

CONSULTATION ON DRAFT STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR LIBRARIES

Report By: DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND COMMUNITY

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To note the key recommendations and proposed action plan for the draft Strategic Framework (2004-2010) for the library service and accompanying consultation plan and provide opportunity for comment.

Reasons

The draft Strategic Framework has taken account of the current realities for the library service – a low density population; limited access to services due to historically low levels of provision / investment; declining use; and an urgent need to respond effectively to the introduction of a range of local and national standards and policies covering libraries, learning and customer-focused services.

The overall priority for the library service is to increase the uptake of services so as to maximise the benefits to the whole community of the investment into the service (past, present and future). To achieve this it must set clear priorities as to what range of services to deliver and to whom; and have long term strategies and short / medium-term action plans in place to meet them.

The proposed action plan is designed to address the most urgent problems quickly (eg. buildings which will not meet requirements of DDA, staff training, service standards, marketing, stock management) but also to build firm foundations for the long term (eg. restructuring and recruitment, co-location, new partnerships). It aims to ensure that all available resources are targeted towards priorities.

A comprehensive consultation programme is planned to ensure that all groups, organisations, services and stakeholders have an opportunity to shape the future of *their* library service. This process will itself be an excellent opportunity to market the service to potential partners; as well as indicating a significant shift in culture to engage effectively with stakeholders and encourage challenge and critical comment on current provision. It is envisaged that this consultation will take 8 –12 weeks and a final framework will be completed in November 2003.

Considerations

1. The most significant characteristic about Herefordshire which affects the library service is the low population density - the fourth lowest in England for public library authorities – and its distribution across the county. Each authority has a statutory duty to provide '*a comprehensive library service...to everyone who lives, works or studies..*' within the authority. To fulfil this responsibility as effectively as possible all library services operate as authority-wide networks of access points (buildings and mobile libraries) that share the

key resources of books and media and many of the specialist staff. Therefore the larger the authority the greater the total resource and the opportunities for economies of scale. Comparing Herefordshire with the 10 authorities in England with the lowest population density it is noticeable that all are larger in terms of population by a factor ranging between 60 and 300%.

2. The Council has already recognised that historically the library service has received a low level of investment, and has taken steps to address this. Appendix One benchmarks our provision and performance in the key areas of access, staffing, stock and budget against these other 10 authorities (based on latest data available). The Council is in the bottom two for 11 of the 13 indicators for provision / performance per head of population.

3. The overall level of books and media held has a significant effect on the range and choice of titles and formats we can offer; our ability to provide for particular needs (eg mother tongue, visual impairment); to supply duplicate copies of popular material to meet demand; and to respond promptly to requests for specific titles / information. The comparative authorities enjoy advantages ranging between 60 and 370%.

4. Having sufficient staff time to manage collections and services; to help customers with ICT, homework and choosing books; and to update their skills through training; is crucial to ensure that the service continually improves and develops and is promoted throughout the county. Herefordshire has the fourth lowest level of staffing per head of population in England and in real terms the comparator group enjoy advantages ranging between 110 and 370 %.

5. In line with the rest of the country the library service in Herefordshire has seen a steady decline over the last decade in visitor figures; the borrowing of books and media; and an accompanying loss of income. Public ICT has been introduced in the last 3 years to all libraries, initially funded by the government.

6. Since 1999 there have been a series of national reports and policies concerning public libraries, culminating with *Building Better Library Services* (Audit Commission 2002) and *Framework for the Future* (2003) – the government's strategic framework for public libraries. Collectively they have highlighted many areas where public libraries must improve (eg. social inclusion, services to young people, opening hours, marketing, stock and performance management) and given guidance as to how this can be achieved.

7. The government introduced Standards for Public Libraries in 2001 with a three year 'lead in' period to March 2004 before any formal assessment. Herefordshire will not meet the key standards for access; opening hours; ICT provision; visits and expenditure on books and media based on current levels of provision and performance.

8. Herefordshire Council and Herefordshire Partnership are committed to delivering a range of improvements and developments which will impact in differing ways on the existing library service.

9. Combining all of these factors means that the library service is faced with a unique local 'reality' which is not necessarily shared with other authorities. This in turn requires that the long term policies and strategies to address this, and the actions and solutions to make them happen, must focus on these local circumstances if the service is to fulfil its potential.

10. Further improvements of the quality and access to library services which have been identified will be limited within existing revenue budgets. Improved resource management and efficiencies from co-location and partnership delivery of services will not on its own address all of the current shortcomings. The final version will report on the budgetary implications of the framework.

11. It is proposed that the library service focuses its services on these four priority communities and groups of individuals:

- **Geographically and / or Socially Excluded** – eg. those furthest from libraries; the housebound; English not their first language; visually impaired; low literacy skills
- **Young people** – ensure the service recognises and meets the differing needs of all babies and parents / carers, children and young adults
- **Readers** – of all ages, ability levels and interest - both as individuals and as groups; offering and promoting to them a choice of material
- **Learners** – meeting the varied needs of pre-school children and their parents / carers; primary, secondary and further education students; adult basic skills, lifelong and independent learners

12. To increase the uptake of services the library service must improve in the following four areas:

- **The quality and standard of services offered** –customer service, materials, buildings
- **When, where and how** these services can be accessed
- **Provision of the key resources** of books and media, staff, ICT
- **Increase the awareness and profile** of the service with non-users, officers, elected members and partners

13. These improvements will be delivered by the following:

- **Partnership working** at both a local and strategic level with a much wider range of statutory, voluntary and community groups
- **Better resource management** – new staff structure and recruitment policies; better training; co-location of library services; performance management
- **Innovative delivery methods** – more use of ICT; better mobiles; home delivery services; community drop-off points; specialist outreach staff and services
- **Market and promote** all services through advertising and branding; outreach work and customer service; partnerships
- **Engage effectively** with groups and communities to ensure our services meet all of their needs and aspirations

14. The proposed Action Plan for the next 3 years is included as Appendix Two. This indicates how each action will improve services and meet the needs of the target groups identified in 9 and 10 above.

15. The proposed Consultation Plan is outlined in Appendix Three. The draft framework will be widely circulated to stakeholders and comments invited. The Head of Customer Services and Libraries and the Libraries Operations Manager will in addition brief key stakeholders (eg education, social services, health, Herefordshire Partnership). The consultation period will last until October and a final version of the framework will be prepared in November.

Alternative Options

There are no alternative options

Risk Management

The financial implications of the Strategic Framework will be reported in the final version.

The comprehensive consultation programme will minimise the risk of any particular group or community not having the opportunity to help shape the future of their library service.

Consultees

Recommendation

- 1. THAT the priority customer groups and service improvements and the proposed strategies to deliver them identified in the draft Strategic Framework for the library service are noted.**
- 2. THAT the proposed action plan to begin implementing them is noted (Appendix Two).**
- 3. THAT the accompanying consultation plan is approved (Appendix Three).**

Background Papers

'Scope and Remit for Libraries & Information Service Strategic Framework' – report by Director of Policy & Community (March 2003).

Annual Library Plan 2002.