Thurrock Council

Library Peer Challenge

Report of the Peer Challenge Team

Date 8 - 9 July 2019

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1. Executive Summary

Thurrock Council Library Service (TL) was awarded a peer challenge through the Arts Council England (ACE) and Local Government Association (LGA) partnership. Nine library peer reviews were funded by the Arts Council this year for the first time in addition to three culture peer challenges. The scope and focus for this library challenge is set out in section three of this report.

On 12 December 2018 Thurrock Council's Cabinet agreed a "Communities First Strategy for Thurrock Libraries and Community Hubs." This is the first ever plan for Thurrock Libraries. It sets out the ambition for service development within the context of the agreed council vision for Thurrock, the place. TL are considering how to make the strategy a reality and are working up delivery plans, whilst continuing with an ongoing programme of refurbishment and renewal of the library buildings. The accompanying report states that additional funding will be required to secure the service at current levels. One off funds will be allocated to support the development of individual business plans and financial implications will be considered at that stage. A key aim of this will be to develop an investment plan for the long term future, by considering all development opportunities to enhance future provision.

The strategy was produced following public consultation that took place in June 2018. This guarantees that all nine of Thurrock's libraries and the self-serve community hub will remain open, and seeks to enhance and improve the offer to residents by continuing to develop community hubs within library buildings. The intention is to develop libraries and hubs as an "anchor" in which to extend support to residents.

The strategy also looks to extend the services on offer in libraries and build on the excellent work already being done. As well as providing books, libraries will:

- offer support to those looking to learn and enhance their skills
- support health and well-being
- provide a range of cultural experiences and arts events
- provide excellent digital resources, including access to PCs and Wi-Fi
- give children and adults the skills they need to become skilled digital operators ready to take advantage of the latest technological advances.

There is a strong cross party political commitment to the library service. The council has stated that it will not close any libraries. They will remain in their current locations, although some of the library buildings may change this will be to enhance services.

The peer team met with a very welcoming, passionate and committed group of staff, volunteers and Portfolio Holder. TL managers recognise that some staff feel undervalued, and this impression is compounded by the need to restructure the service, to align with the desired outcomes of the new strategy.

The service is self-aware and describes itself as "being at the crossroads" and recognises that it is time to realise the full potential of the service. TL is not alone in holding aspirations for the library service, with support evident at the most senior levels of the council. The peer team recommend that you use the peer challenge process to support your forward planning. The team offered both individual and organisational support to assist TL on its journey. There are other library authorities that are further down the line of library/community hub development that will be able to share their experience with Thurrock.

Most commentators' feel that TL have found a suitable home in the Adults, Housing and Health Directorate of the council. The peer team was told that "Being in the adult services directorate is the best fit we have experienced." This organisational arrangement has helped stabalise the service and provides comfort to staff and users that the council is serious about its library service provision. Prior to this libraries had been located in range of different directorates and this had proved unsettling.

During the visit the peer team visited the South Ockendon library/hub. We learned that in 2012 three groups using separate buildings merged into one community hub. This included the library, the housing office and South Ockendon Community Forum shop front. The model appears to be a good prototype for other similar developments. TL are currently building a replacement for a branch library in Aveley, refurbishing East Tilbury and working up proposals for an integrated health, hub and library in Tilbury. Other buildings are in phase 2 of a development programme and early thoughts are being given as to what a virtual library/hub could be. It appears that the library service provides the anchor around which other services/community led support can be provided to suit local need as defined in community profiles and by the refinement of further detailed consultation with the local community.

Thurrock is an exciting place to be with great potential. TL need to find a way to engage in the wider place agenda.

2.   Key recommendations

The peer team recommendations are grouped under the three priorities set out in the council's vision, agreed in January 2018. These are People, Place and Prosperity.

1. Develop a clear plan to roll out the new library strategy (People)

The recently agreed library/hub strategy "Communities First" sets out a five year plan to improve the service and place it at the centre of the communities that live in Thurrock. The council is aware that it needs to decide how it is going to deliver these aspirations and work is well underway on investing in infrastructure improvements.

2. Consider appropriate timing for staff restructure (People)

Time now needs to be spent on bringing staff and volunteers fully into delivering the aims of the strategy. This will require consideration of the timing of the staff restructure to ensure alignment with the skills required to deliver the strategy. The current structure and job specifications, role descriptions are out of date and will be reviewed as a necessary consequence of implementing the strategy. Once a delivery plan is agreed, it should be shared with staff, properly resourced, timetabled and implemented at pace. Some staff are feeling "unloved" and would like to welcome a greater recognition by senior council officers and councillors.

3. Increase the profile of Thurrock and its libraries locally, regionally and nationally (People)

TL has a lot to be proud of and now is the time to consider how to better promote TL as a progressive library service. In particular the success of the South Ockendon community hub, with its core library offer combined with the delivery of other offers seems an appropriate model for wider recognition. As Thurrock continues to develop the model it would be useful to commission an independent evaluation. This will provide a useful basis from which to roll out the infrastructure improvements set out in the TL strategy. The South Ockendon success story would be suitable for a case study. Both the LGA and ACE will help Thurrock promote this story. It would be good to see Thurrock appear in a future edition of Arts Council's Libraries as Community Hubs: Case Studies and Learning[1] and as a case study in the LGA/ACE online culture hub

It would be useful to collect and use impact stories, and build this into the new performance management framework, perhaps by making this a performance indicator. The new libraries campaign can use these stories to raise the profile of libraries. Consideration should be given as to whether the current KPIs are the correct ones to inform on the value of Thurrock Libraries. Consideration should also be given to improving data collection to support TL's work and profile.

4. Continue to develop and network (People)

TL has some valuable alliances locally, resulting in good collaboration within the library/hubs. These can be further developed and matured for the benefit of the Thurrock communities. Much effort has been expended in consultation and it would be useful to consider how to maintain this relationship. One idea would be to consider developing a Friends network, building on responses to recent consultation and providing a platform for continuing dialogue with the public.

5. Develop one brand with shared understanding (Place)

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[1] https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Libraries-CommunityHubs-Renaisi.pdf

The presentation of the library/hub service is confusing and much effort is being expended to try and describe what goes on within the library/hub buildings. This requires a discussion and agreement about developing the one brand for TL.

6. Recognise the contribution that libraries can make to literacy, digital literacy and educational attainment (Prosperity)

As the strategy develops it will be important to explore the libraries contribution to increase prosperity in Thurrock e.g. supporting business development. This area appears to be underdeveloped and may be a consequence of no libraries voice being heard at the "top table."

3.   Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Thurrock were:

• Carol Stump – Chief Librarian, Kirklees Council
• Helen Parrott – Senior Manager Strategic Partnerships, Arts Council England
• Mark Harrison – LGA Peer Challenge Manager

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following areas three core questions:

•   is the council getting best value from its library assets?
•   how effective is the library service's contribution to cross cutting agendas of other services?
•   what is the role of the library service and council in the local community?

In addition, Thurrock asked the peer team to consider the following questions:

•   what are the relationships and role that the service has within the wider council?
•   what opportunities are there for income generation, what can TL learn from other councils?
•   is Thurrock getting the balance right between its community and its traditional roles?

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement-focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement focus. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented

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to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days onsite at Thurrock, during which they:

- spoke to more than 34 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders

- gathered information and views from more than 13 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading

- collectively spent more than 80 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than two weeks in Thurrock.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (8 - 9 July 2019). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4.   Feedback

Is the council getting best value from its library assets?

TL staff are working hard to get better value from the library assets. There is more work to be done as some of the building stock is not fit for purpose and opening hours have been reduced as a consequence of budget reductions. The council is addressing this through a planned programme of infrastructure investments and is considering how to realign opening hours to better suit public requirements.

Despite this TL are bucking the national trend on visitor numbers, with a high number of active borrowers and physical visits (CIPFA stats comparative profile February 2019). TL has high levels of computer use and high take up on the Summer Reading Challenge strongly supported by young volunteers.

There is an emerging recognition that libraries are so much more than buildings and the recently adopted strategy sets out for the first time a forward plan for library improvements. This is ambitious and although the proposals for building improvements is clearly stated there needs to be further consideration given to the capacity and revenue budget necessary to deliver on the aspiration.

The council is investing capital, as it rolls out a programme of library/hub renewal. More work is

required to explore opportunities for existing branches that are not currently within scope for redevelopment. We were pleased to learn that communities will be actively involved in this process. There is also work required to assess the impact of the major developments within Thurrock, including 30,000 new homes.

There is a clear recognition the TL contributes to social cohesion and community wellbeing. However the value of this work is not recorded or measured, therefore it is difficult to assess if the council is getting best value from its library service in this area. So the question that arises is TL measuring the right things?

We were told that spaces/rooms could be better used and this would increase engagement by the wider community. Staff feel disempowered and would welcome the opportunity to take risks, within boundaries and without the fear of sanction. It may be time to think of a different approach to room hire within the library buildings. It may be that the income targets are preventing the best use of the assets by the community. A shift toward offering the use of the space to community groups and partners in pursuit of delivering library strategy outcomes is worth considering.

Many people commented about inadequate corporate support e.g. I.T and assets. This seems to be a long term issue and is using up much time, goodwill and capacity that would be better directed to the front line and library/hub development activity.

During our focus group sessions a number of improvement ideas were identified by staff and volunteers, and these require consideration and resolution. They are:

- staff feel undervalued by the rest of the council and some are circumspect as previous reviews and reports have not led to any improvement
- action is required to improve opening hours, especially on Saturday afternoons
- investment is required in digital infrastructure and related training/skills development
- opportunities to improve skills and capability to better respond to user requirements
- focus required to improve marketing, image and profile of the library service/hub
- clarification about the role of volunteers
- unified management approach across the network i.e. one manager for library/hub
- better promotion of library activities and events, including inter-generational activity
- refocus on literacy and educational attainment
- realism about the budget
- progress on restructuring and recognition of the contribution that staff make, maybe a celebration of success
- improvement to stock and its presentation
- better access, both physical and reading materials.

We were pleased to meet a passionate and knowledgeable group of library staff. Despite budget constraints they are fully committed to doing the best they can for their communities.

How effective is the library service's contribution to cross cutting agendas of other services.

There is lots of potential in this Directorate and beyond for TL to demonstrate its contribution to the wider agenda of the council and partners. Some excellent work is in place, but it remains under celebrated and the opportunity exists to ensure that the outcomes that will be described in the library/hub delivery plans can be developed in a way that better reflects TL's contribution to Place, People and Prosperity aims.

Libraries could underpin so much more of the Council's work, and the strategy sets out a number of offers that reflect this, as follows:

- reading
- learning
- wellbeing and community
- cultural and arts
- digital.

It appears that libraries have not featured when new developments are being shaped. This opportunity should not be missed in future, the potential of libraries/hubs should be a part of the prospectus for future housing growth and other suitable regeneration initiatives. The inclusion of a library/hub space in a new leisure centre or school can be a low cost/high impact solution.

The ambition expressed in "Communities First" is not matched by the current resources. Consideration is required to stabilise the library revenue budget and to provide additional capacity and capability to work out how best to deliver the strategy.

TL need to develop and share a compelling narrative. Much of this is set out in "Communities First" and we understand that there will be a media campaign to raise awareness of the library/hub offer under the championship of the Portfolio Holder for Communities.
Staff are very excited about the future and it is important both to recognise this and to find a way to better equip staff to contribute ideas. They should be involved in the continuing infrastructure improvements and helped to acquire the skills necessary to deliver on the strategy.

We recognise that the Book Start scheme is well understood in Children's Centres. This initiative makes a significant contribution to children's development and literacy.

What is the role of the library service and council in the local community?

The role of libraries in Thurrock is a provider of books and reading opportunities, and also learning, literacy and information. Above all libraries are about communities and people and responding to their needs. Libraries can help people to live independent, happy and fulfilled lives in line with the emerging ambition expressed in "Communities First".

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TL is very much part of the council vision this means that libraries/hubs should aim to provide

(People)
• high quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
• the opportunity to build on partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
• the library/hub model that helps empower communities to make choices and be safer and stronger together

(Place)
• accessible public spaces that connect people and places
• fewer public buildings with better services

(Prosperity)
• attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
• vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
• commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services.

Libraries are a safe and neutral space in which the above can be provided. The contribution to the people and place elements of the council vision are evident, and could be better documented to demonstrate the connections. The prosperity element is less evident and therefore requires further consideration and promotion to ensure that TL clearly understands its potential contribution to the prosperity of Thurrock.

The success of the library/hub model demonstrates the appetite to make co-location and co-production work. Despite some teething problems this model is maturing and the benefits of working in a new way focused on the local community is proving to be beneficial for residents.

The national Universal library offers support the "Communities First" strategy. Some work needs to be done to ensure that staff understand the connection between TL and the wider council and national agendas.

Thurrock understands that its libraries offer an inclusive environment and a safe space in which bespoke activities can be developed to respond to local needs. There is a common understanding that Thurrock consists of a number of "urban villages" each having its own unique characteristics. This profile needs taking into consideration as each new community/hub reflects the specific requirements of its own local community.

What are the relationships and role that the library service has with the wider council?

TL is moving in the right direction and is well positioned within the Adults, Housing and Health directorate. This has helped the council, at a corporate level, to develop an understanding of the

potential of libraries.

TL has been undervalued as a resource corporately and is playing catch up. Much valuable work has been carried out in the last 18 months to improve the service and to roll out the continuing infrastructure improvements. The scene is now set for the next five years and will be mapped out in business plans that deliver on the "Communities First" strategy. More work is required to make the strategy a reality and TL staff are key to its successful implementation.

It would be useful for TL to develop a narrative to assist in the marketing and promotion of the library offer. Part of the development of the narrative will describe clearly TL's contribution to the wider council agenda.

Now is the time to recognise and share strengths, to be aspirational and to communicate and celebrate success.

As TL raises its profile in the council, staff would value more contact with senior management and councillors.

What opportunities are there for income generation, what can Thurrock learn from other councils?

We are aware of the existing proposal to recruit to a business development post for TL. This is a specialist area and one where libraries have not been particularly successful. We think that a One Council approach is necessary. That is a review of the income generation potential of library/hubs in the context of the Thurrock estate and a recognition of the value of the other TL assets (people, stock, acquisitions, and services) as social capital.

TL has realised the clear potential in new developments of raising capital from S.106, public health and the council's community hub capital funds. It would be useful to explore other funds and this requires time and resource to do so effectively e.g. Corporate Social Responsibility/sponsorship, ACE and other grants, working with the economic development team.

Funding partners will be looking to develop sustainable relationships, with pay back more likely in the medium to long term. It is not envisaged that any new income generation would cover the current revenue gap. To fully realise the ambition set out in the new strategy, the council needs to fund the service properly and consolidate the current operation.

The untapped potential of volunteers represents a significant potential resource for TL. Currently volunteers are active in home delivery, summer reading schemes and library assistant roles. However, the role of the volunteer varies across the service and staff have a range of views about the benefits of volunteers. Now is the time to reconsider the relationship with volunteers. For example advantages of volunteering include:

- work experience and expanding your CV
- helping your local community and giving back to society
- meeting new people and making friends
- staying active and feeling appreciated
- improving your wellbeing and discovering new purpose.

All of the above are opportunities that are provided within "modern" library services. Now is the time to work together to provide an expanded role for volunteers within TL in partnership with volunteers and their representative organisations, such as Thurrock CVS. One important point is to consider how to better match the skills of the volunteer cohort with the aspirational outcomes of Thurrock's new library strategy. An exemplar is Norfolk library service that has progressed the opportunities available for volunteers by developing nearly 40 role descriptions. Thereby clarifying and expanding the volunteer role and creating a better alignment with the work and desired outcomes of the Norfolk library and Information service.

Is Thurrock getting the balance right between its community and its traditional role?

The peer team's view is – is this the right question to ask given the ambitions of the council and its partners? The development of the community hub model with the library anchor reflects a good combination of a new integrated service. A key role of community hubs is to galvanise communities around the issues they feel passionate about; supporting opportunities to improve local conditions including health and wellbeing, community safety and helping people into work. As the library service and hubs programme align, the council aims to build on this opportunity for residents to influence local decisions and shape the future of their borough through hubs.

The library/hub will help support the delivery of Your Place Your Voice engagement activities and support residents with a passion for active citizenship to develop the skills and confidence to take an active role in their neighbourhood.

There is an awareness amongst library staff and senior management that work remains to be done to ensure that the library service is better positioned to contribute fully to the achievement of the Thurrock ambition. In particular the following require attention:

- develop and document a shared understanding of the contribution libraries can make to Thurrock outcomes
- frame the library service in the context of the library universal offers
- engage and inspire colleagues through leadership, direction and vision.

As well as the national agencies, Thurrock should work with various local and regional partners to achieve the ambitions of "Communities First". The strategy conforms to good practice, as it includes a clear vision for the future outlining what the service should achieve and deliver. We note that DCMS approve the approach taken in Thurrock in developing the library/hub model.

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Networking opportunities are not being maximised and learning is not being migrated to help with the TL response to the Thurrock vision. Currently there is an opportunity to take a pause, reflect on work to date and identify the capacity and capability to fully engage with the national, regional and local agendas. The following may be of assistance as you move towards a new plan for TL to become fit for the future.

Library Taskforce publications/Blog. The Taskforce was set up to enable libraries in England to exploit their potential and be recognised as a vital resource for all. On this **blog**, members of the Taskforce talk about their work. https://librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/

Arts Council is the development agency for libraries in England. The focus is on public libraries, which operate within a wider framework of library provision and local and national government services. They have taken on the work of the Libraries Task force until 2020. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-libraries

ACE/LGA online culture hub: https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/culture-tourism-leisure-and-sport/good-practice-culture

Two case studies from Peterborough Libraries currently on the culture hub, both for their content on the use of technology and as examples of published case studies. https://www.local.gov.uk/new-delivery-model-peterborough-city-councils-library-service

https://www.local.gov.uk/peterboroughs-open

Libraries Connected. The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) has become Libraries Connected as part of its new role as a Sector Support Organisation with Arts Council England (ACE) funding. The new role will see Libraries Connected support and advocate for public libraries, building on successes such as the Universal Offers. The name change is part of a broad rebranding that has seen SCL adopt charity status, as part of the ACE funding deal worth £500,000 a year. https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/LibrariesConnected1

The Reading Agency is a charity that works throughout the United Kingdom to harness the proven power of reading to tackle life's big challenges like literacy, health and wellbeing and isolation and loneliness. Its vision is for a world where everyone is reading their way to a better life. It works closely with partners including public libraries, colleges and prisons to promote the benefits of reading among children and adults. https://readingagency.org.uk/

CIPFA Nearest Neighbours. Allows councils to download reports comparing each English library authority that returned data (134 of the 150 councils in England have been published: reports updated March 2017) with their family group, as defined by the CIPFA Nearest Neighbours Mode. Thurrock has a near neighbour comparator in Peterborough, and this may be worth progressing a conversation between the two library authorities. The peer team can facilitate this

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introduction.

JISC champions the use of digital technologies in UK education and research. It provides a range of online services and training to education, learning and research communities in the UK. Providing shared services, infrastructure and advice to help you manage your library resources, research publication lifecycle and research outputs. https://www.jisc.ac.uk/

LGA is a founder member of the Libraries Taskforce and has oversight of cultural activities through its Culture, Tourism and Sport Board. It provides guidance and case study material as well as blogs, leadership conferences and peer challenges. https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/12.6_LGA%20Cllr%20handbook_Delivering%20local%20solutions%20for%20public%20library%20services.pdf

CILIP is the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. It is a professional body for librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers in the United Kingdom. https://www.google.com/search?q=CILIP&oq=CILIP&aqs=chrome..69i57j35i39j0l4.2367j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

LOCALITY (funding and income) is the national network supporting community organisations to be strong and successful. https://locality.org.uk/

Both peers on this team offered the ongoing support as individuals and on behalf of their respective organisations, Libraries Connected, Kirklees Council and Arts Council England. Kirklees Chief Librarian will share information and support around volunteer recruitment and roles, the Libraries of Sanctuary awards and national opportunities for recognition.

Finally the peer team evidenced much good practice internally, it is important to find a better way of sharing this across the service and council. The Library Services Manager produced an excellent narrative and supporting documents for the peer team. It would be useful to share these as appendices to this report when it is reviewed by the council's overview and scrutiny committee.

5. Next Steps

Immediate next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Gary Hughes, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government

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Association (LGA). His contact details are: gary.hughes@local.gov.uk

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.

For more information please contact

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