tell existing users and new audiences about the full range of services. We will look specifically at how we can focus communications by locality, interest or audience and we will do more to advertise library events.

3.6.4. Library buildings will be improved to ensure they are fit for purpose, accessible, and flexible spaces, in the right locations, where families feel comfortable and welcome. Any new library buildings or improvements will take account of the environmental impact for example by using natural light and other options for low-cost heating and air cooling, like solar panels and LED lighting. And we will look at our library spaces to see if there are opportunities to co-locate with other complementary services.

Pillar 3: Supporting Communities and Levelling Up

3.6.5. Expanding our outreach to those who can't access our physical sites and involvement of our communities in shaping the service are prominent in our plan.

3.6.6. The library service will play a crucial role in helping to support our communities to connect with each other and partners to enhance employability, wellbeing, culture and arts. We are keen to drive up use of library buildings and increase footfall to encourage greater use of library facilities, and so we are exploring options for some chargeable activities to run alongside and complement free activities. Hosting these activities could enable us to provide an enhanced offer, service or experience to appeal to our existing customers, new users and to raise awareness of libraries as a potential partner and venue for other organisations.

Summary of the Consultation Feedback

3.7. The consultation was hosted on Essex County Council's consultation portal for 8 weeks and was publicised extensively across the county. Social media activity reached hundreds of thousands of local people through posts on ECC and Essex Libraries social media channels as well as a Facebook advertising campaign. The survey was also prominent on both the ECC and Essex Libraries websites and social media channels throughout. The draft plan and survey were also shared directly with residents through resident and library newsletters. Prior and throughout the consultation, engagement was carried out with local, regional and national press, generating coverage in many local newspapers and on local radio stations.

3.8. Posters, popup banners and postcards were displayed in libraries and staff met with people in town centres to encourage participation. Every school was contacted and there was direct engagement with other groups including Young Essex Assembly, schools, faith leaders, and library clubs and groups.

3.9. We also engaged with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, The National Literacy Trust, and Libraries Connected.

3.10. We received 2,213 responses to the consultation - 2,185 from individuals and 28 responses from organisations. The analysis showed good support for the proposals in the Plan, with many showing strong agreement. There is significant alignment between individuals and groups.

3.11. Feedback from the key national bodies, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), The National Literacy Trust (NLT), and Libraries Connected (LC) was positive.

- NLT felt it was a very positive message. They particularly supported links to levelling up and the ambitions around partnerships.
- DCMS noted the ambitions to do more in the digital space.
- LC were pleased to see infrastructure and a focus on the environment.

3.12. All organisations gave pointers to help Essex Libraries make the implementation of the plan successful and were pleased to be engaged as part of our consultation. The Summary of engagement from other organisations is in Appendix 3.

3.13. In March we reported the outcomes of the consultation, together with proposals to revise the draft plan in line with the feedback, to a joint meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee and the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee.

Consultation Results

3.14. Pillar one: Library Service and Literacy

- There was at least 90% agreement from individual respondents with the aims to support children to be school-ready and develop their reading

skills, keep stock and resources up to date, help adults improve their literacy, ensure staff have the right skills, and provide books and resources in formats that meet changing need.

- Support to deliver a new and exciting programme of events and activities and to get more residents involved in shaping the service is also high at over 80%
- The aims to explore new opportunities to generate additional income, and new roles and opportunities for volunteers received around 70% agreement.
- 638 individuals made comments about the aims for Library Services and Literacy. The most common theme from 25% of those making comments, is that well trained staff are critical to the library service, with 18% noting that volunteers should be in addition to paid staff rather than replace them. 14% of the 638 who made a comment (equating to 89 individuals) also wanted to flag a concern that digital alternatives should not replace physical books.

3.15. In the final plan we have therefore:

- stated more clearly the importance of our skilled paid workforce alongside volunteers and emphasised the important link between the two, recognising that volunteers support the work of the service and allow us to do more
- made it clearer that our ambition to keep our stock up to date and appealing includes hard copy stock and electronic resources.

3.16. Pillar two: Communications and Infrastructure

- Developing the mobile library offer to support service outreach and community engagement and improving communications to help engage with existing users and new audiences were the best supported aims by individual respondents with at least 83% agreement.
- Improvements to buildings, including reducing our carbon footprint, and improving engagement with the staff gained 75% agreement and had strong support.
- Aims with agreement of 60% and above were: Roll out better mobile technology for staff and volunteers; Update printing services on offer to customers; Launch a new online library platform.
- 485 individuals made comments in this section. The most common theme from 21 % of those making comments in this section was the need to promote the library service better and improve communication. 13% noted having well trained staff who were proficient in Tech support. And, consistent with comments under the first pillar, 11% of the 485 (equating to 53 individuals) commented on retaining physical books alongside electronic alternatives.

3.17. As a result of this feedback, we have given more prominence in the final plan to outreach, communications and involvement of our communities in shaping the service. We will specifically look at how we work with targeted groups and organisations to localise communications and adverts of library events. Detailed demographic data, including that from the consultation, will inform how we focus services. Changes to the plan to emphasise the importance of

skilled staff and keeping hard copy stock up to date mentioned in paragraph 3.15, also apply here.

3.18. Pillar three: Supporting Communities and Levelling Up:

- At least 85% of individual respondents agreed with the aims to help reduce digital exclusion and improve digital skills, connect residents with other services, expand outreach services, and provide employability support. 80% agreed with supporting residents with their health and wellbeing.
- The proposal to explore options for providing chargeable activities alongside the existing free activities had 50% agreement. A significant proportion (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this aim.
- 379 individuals commented on this pillar. The most common theme from 22 % of those making comments here was concern about moving outside the core offering and getting involved in services which are provided elsewhere. 14% thought all services should be free. And 12% suggested the library could act as a community hub or for socialisation.

3.19. We have therefore given more context in the plan as to why we might charge for some new additional activities and provided assurance as to how these could run alongside and complement free activities. Hosting these activities could enable us to provide an enhanced offer, service or experience to appeal to our existing customers, new users and to raise awareness of libraries as a potential partner and venue for other organisations. We are keen to drive up use of library buildings and increase footfall, which we hope will encourage greater use of library facilities.

3.20. Full details of the changes made to the draft plan are in the Changes Report in Appendix 4.

4. Links to our Strategic Ambitions

4.1. This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision

- Enjoy life into old age
- Provide an equal foundation for every child
- Strengthen communities through participation
- Connect us to each other and the world

4.2. The principles, themes and commitments of Everyone's Essex: our plan for levelling up the county 2021 to 2025 are woven through Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026.

Economy

4.3 With the focus on literacy for all age groups, whether to encourage reading for pleasure or as part of skills development, this plan supports ECC's ambitions to tackle education inequalities - a driver in levelling up the economy. There are also plans to support people to improve employability skills helping them

in the job market.

Environment

4.4 Through library refurbishments and rebuilds, optimising the use of technology for staff and residents, and supporting partnership recycling initiatives, the plan will contribute to the commitments to Net Zero and minimising waste.

Family

4.5 The commitment to support children to become school ready and develop their reading skills contributes to the education outcomes for families. As an example, we commit to work with early years providers, parents, schools, charities, and the Essex Education Task Force to support children to be school ready, and every library will have an Everyone's Literacy area by the end of June.

Health

4.6 By engaging with residents and communities to shape the service and events, working in partnership with other organisations, and continuing our outreach services, we can help to reduce social isolation and contribute to the wider health commitments.

Service excellence

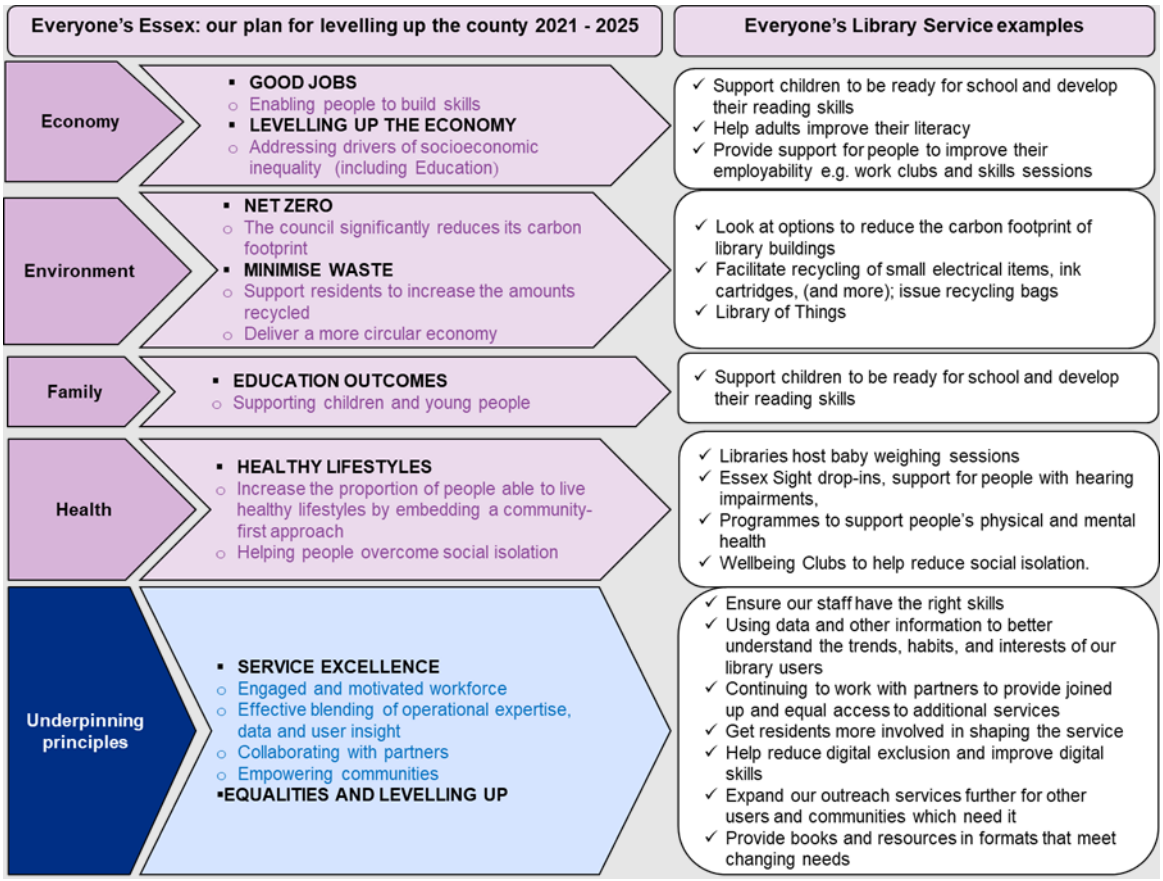
4.7 This is written into the plan which seeks to ensure that the workforce is equipped with technology and skills for the future, while also developing further volunteering opportunities. We will also use data and insight to better understand how we can enhance services for library users and make more use of digital platforms for marketing and outreach.

Supporting ECC's climate change objectives

4.8 Any planned new builds or refurbishments will take account of environmental issues in the design and materials, for example through maximizing the use of natural light or using LED lighting and exploring environmentally friendly options for heating and air cooling, like solar panels and LED lighting for example, Shenfield Library.

4.9 The Plan also aims **to help residents address climate change** by identifying opportunities and resources to educate and inform and continuing to develop waste reduction activities. Libraries are distribution and collection points for recycling bags, batteries, ink cartridges, and care equipment. The "Library of Things" promotes borrowing seldom-used household and garden items, rather than buying new and is part of the Circular Economy project.

4.10 Figure 1 shows some examples of where these links are made.



5. Options

5.1. Recommended Option 1: to adopt the Plan

5.1.1. The proposed plan has been developed with feedback and input from key internal and external stakeholders and aligns with Everyone's s Essex: our plan for levelling up the county.

5.1.2. We have worked creatively to develop an outline of how this plan can be developed within a limited budget and are ready to mobilise that, bringing about changes to impact the lives of our residents for the better as soon as we can.

5.1.3. We propose to recruit to six fixed term posts to bring in the skills we need to develop the delivery framework and achieve quick wins and early implementation. This allows time to upskill our existing workforce and recruit new talent through natural turnover of staff, who will then be able to deliver the activities on a long-term, sustainable basis.
These posts centre around:

- the literacy ambitions
- community engagement and outreach, and
- delivery planning and implementation.

5.1.4. The delivery planning and implementation role will have responsibility for turning the ambitions and proposals in the strategy into tangible deliverables, which are flexible, responsive, and tailored to the needs and ambitions of localities. The role will be responsible for prioritising, planning, sourcing funding and ensuring there is a governance process is in place which validates any spend.

5.1.5. Our plan also includes proposals to bring in and complete some of the refurbishment initiatives within FLS Strategy which are consistent with the aims of Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026. These include investing in the mobile library service supporting the community outreach ambitions, and completing some planned library refurbishments, which supports our plans to make sure libraries are welcoming spaces.
Any specific refurbishments which require additional engagement or governance will proceed through the appropriate channels in due course.

5.1.6. An example of a key initiative we will put in place straightaway is to create an Everyone's Literacy areas in all 74 libraries. These dedicated spaces are developed in consultation with teachers, Adult Community Learning and other experts in literacy skills. They will have books and resources to support children, families and adults to improve their reading skills and also help to develop a love of reading for pleasure. Everyone's Literacy areas contain:

- books for adults on how to support your child to read
- phonics and learning-to-read books
- books for children and adults who have literacy difficulties
- easy-read books for adults and children
- fun resources to help children improve their vocabulary and reading skills
- signposting to other areas of support for reading skills.

All areas are clearly branded and identifiable in each library.

5.1.7. We will ensure there are processes in place to measure success of any initiatives implemented to meet the outcomes of the plan. The metrics for this are currently being developed and will dovetail with the broader Everyone's Essex Plan and the Levelling Up agenda.

5.2. **Option 2: to amend the draft plan further**

5.2.1. This option is not recommended. The public and stakeholders have been engaged in the development of this plan and we have received strong support and approval from them. We want to translate that appetite for the proposals into delivery so that the residents of Essex can start to benefit from it as soon as possible.

5.3. **Option 3: to reject the draft plan**

5.3.1. This option is not recommended as the current strategy does not reflect the world as we now see it.

6. Issues for consideration

6.1. Financial implications

6.1.1. At this stage there is **no request for new funding** to kickstart implementation. Instead, approval is sought to utilise the previously approved residual funding yet to be drawn down from the Transformation Reserve that was set aside for the Future Library Services Strategy *(FP/461/06/19).* As both plans have the same broad ambitions to modernise the library service to meet the needs of Essex residents, the activity proposed here is within scope of the original Cabinet Paper.

6.1.2. The table below sets out how the remaining £2.4m is proposed to be used to support the delivery of Everyone's Library Service.

Description	**£**
6 x Fixed term temporary posts for 18 months (as set out in 5.1.3)	400,000
(1) Completion of committed refurbishment activity started under the previous strategy which also meets the ambitions of this plan; (2) Delivery of Everyone's Literacy areas as detailed in paragraph 5.1.6	400,000
Sub-total costed schemes	*800,000*
Remaining fund for delivery of other initiatives identified through the delivery planning process yet to be costed (as per the roles identified in paragraph 5.1.4)	1,600,000
Total revenue cost	**2,400,000**

6.1.3. The anticipated profile of the £800,000 costed spend is as follows

	2022/23 £000	**2023/24 £000**	**Total £000**
Profile of drawdown	620	180	800

6.1.4. Approval is sought to drawdown the £800,000 for costed schemes immediately. For the residual balance of £1.6m, a future drawdown decision will be sought when costed schemes are available. This decision will be informed by business cases taken through the appropriate internal governance to ensure value for money and to evidence how the spend meets the objectives of this strategy.

6.2. Legal implications

6.2.1 It is important that all issues of significant with the draft strategy which were raised in the consultation are identified and drawn to the attention of the Cabinet. It is understood that the consultation report identifies those issues and it is important that the Cabinet consider this report and the responses.

6.2.2 The Council is under a statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service and this plan shows how we will meet that duty.

7. Equality and Diversity Considerations

7.1. The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

(a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful

(b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

(c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

7.2. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

7.3. The equality impact assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

7.4. The impact has been assessed to be positive for people with the protected characteristics of age and disability. For all other groups the impact is neutral. The Equality Impact Assessment is in Appendix 5.

8. List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Everyone's Library Service 2022-2026

Appendix 2: Consultation Analysis Report (Word and PowerPoint versions)

Appendix 3: Summary of other Engagement

Appendix 4: Changes Report

Appendix 5: Equality Impact Assessment

9. List of Background papers

Consultation questionnaire