

North Somerset Council

Report to the Place Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: 23 November 2022

Subject of Report: Your Neighbourhood Update

Town or Parish: All

Officer/Member Presenting: Emma Wellard Head of Libraries and Community and John Flannigan Head of Open Space, Natural Environment and Leisure

Key Decision: No

Reason: Information Item

Recommendations

That Place scrutiny notes the progress made against the Libraries Strategy adopted by the council in February 2021 and the Leisure Strategy adopted by the council in December 2020.

1. Summary of Report

This report provides an update for Place Scrutiny on the progress with the Libraries Strategy that was adopted in February 2021 and the Leisure Strategy that was adopted in December 2020.

2. Policy

Delivering the Libraries and Leisure strategies are priorities within the Corporate Plan for 2022/23.[\[Click here to enter Policy\]](#)

3. Details

Libraries

The Library Strategy was adopted in February 2021 and has 4 core objectives, developed through widespread consultation. Key progress against each objective is shown below:

Objective 1: Reading, literacy and culture

Post lockdown-restrictions saw library buildings close, services move online and the development of click and collect services. Since then, use of libraries has continued to recover, e.g. book lending in October 2022 was 81% of October 2019's activity. A programme of activities has also resumed, e.g. in 2022, 14% of primary aged children in North Somerset engaged with the annual Summer Reading Challenge (addressing dips in literacy levels during the summer holidays and from Covid). Several author and cultural events have taken place, including with Poet Laureate Simon Armitage at Clevedon Library, workshops and story sessions with Theatre Orchard and Jubilee celebration events.

Libraries also hosted Read Easy sessions in Weston and the Read Ahead scheme with Community Learning for adults with low literacy levels. For families, the new Booktrust Storytime programme was piloted targeting families needing support to read with their children.

Objective 2: Digital, information and skills

Libraries continue to play a key role in supporting residents lacking digital access or skills. Digital support sessions have resumed at most sites delivered by volunteers and partners. A 'Learn to code' programme was delivered in 2022, with excellent attendance and feedback from the children's courses. Weston and Healthy Living Centre Libraries provided support for residents for the first digital Census in 2021 and libraries across the district are distributing National Databank resources to address data poverty. Libraries have worked closely with the Economy Team to deliver projects including 'Get connected' where digitally excluded received laptops and 'Opportunity North Somerset' which supported residents into employment and training. Investment in library's digital resources continues: in 2020 the public computers were upgraded to Windows 10 and in 2021 new eMagazine and eNewspaper services were launched in addition to a new combined platform for eBooks and eAudiobooks. Access to digital services will shortly be improved through self-service opening at Clevedon Library (November 2022) and Nailsea Library (Spring 2023).

Objective 3: Health and wellbeing

Libraries continue to provide community locations where residents can access health and wellbeing information and support and are also social prescribing destinations. Libraries regularly host partner information sessions, for example, recently supporting anti-hate crime awareness week and hosting NSC social assessment clinics. Libraries provide access to quality assured collections of 'Reading Well' books in print, eBook and eAudio format to help residents to understand and manage their health and wellbeing. Library staff are trained to support many community needs: there are Breastfeeding Champions in all library sites; frontline staff are all Dementia Friends and trained to provide Autism friendly services and support hidden disabilities. Through the volunteering programme, libraries offer residents opportunities to support their communities, whilst also addressing social isolation. Following a virtual volunteering offer during lockdown, the face-to-face offer was re-established with volunteers reporting a positive impact on their wellbeing. In 2021 the 'Reading Friends' project was also launched in libraries, helping tackle loneliness by bringing people together to read, chat and share stories. The Care Homes Service and Home Library Service were also fully restored following lockdown, supporting isolated residents. The re-start of early years activities has helped support maternal mental health. Library staff have engaged with the development of the NSC Health and Wellbeing Strategy and as a result, a programme of library activities is currently in development to help address mental health and social isolation issues.

Objective 4: Community places, accessible to all

Clevedon Library – the team made a successful capital bid of £215,000 to the DCMS Libraries Improvement Fund (distributed by Arts Council England) supplemented by Clevedon Town Council and North Somerset Council. The programme included works to: reduce the carbon footprint; extend opening hours by installing self-service technology; make access improvements throughout; construct a self-contained meeting space, supporting the development of community hub activity in Clevedon. The library re-opened in October 2022. Nailsea Library – a 125 year lease was signed in October 2022 on a retail unit in Nailsea town centre enabling the existing library to relocate in Spring 2023. Relocating the library will meet accessibility standards; address health and safety issues at the current site; significantly extend library opening hours on a self-service basis; provide a meeting space to give additional community access; facilitate the delivery of activities in

support of the library strategy; save energy; and be more cost effective to run. Other community highlights include hosting the 'Face-to-face' council services pilot in 5 libraries, supporting residents unable to engage with digital council services; updating the Dementia reminiscence project 'Memories Shared' through the Heritage Action Zone work; working with the Refugee Support Team to promote libraries; and joining the 'Public living rooms' initiative, providing a network of warm, non-judgemental, accessible spaces for residents affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

Carbon neutrality

The Library Strategy also outlines ambition to support the Council achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. The main successes to date include: working with partners and other teams to deliver high profile events such as Big Green Week and Earth Day events in Portishead Library; a range of funded decarbonisation work at Clevedon Library; signing up to the national Green Libraries Manifesto.

Leisure Service

The Your Neighbourhood consultation aimed to explore and to help the council to understand the way North Somerset's leisure and sport centres are currently used and how people would like to see them used in the future.

The response rate was very positive and the results showed that:

- 96% of residents thought the council should provide leisure and sports facilities.
- Over 70% using a leisure or sports facility in the last year, reasons mainly for swimming, fitness classes and using the gym.
- Three most important things in a leisure centre being affordable, clean and having good quality facilities.
- Main reasons for dissatisfaction include cleanliness and outdated facilities.

To further support the outcomes of the consultation, The Sport and Leisure Facilities Strategy was adopted by the Council in December 2020.

This document forms the strategic framework for developing future action plans for sports and leisure provision in North Somerset.

Covid Impact on leisure

During the consultation period in March 2020, the leisure centres were forced to close due to the arrival of Covid. The following months brought uncertainty and concern for the leisure facilities and as this continued the impact on income for the leisure centres was significant.

It was a period of months where the leisure centres ability to open was uncertain and the need to adapt to the ever changing restrictions which were in place once the buildings were allowed to re-open.

The contractors who manage the centres on our behalf, were forced to make redundancies and reduce their programme and adapt to try to reduce the financial impact. We worked very closely with our contractors during this period and continue to do so.

The Council recognised the financial difficulties being experienced by the contractors, supported by the recognition from residents the value which the leisure centres can offer and help with people physical and mental health needs.

Financial support was offered to help through the most difficult time and the Council also secured additional funding through the National Leisure Recovery Fund, to support the loss of income the centres were experiencing.

Since the final lockdowns, the centres have been recovering well with swimming usage at an even higher level than pre-covid, with particular demand for swimming lessons. However the fitness market has been slower to recover than expected, but the contractors are adapting to their business offer to try to overcome this.

However recently the significant increase in utilities costs for the leisure centres, on top of the recovery period from Covid is causing further issues.

We are working closely with the contractors to support them to generate further income to reduce the impact on their financial position.

Actions

Even though the last 2.5yrs has been very difficult for the leisure industry, there has been a number of positive actions, which have taken place:

- Capital has been invested in the leisure facilities to enable them to remain open and also to improve the quality and offer to local residents
- Invested Section106 contributions to improve the facilities and activities on offer
- Working closely with the contractors to improve the cleanliness of the buildings.
- Condition surveys produced for all leisure centres, to understand the future building needs and be able to plan future works.
- Decarbonisation studies have been produced for all leisure centres, to understand the potential opportunities to reduce the carbon emissions.

In addition the service has also:

- Continued to ensure new housing developments provide community, sport and leisure facilities for new residents
- Setting up a community fund for residents in Haywood Village to access a small pot of funds (s106) to support local groups and organisations
- Formed and launched a successful Play Improvement Fund, from the £250k budget identified - which enabled town and Parish Council and constituted organisations to apply for match funding to improve their local play facilities. These 22 projects are starting to be seen being installed and will be completed by March 23.

To support the outcomes of the consultation and strategy, the service is also working with Public Health to produce a joint Physical Activity Strategy for North Somerset. This strategy will have a supporting action plan and look at way to improve physical activity levels for residents across North Somerset.

4. Consultation

Both strategies were drafted using the outcomes of the Your Neighbourhood consultation which took place between February and May 2020 and which covered both libraries and leisure service areas.[Click here to enter Consultation]

5. Financial Implications

The delivery summarised in this report has been carried out using approved revenue and capital budgets for the Neighbourhoods and Transport service areas, and grant funding where identified and secured. [Click here to enter Financial Implications]

6. Legal Powers and Implications

None[Click here to enter Legal Powers and Implications]

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

Climate change and environmental implications are important parts of both the libraries and leisure strategies and are clearly articulated in both strategies.[Click here to enter Climate Change and Environmental Implications]

8. Risk Management

N/a[Click here to enter Risk Management Implications]

9. Equality Implications

None[Have you undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment? Yes/No

[Click here to enter Equality Implications]

10. Corporate Implications

None[Click here to enter Corporate Implications]

11. Options Considered

N/A[Click here to enter Options Considered]

Author:

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Appendices:

[Click here to enter Appendices]

None

Background Papers:

None[Click here to enter Background Papers]