Minutes of the meeting of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 11.00am on Thursday, 10 March 2022 in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Chelmsford.

Present:
County Councillors:
R Gooding (Chairman – present for items 1-4)
L Bowers-Flint
M Durham
J Fleming
M Goldman
C Guglielmi (Vice Chairman, in the Chair items 4-6)
J Lumley (participated via Zoom)
P May (Vice Chairman)
A McGurran
R Playle
L Shaw

Members of the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee:
A Goggin (Chairman of PSEG)
M Steel

Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer and Gemma Bint, Democratic Services Officer were also present.

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report on Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received. Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Susan Barker and Wendy Stamp and Sharon Westfield de Cortez from Healthwatch Essex.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2022 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3 Questions from the public

There were none.

4 Briefing on the consultation and development of the new library plan: Everyone's Library Service 2022 - 2026

The Committee considered report PAF/06/2022 comprising of an update 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,
- The next steps to finalise and adopt the plan and prepare for delivery.

The following people from Essex County Council attended the meeting to introduce the item, deliver a presentation and respond to questions:

- Councillor Louise McKinlay – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance,
- Juliet Pirez – Head of Libraries,
- Suzanna Shaw – Director of Customer Services.

The presentation provided information on the Everyone's Library Service 2022 – 2026 including the outcomes of the consultation, summary of the engagement and eight week public consultation that had taken place which received 2,213 responses from Essex residents, what had been amended in the plan and the next steps including the timeline up to March 2026. There were key themes under three pillars of the Plan which included Library Service and Literacy, Communications and Infrastructure, and Supporting our Communities and Levelling Up.

A service update was given to the Committee including activities that would be taking place in the libraries such as a memory café, Reading Friends sessions, the development of Colchester library as an accredited Library of Sanctuary and that there would be 15 events as part of the Essex Book Festival due to take place in June 2022. Harlow library was currently being redeveloped and it was expected to re-open on 20 June 2022. A wide range of children's events was being delivered and ECC was working with schools to introduce the Literacy Lead scheme.

Following the presentation, the following points were highlighted, raised and/or noted:

(i) Members were keen to identify and maximise opportunities to continue to reach out to those residents not currently using libraries and encouraged ongoing work with individuals, partners and other groups to continue so that they could disseminate information within their own networks. There was a library newsletter that went out to everybody who had provided their email address, members encouraged consideration of how to further expand the number of subscribers.

(ii) A meeting had taken place with the Young Essex Assembly and they had provided suggestions, the dialogue would continue with them going forward.

(iii) Members queried whether further breakdown and analysis of responses and feedback was possible using demographics and locations to see if certain types of usage could be identified in certain areas for example. There was the suggestion that officers may pursue that to some extent.

(iv) Members referred to what seemed to be a low number of organisations that had responded to the consultation and queried what more could be done to improve interaction with these and other organisations and with school aged children.

(v) As part of the discussion on increasing footfall and usage of the library buildings, members referred to the pre-pandemic launch of the London Library Community Fridge initiative and officers agreed to look further at this to see if something similar was viable in Essex.

(vi) Members recommended adding virtual tours of some libraries onto ECC's website and it was agreed that this would be further considered. Members also stressed that such tours could emphasise the use of space in libraries to provide some re-assurance to those pre-pandemic users who still remained nervous about returning to use the library buildings.

(vii) ECC were ensuring marketing of events and activities was the best it could be. Social media was used a great amount and ECC was working on a strong communications and engagement plan to help further reinforce and promote what was available.

(viii) ECC were looking at how to strengthen links with schools and nurseries to start to ingrain literacy and use of libraries. As part of the Year of Reading ECC would be supplying library cards to every primary school and Year 7 child and all children within special schools across the county, it was expected that the cards would be distributed within May half term.

(ix) Members noted and supported the plans for promoting literacy with literacy co-ordinators on site and emphasised that library staff would need to be trained so to be able to deliver that. It was agreed that a further update on promoting literacy may better be incorporated into the next committee discussion on educational attainment planned for the summer.

(x) There were two large library vehicles and a new smaller van, this was more agile and the model would be developed going forward as it was more attractive to drive. There were opportunities to promote the van where very high footfall was expected such as country parks in half term. It was confirmed that the stock on the vehicles did get rotated regularly and that it was flexible, stock was updated to be relevant to where the van was visiting.

(xi) The commitment was there for the 74 libraries to remain open, however as housing developments grow it might mean that people move about and therefore a library might not be suitably situated in terms of where the bulk of the populace was, and there was a need to ensure there was an opportunity to respond to this.

(xii) It was emphasised that the consultation and the report to the Committee were at the level of a strategic plan and that detailed plans for each library would follow in due course after the strategic plan was adopted by the Cabinet and further discussions with local community groups. Members stressed that smaller libraries and local communities wanted to work with ECC especially as part of determining the longer term future of those libraries with smaller footfall.

(xiii) Volunteers were important to the service and training and support was given to them as appropriate.

(xiv) There was discussion about factoring in aspirations and changes for some library buildings within the capital programme alongside a more detailed piece of work for the next layer of opportunities. Some members were particularly keen to explore this further at an appropriate point in the future whilst it was acknowledged that such follow-up scrutiny work would likely sit within the remit of the Place Services and Economic Growth Committee rather than the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee.

(xv) ECC libraries were currently running a campaign which asked for people to take a photograph in the place where they best liked to read to raise awareness of the importance of reading, the photos would be displayed in the libraries. Going forward footfall could indicate how many people had been engaged with in terms of how reading was promoted. The fundamental question was what should be measured and if it could be demonstrated that more families had been engaged with through the service and awareness had been raised this would indicate success.

(xvi) Members challenged how the success of changes would be measured and it was stressed that whilst some measurement will be straightforward, such as the numbers taking out library cards, numbers attending courses and events held at libraries, the more difficult part to measure would be the impact of changes and how it was correlated to better levels of development and school readiness.

Conclusion:

It was **agreed** that there would be a further update to the Committee with a more detailed implementation plan in approximately six months' time.

Contributors were thanked for their attendance and left the meeting.

5 Work Programme

The Committee considered and discussed report PAF/07/22 comprising the work programme for the committee.

6 Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Thursday 14 April 2022.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 1.00pm.

Chairman