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Report title: Briefing on the consultation and development of the new library plan: Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026	
Report to: People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee (with members from the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee also attending and participating)	
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Date: 10 March 2022	For: Consideration
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County Divisions affected: All	

1. Everyone's Essex

1.1. This paper provides an update for the Scrutiny Committees on:

- The consultation and engagement process with Essex residents and key stakeholders on the draft plan for Essex libraries: **Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026**,
- The outcomes of the consultation, and
- The next steps to finalise and adopt the plan and prepare for delivery.

1.2. This new library plan will enable us to deliver a service that is modern, vibrant, and sustainable. The plan is underpinned by the themes of equality of opportunity, empowering communities, harnessing technology, enhancing resources, and contributing to the wider ambitions of Essex County Council (ECC) for its residents. It commits to keeping all 74 libraries open with investment in training and the upskilling of library staff.

1.3. We have consulted on the Plan to test the appetite for our commitments and to gather feedback.

1.4. The consultation analysis report shows that Essex residents and organisations give their broad support to the Plan. Key internal and external stakeholders have given broad approval and helpful feedback.

2. Background

2.1. As part of the Everyone's Essex Plan that has been adopted by the new administration, a refreshed Libraries' strategy has been developed, which covers a range of agendas, but with a specific focus on Levelling Up and Climate Change.

2.2. In September 2021, we drafted ideas for what a new plan would look like. The Deputy Leader / Cabinet Member engaged with stakeholders and held a public webinar, where she outlined the direction of the draft plan, ahead of it going out to consultation.

- 2.3. An 8-week public consultation was launched on 26 November 2021 and closed on 21 January 2022. This included an extra 2 weeks to the standard 6-week consultation, recognising that this covered the Christmas festive period.
- 2.4. For reference, the draft plan and surveys used during the consultation are in Appendix 1.

3. Consultation and engagement process

- 3.1. The consultation opened at 1pm on 26 November 2021. Starting at 9am, a comprehensive communications cascade was launched for employees, ECC leadership, politicians and local authorities across Essex in all tiers, ECC and library partners, national and regional bodies. A comprehensive public communications campaign was also launched, which targeted key audiences in order to achieve a broad representative range of responses. (More on this further in the report.)
- 3.2. The principal way to read the plan and complete the survey was online. Library staff were encouraged to help anyone in a library setting who needed support to do this. There was also a process in place to provide hard copies and alternate formats. This approach is consistent with other ECC consultations and balances several factors including the increased digital skills of our residents, environmental concerns, accuracy of recording, and administrative efficiency.
- 3.3. The draft plan and survey were promoted extensively throughout the county, targeting both new and existing users from across Essex to get a breadth of replies. With reduced footfall in town centres and villages due to the pandemic, as well as the rise in social media access, our strategy was a mix of digital communication, traditional channels, and hard copy local displays, and working with partners. This balance helped to address environmental concerns about large volumes of print and paper waste. Using digital channels is much more effective in focusing in on areas and groups where we want to increase awareness and engagement.
- 3.4. Social media was key to reaching younger populations and hard to reach groups. We proactively used the demographic data received during the consultation to target promotion to specific areas, age groups and organisations, for example Mums groups, Community groups and Business groups. We reached more than 200,000 people through posts on our ECC and Essex Libraries social media channels as well as through a Facebook advertising campaign.
- 3.5. We sent out information to every school in Essex and reached out to both Essex Universities. We engaged directly with key groups including Young Essex Assembly, Epping Youth Forum, faith leaders, library clubs and groups, partners and groups who use library spaces, library employees and volunteers, and wider ECC employees.

- 3.6. Library staff went out to town centres and schools, engaging directly with residents about the plan and survey using information displays and handing out postcards with information about the consultation to encourage participation.
- 3.7. To extend the reach we asked partners to use their networks, for example:
- Essex districts, boroughs, city, towns and parish councils
 - Essex Youth Service and Essex Young Assembly group
 - Facebook community groups and Essex is United
 - Local and national groups like the Rural Community Council Essex, Essex Rural Partnership and the Arts Council.
- 3.8. We communicated directly to around 80,000 residents through our e-newsletters, this includes approximately 40,000 library users. The consultation also featured on the ECC Homepage which gets on average 37,000 visitors a month. It has also been on the Essex Libraries website and all our social media channels.
- 3.9. Offline we engaged with local, regional and national press generating coverage in many local newspapers and on local radio stations via interviews, which presented the opportunity to talk more about the consultation. Posters and popup banners were displayed in libraries and other community venues.
- 3.10. There was additional direct engagement through meetings with national and regional bodies including Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Libraries Connected, and The National Literacy Trust

4. Outcomes of the consultation

- 4.1. A total of 2,213 survey responses were analysed by an independent external company. The breakdown was:
- 2,185 individual survey responses of which 167 were paper copies and 86 online Easy Read responses
 - 28 online Group responses
 - Blank submissions were not included in the analysis.
- This compares well with other recent ECC consultations.
- 4.2. The analysis showed very good support for the proposals in the Plan, with many showing strong agreement. People were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each one or if they neither agreed nor disagreed. They were also given the opportunity to provide comments on each of the three high-level aims in their own words and these were grouped into themes. The next three paragraphs give more detail in relation to each pillar of the plan.

4.3. 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. Strength of agreement (i.e. proportion of respondents 'strongly agreeing') for these aims is also very high.
- 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 scored 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.
- Responses from groups aligned broadly with the individual responses. The aims to keep stock up to date and provide alternative formats, and to support children to be school-ready and develop their reading skills had 100% agreement.

4.4. 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.A significant proportion neither agreed nor disagreed with these aims, possibly because of perceived relevance.
- 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.
- Group responses were broadly aligned although there was less agreement for building improvements, with a significant proportion neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

4.5. 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. Individuals also put forward ideas for activities which could be chargeable including arts and crafts, exhibitions, writing workshops, and talks by authors.
- 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.
- Reducing digital exclusion and improving digital skills scored 100% support from the groups who responded.

4.6. Feedback from the Department of 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.
- 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.

4.7. The full Consultation Analysis report and the Summary of engagement from other organisations can be found in Appendices 2 and 3 respectively.

5. Next steps to finalise and adopt the plan, and prepare for delivery

5.1. The insight and analysis from the consultation tell us where individuals feel most passionately about the ambitions and proposals. This has helped us to prioritise the ambitions for the library service. We propose some changes to emphasise and clarify what the public have told us is important to them.

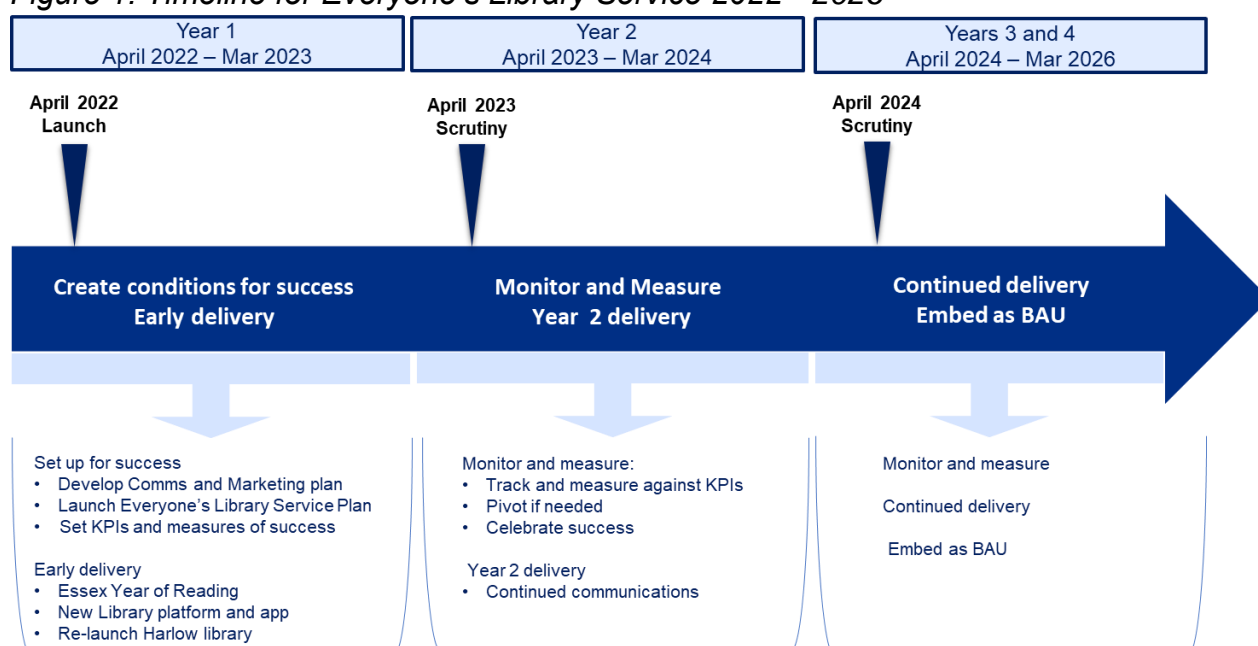
- The public have reiterated how important hard copy book stock is for them – an ambition we have always supported. We will make it clearer in the Plan that our ambition to keep our stock up to date and appealing includes hard copy as much as electronic resources.
- Outreach, communications and involvement of our communities in shaping the service will be given more prominence in our plan and we will specifically look at how we can localise communications and adverts of library events.

- Our skilled paid workforce are as important to the public as they are to us and we will reflect this more clearly. Volunteers support the work of the service allowing us to do more, as they work alongside our paid for staff. The Plan will emphasise the important link between the two.
- We will give more context as to why charging is required for some new activities and assurance how they 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.

5.2. Full details are in the Proposed Changes Report in Appendix 4.

5.3. Following any final feedback from the Scrutiny Committees we will amend the plan in line with the proposed changes and seek Cabinet approval to adopt the plan on 19th April 2022. The timeline is in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Timeline for Everyone's Library Service 2022 - 2026



5.4. Where initiatives in the plan require additional funding or governance, we will work through the appropriate governance channels.

5.5. As part of adopting the new plan we would seek to close the previous strategy, during which some significant achievements were delivered e.g., the Library Management System.

6. Links to our Strategic Ambitions

6.1. 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.

6.1.1. 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 and 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 a Literacy Corner to support outreach work, by the end of June.

6.1.2. Through a programme of refurbishment, optimising the use of technology for staff and residents, and developing initiatives to reduce waste, the plan will contribute to the commitments to Net Zero and minimising waste.

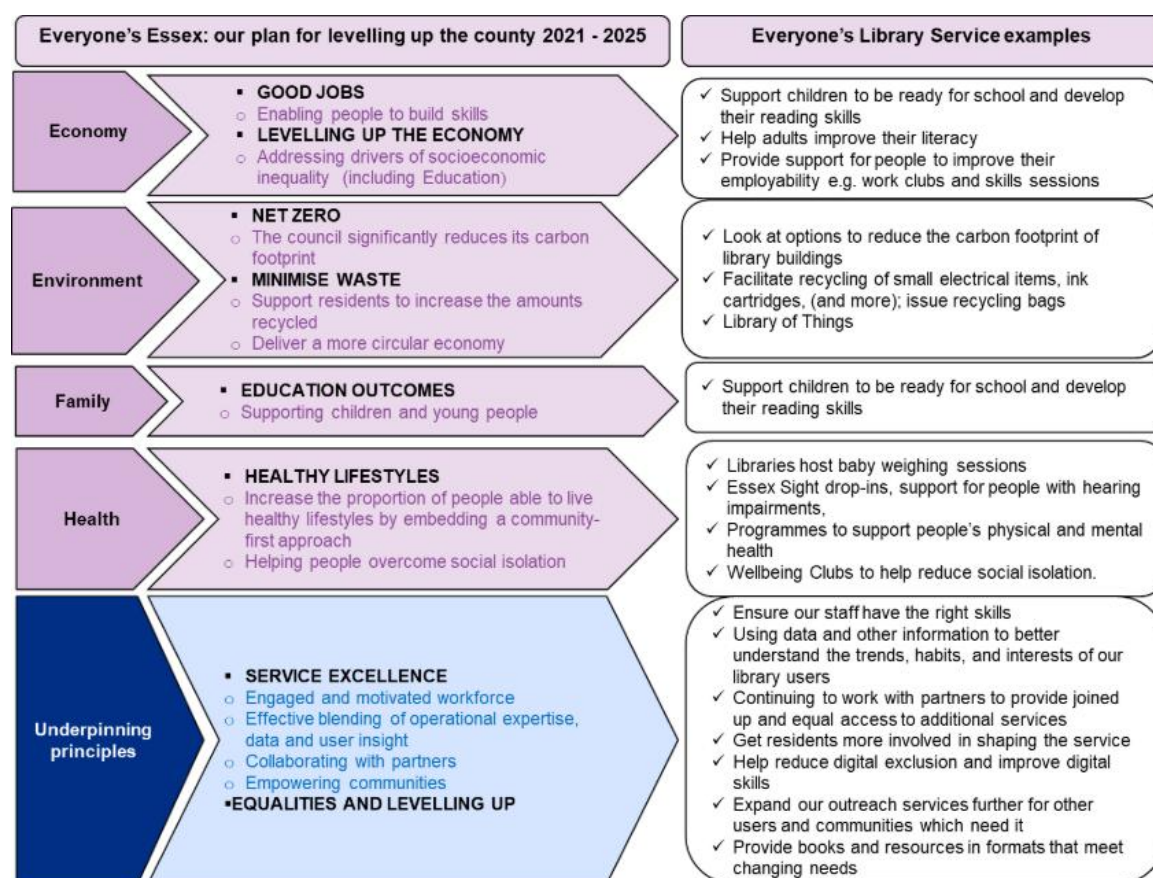
6.1.3. By engaging with residents and communities to shape the service and events, working in partnership with other organisations, and continuing our outreach services, we can help to reduce social isolation and contribute to the wider health commitments.

6.1.4. Service excellence is written into the plan, equipping the workforce 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.

6.2. Supporting ECC's climate change objectives features in the Plan. 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 e.g. Shenfield Library.

6.3. 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. Figure 2 shows some examples of where these links are made.

6.4. Figure 2: Everyone's Essex and links to Everyone's Library Service



7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix 1: Draft plan and surveys used during the consultation

- Everyone's Library Service – Draft plan for consultation
- Everyone's Library Service – Individuals
- Everyone's Library Service – Groups & Organisations

7.2. Appendix 2: Consultation Analysis report

- Consultation Analysis – Everyone's Library Service Word
- Consultation Analysis Report – Everyone's Library Service Ppt

7.3. Appendix 3: Summary of engagement from other organisations

7.4. Appendix 4: Proposed Changes Report