Scrutiny Committee

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Provision of library services in Suffolk

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Introduction

1. This report is to inform the Scrutiny Committee on the current state of the commissioned library service, to answer the questions that the Committee wished specifically to be addressed, and assist the Committee to formulate any further questions it wishes to ask about the contract and service.

Main Body of report

(a) What are the statutory responsibilities of the County Council in relation to the provision of library services?

2. The Council has a statutory duty to provide a "comprehensive and efficient library service" under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, under section 7:

   It shall be the duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof. Provided that although a library authority shall have power to make facilities for the borrowing of books and other materials available to any persons it shall not by virtue of this subsection be under a duty to make such facilities available to persons other than those whose residence or place of work is within the library area of the authority or who are undergoing full-time education within that area.

3. The Council sets the overall direction and the priorities for the services which are provided on its behalf and reviews the performance of the supplier against agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). It has a duty to step in if the statutory provision is failing.

(b) What is Suffolk Libraries IPS Ltd contracted to provide?

4. Suffolk Libraries contract is for five years, plus an option for them to renew for a further five years from July 2017. The contract price and the Service Specification are negotiated annually. Suffolk Libraries is contracted to provide the specified library service in all 44 of Suffolk's libraries and three mobile library vehicles.

5. The present specification is attached as Appendix 1.   The Appendices referred to in this document are not included for the purposes of this scrutiny review, but the full contract and further information is published on Suffolk Libraries website at: http://suffolklibraries.co.uk/about/documents.

6. In brief, Suffolk Libraries provides:

- Provision for reading and literacy through books to borrow, books to download and through activities
- Services that address loneliness and social isolation, and provide a shared community space where people feel safe
- Help with learning and skills and finding a job
- Provision of activities that improve mental and physical health and wellbeing
- Information provision and the internet, both self-service and with the help of skilled staff
- Access to films and music, in the format of CDs and DVDs, and through downloads

7. There is a schedule of key performance indicators, which are reported on either quarterly or annually, to ensure service quality. The KPIs are a mixture of traditional library measures and locally agreed indicators that aim to measure the impact of the service on key areas for the County Council.

8. The traditional library measures are derived from the national Libraries Survey conducted by the CIPFA (the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy), and provide a means of comparison with other library services.

9. The Suffolk-only measures are informed by: Transforming Suffolk, the community strategy 2008-2023, the Council's published Key Priorities, and the current Adult and Community Services (ACS) Service Plan. Libraries contribute towards a wider set of the council's statutory duties, including the Care Act, and to areas of priority service improvement, such as Raising The Bar.

10. The measures also include the Universal Service Offers developed by the Society of Chief Librarians to enable modern library services to show performance in developing health and wellbeing, literacy, digital skills, lifelong learning and accessing information and services in vital areas such as careers and jobs, health, government online services and financial help.

(c) What is the service model?

11. The service model, as laid out in the Council's 2011 Review of Library Services, is based on a structural model of how Suffolk's library service will be provided, and on an access model of where service points will be.

12. The structural model is single organisation providing both a library service that manages all staff and resources, and gives governance and leadership to the community groups that make up the membership of the IPS.

13. The Access model uses the Borough and District Council published Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) as the framework for library services. This is because they support and sustain rural communities; they identify centres of services across the county, from Major Centres to Towns to Key Service Centres to Local Service Centres and Primary Villages.

(d) How does the service in Suffolk compare with others?

14. The service in Suffolk performs generally well against national and regional trends. The main comparison tool for core library functions is the annual CIPFA survey. CIPFA produces a number of reports that show individual library service's performance against national, regional and "Near Neighbour" (NN) groups. The NN comparisons are used in the contract KPIs, as they compare Suffolk's performance against 15 other shire counties that are similar to Suffolk.

15. The 2014-15 report (the last published), extracted at Appendix 2, shows that Suffolk is above average in our NN group for number of books in stock per person (a), and for issues (b) and visits (c).

16. Suffolk has a high level of engagement with volunteers. The willingness of communities to help deliver the Summer Reading Challenge, as well as the contribution of time by library friends groups and the Suffolk Libraries Board is shown by the high proportion of volunteer hours as a percentage of total hours worked in libraries, shown at (d).

17. The service is delivered at the lowest cost per visitor in the comparator group (e), and both the average cost of acquiring a book (f), and the revenue expenditure per 1000 population (g) are lower than average.

18. Suffolk has the most volunteers, and the most hours per volunteer worked, because of the huge support people give to the Summer Reading Challenge, and the time people give to the Friends groups.
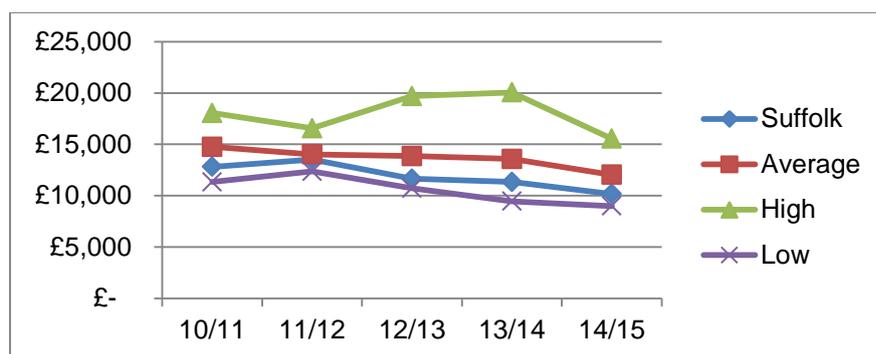
19. *Performance over time - CIPFA NN Group. Highest and lowest performing library authorities will be different for each measure, and may vary by year.*

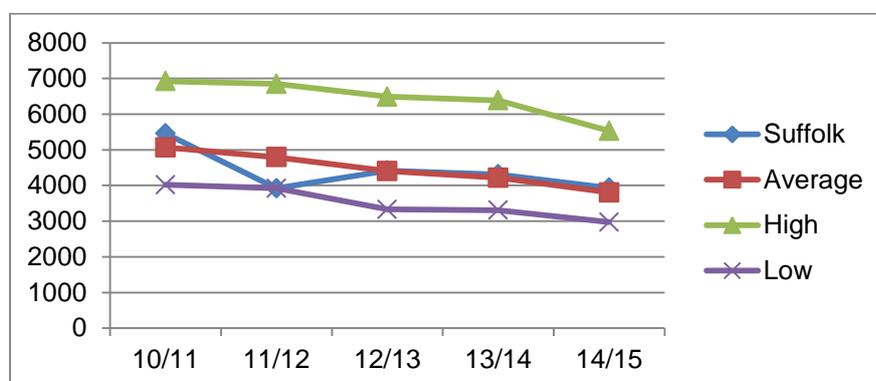Fig 1. Visits for library purposes per 1000 population
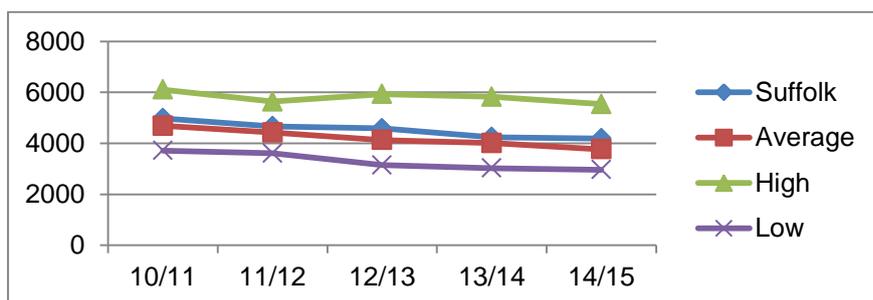
Suffolk's visits remain above average and have levelled out after a period of decline.

Fig 2. Revenue expenditure per 1000 population

Suffolk's libraries have a history of being lower cost than average. This has been maintained

Fig 3. Book issues per 1000 population

After a dip from a higher than average peak, Suffolk's book issues are slightly above average.

20. A richer set of KPIs, reflecting Suffolk's priorities, is measured through returns submitted as part of the specification monitoring process. Some measures are reported quarterly, and there is an annual return covering all measures. The commissioner adds analysis of outcome and direction of travel, and reports to ACS Management Team. The last completed annual return and report, for 2014-15, is at Appendix 3.

21. Over 12% of the stock was refreshed over the year (measure 2.4). This includes print and non-print material. The proportion of stock refreshed was slightly higher than the year before.

22. All libraries provide Wi-Fi access to the internet, allowing people to use their own devices (measure 3.2), and there are 71 devices available for loan through libraries (measure 3.5), helping to address the issue of 25% of people who lack mobile internet access, and the 14% of households who lack any internet access at all (source: Office for National Statistics). Both national and local government are driving towards digital access to services being the default, making access to broadband internet, and help to use it when needed.

23. Older people, people at risk of social isolation and people looking for jobs or training opportunities use libraries to get online (measure 3.18).

24. Use of libraries for events and activities focussed on children and on older people is growing, the number of attendances at events last year increased by 7.5% to 90,700 – over 1700 per week (measure 3.7). Use of library buildings for events outside library hours is also healthy (measure 3.10).

25. Early analysis of the performance figures for 2015/16 show an increase in areas which reflect the library experience people expect from a modern library service:

    - Library visits are holding at approx. 3 million.
    - Issues are down but by a very small percentage, with 2,885,456 issues compared to 2,904,656 reported in last year's CIPFA report. A drop of 19,200 (0.7%).
    - Activities for older people are up by 10% - from 17,162 to 18,896.
    - One off and regular activities are up by 12 % - 139,387 to 155,876.

26. Independent reviewers have noted Suffolk's ability to deliver a high-performing service at lower than average cost. William Sieghart, who led the 2014 Independent Library Report for England, described the service as "gold standard". The County Council and Suffolk Libraries are contacted regularly by other library authorities who are keen to explore our model of service commissioning and delivery through an independent, not-for-profit, charitable company.

(e) How has use of the library service changed since 2011?

27. While physical visits have reduced, online visits, accessing library services such as eBooks, eAudio, free music downloads and online magazines, have increased.

28. Traditional lending of printed books and physical discs and tapes has also reduced, but at less of a rate than the national trend. Indeed Suffolk's book lending per head is above average for like counties.

29. Suffolk's library service was an early adopter of eBook loans while in the County Council. Since externalisation, the service has accessed a growing range of suppliers, increasing the choice. About 1% of stock bought in 2014-15 was in eBook format, double the year before. (Appendix 3, measure 2.2.2)

30. People use the library service for much more than borrowing. Attendance at library activities has increased, and people are much more likely to come to the library outside staffed opening hours to attend other activities: learning, creative art and reading sessions are all run by local individuals and groups.

31. As more information becomes available online, there is less reliance on libraries for basic enquiries. Enquiries handled by Suffolk libraries dropped by 15%, which is broadly in line with the national trend. People now expect more focussed advice about how to access the services and information they need, and help to use the digital services with which they are presented. Examples include accessing social housing lists, registering with service providers, searching for an applying for jobs and training. 21,500 people were assisted to get online at libraries in 2014-15 (measure 3.18)

32. Libraries are seen much more as places to access other services. As an example; New Chapters, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Information Service, has been delivered through libraries since 2010. Funded by the Joint Mental Health commissioners, and commissioned separately from the core library

service, it has developed a stigma-free information, advice and support service that includes self-help groups and activities to promote physical and social wellbeing. The library service logged over 2000 mental health related enquiries last year.

(f) How has the Suffolk library service developed since 2011 to adapt to these changes?

33. Because there is a much closer tie between the library staff, the friends groups, and the community at large, there has been a blossoming of more local offers based on the needs of individual communities. The core service is delivered to a common standard, and this has enabled local talent to flourish:

- Adult learning classes are key to the offer at Aldeburgh Library, organised by the Aldeburgh Library Foundation.

- There is a walking book discussion group at Saxmundham that combines gentle physical exercise with the features of a book club.

- Gainsborough library benefits from a 7 day a week community café run by volunteers drawn from and recruited by Voices for Gainsborough Library.

34. The service has also been able to be more innovative and entrepreneurial:

- Stradbroke library is the first in the country to house and run a village Post Office; a service that would otherwise have been lost to the village, probably forever.

- In Ipswich Library, Suffolk Libraries has worked with the Chamber of Commerce, Ipswich Borough Council and the Eastern Enterprise hub at University Campus Suffolk (UCS) to develop and deliver the Enterprise and Innovation Hub, an incubator space for start-ups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), including an IT Lab that offers a maker space and equipment to assist entrepreneurs and innovators to develop new product ideas.

35. The more traditional areas of library use have also changed; as well as the move towards eBooks and eAudio, people can also borrow the devices to use these formats. Libraries also lend Chromebooks, simple to use laptop devices where most of the software lives on the internet and is used online.

(g) What is the current model and costs for the operation of the mobile library service?

36. Mobile library visits were reduced in 2012 from fortnightly to every 4 weeks, after public consultation.

37. The county council retains ownership of the mobile library vehicles, which are operated by Suffolk Libraries. There are three vehicles which visit approximately 566 stops in 358 communities. There is a stand-by vehicle to cover for any of the active vehicles being off the road.

38. The service costs c£170,000 a year, including staffing but excluding the cost of stock. In 2015/16 there were 27,585 visits to mobiles, making an average of 766 per mobile per month. There are 11,194 mobile library cards, of which 3,276 have been used in the last 12 months. Since 2013/14 active mobile library card use has decreased by 3.8%.

39. The three active vehicles are due for replacement in the next 12-18 months, and are likely to cost in the region of £120,000-150,000 each. It is the responsibility of the County Council to replace the vehicles in a timely fashion. This is a capital cost to ACS not provided for in current capital programmes.

(h) What services does the mobile library service provide and how well are these used?

40. Although well loved by its users, the service offers necessarily less than the full range of services that would be available from a library in a building. Essentially they are a book delivery service, with the added opportunity for some time-limited social engagement with other people using the vehicle, and the mobile library manager.

41. The vehicles use 3G (mobile phone) technology to issue items on the online library system, but there is little scope for offering access to the internet.

42. In 2011 when mobile services were last reviewed, and usage was analysed in depth, the majority of mobile users were older people and use had fallen by around 30% in ten years. There was also evidence that many people could and did access a wider set of services at their nearest library, in addition to the more limited service on the mobile.

(i) What savings has Suffolk Libraries IPS Ltd made to date and how has this been achieved?

43. The cashable savings on the baseline 2010-11 libraries budget to date are £2.8m (31.5%).

44. Including some savings made in-house before libraries were externalised partway through 2012-13, the contract with Suffolk Libraries has saved £1.9m (21.4%). Just under £1.5m has been in service delivery costs.

45. The service has cut out layers of management and made the frontline leaner. Rather than manage decline, Suffolk Libraries has worked with its staff to update their role and encourage more engagement with customers, communities and volunteers.

46. No libraries have closed; indeed opening hours have been increased in some libraries, with financial help from friends groups. Services have been reshaped and new services introduced.

(j) What further savings are required?

47. A further £300,000 is required from the contract price, currently modelled into 2017/18.

(k) What are the options being considered in order to achieve these savings and how is this likely to impact upon the current range and quality of services provided?

48. The County Council suggested where savings might be found in the 2016/17 budget paper. These were, in brief: reduction in opening hours, review of the mobile library service, and savings in the stock budget.

49. We have been working with Suffolk Libraries and considering other approaches, intended to deliver the required savings without detriment to the service to the public.

50. The approach is still in the discussion and negotiation stage, and there is work to be done by both the County Council and Suffolk Libraries to develop it further. A major element involves looking at using technology to facilitate cheaper, rather than fewer opening hours.

51. The County Council currently fulfils its statutory library duty to rural communities partly through the mobile library offer. We are interested in scoping an alternative to this relatively expensive and limited service.

52. We are working with Suffolk Libraries to explore options on alternative rural services to deliver the core service and library experience to communities where there is need for a service, making the offer accessible to more people, within the budget available.

53. This may be at less cost, but it is unlikely that the full revenue cost of the mobile library service would be available as cashable savings

(I) What further opportunities exist for the library service to contribute to the achievement of wider public service priorities in Suffolk?

54. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) have jointly commissioned Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021, which they consulted on until 3 June. The document suggested seven areas, to which libraries might contribute, and have their contribution measured. These "purposes" are:

- Reading and literacy
- Digital literacy
- Health and wellbeing
- Economic growth
- Culture and creativity
- Communities
- Learning

55. This direction of travel is already well-established in Suffolk, as well as in some other library services. There are some areas that might usefully be identified as priorities for Suffolk libraries, for example:

Reading and literacy: Building on the increasingly successful Summer Reading Challenge, which has been shown to at least maintain, and sometimes, develop children's literacy through the long school holidays, and the Suffolk Libraries Year of Reading. Suffolk Libraries won funding from the Foyle Foundation to develop literacy in schools, contributing to Raising The Bar priorities to ensure every child can achieve their full potential.

Digital Literacy – This might better be expressed as digital *inclusion*, as the ability to engage digitally depends not only on skills, but on access to technology, to enable people to use *digital by default*. As well as the council and partners' services, it is anticipated that universal credit will be rolled out in Suffolk in next two years via an online app. Suffolk Libraries is already involved in the Digital Assist programme. There are also further opportunities for Business support via the Hub.

Wellbeing – Apart from the increasing attendance and positive feedback from regular and one-off events in libraries, like Top Time events for over 55s, the pilot programme of digital screenings of premier performances in libraries has scope for expansion to support people, particularly in rural and less affluent areas of the county, to access drama, music and dance presentations. New Chapters is also set expand to include events and self-support activities in more libraries.

(m)   What consultation will take place on any proposed changes to the provision of services?

56. Any material change to the service delivered would be subject to public consultation, the timing of which is dependent on when the council believes it has a viable and robust proposal to consult on. We would be expected to inform DCMS of material changes, and are seeking clarification of what this process is.

57. Where there are local variations of service, there is a process of local consultation which involves Board and County Council approval.

The Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider progress to date, and note that the County Council and Suffolk Libraries IPS Ltd are continuing to work in a spirit of openness and partnership to plan to deliver a high-performing 21st century library service that compares well against its peers, while making necessary savings on the contract price, in the future.