

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, PLACE AND COMMUNITIES

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION PEER REVIEW OF THE LIBRARY SERVICE

Purpose of the Report

1. To update the Committee on the peer review of the public library service undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Arts Council England (ACE) in February 2021.

Information

Context

2. The County Council has a statutory duty to provide a public library service under the 1964 libraries and museum act. This duty is delivered by the County Council through a contractual agreement with Inspire – Culture, Learning and Libraries.
3. The County Council and Inspire invited the LGA to undertake a peer review of the library service in 2020, this review was funded by ACE. Due to Covid 19 the review was delayed and undertaken as a virtual review on the 1st and 2nd February 2021
4. The peer review aimed to provide a credible external view of the service which would support the County Council in its commissioning role and the Inspire board and leadership team in focusing on the development of the library service.
5. The scope of the review was agreed between the LGA, ACE, Inspire and the County Council. Key areas of enquiry and review included:
 - a) Membership engagement and volunteering
 - b) Demonstrating impact and performance
 - c) Customer journey
 - d) Income generation
 - e) Staff engagement and skills
 - f) Innovation
6. Areas of challenge included:
 - a) What have we learnt about the library service from the COVID-19 crisis?
 - b) What is the future vision for libraries in a post-Covid world?

- c) How can Inspire and the library service contribute to the cross-cutting agendas of other services and wider council objectives and ensure they are involved at key points?
- d) The library service is the public face of the County Council however it is not always exploited as well as it could be by the council – how can we ensure that we are talking to the right people at the right time?

Review Process

7. The review team consisted of a senior Councillor, professional lead, LGA associate and a senior manager from ACE. The peer review team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing.
8. The team then spent 2 days meeting people from Nottinghamshire in a virtual visit, conducted on Microsoft Teams, during which they:
 - Spoke to 32 people including a range of Inspire and Council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
 - Gathered information and views from more than 12 meetings and additional research and reading.
 - Collectively spent more than 70 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of 1 person spending nearly 2 weeks in Nottinghamshire.

Key Findings

9. Leadership and Management

Inspire provides high quality and highly regarded library services. The political and officer leadership of the Council are justifiably proud of what has been achieved and there is a strong and collaborative relationship between the Inspire chief executive and senior colleagues in the Council. We also found an enthusiastic and proactive staff team, well led and well supported, responding commendably to the challenges of COVID-19. Everyone we spoke to confirmed Inspire and its staff to be resilient, caring and flexible in their crisis response, using words to describe them such as “agile, responsive, kind and committed”.

10. Covid Response

In response to the pandemic, Inspire moved swiftly to deliver an expanded virtual offer, re-engineering their website and providing an information and helpline operating 6 days a week, providing valued support to customers seeking information and resources. Library home delivery, click and collect and mobile services have been particularly effective and Inspire aimed to offer the fullest possible safe and legal offer when it was able to open. Inspire also joined the risk board which coordinated the Council’s COVID-19 response. We were impressed by the professionalism of the managers, staff and volunteers we met in our one-to-one sessions and focus groups, by their pride in Inspire and by the public service values they demonstrated. This is particularly apparent through the unwavering focus on customer and community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

11. Political Support

We were consistently told that there is deep and strong cross-party political support for Inspire and the library service it provides with member commitment to the library service over many years. This has provided a solid platform for Inspire since it 'spun off' from the Council in 2016, with successful delivery of the first 5 year contract and a second 5 years in the process of being signed off.

12. Future Strategy

It is evident that Inspire has been fulfilling its current aims and mission very effectively but that the future vision is still to be explored and agreed. COVID-19 has acted as a disruptor and the peer team suggest that this provides an opportunity to think differently about how Inspire develops moving forward. The people we spoke to set out some urgent public sector challenges as part of COVID-19 recovery; such as supporting catch-up and reading in education for children and young people; tackling loneliness and isolation; addressing a widespread loss of confidence and fear; upskilling people; supporting health and care particularly with regard to prevention; developing business and reviving the high street in a changing economy; and tackling widening social disadvantage and inequality.

We heard from senior leaders that there is a significant opportunity in this context for Inspire to make a more strategic and impactful contribution to public health, adult social care, children's and regeneration outcomes and to position Inspire as the 'front door' to Council services. This is a clear invitation from Council leaders to re-examine how Inspire is positioned in the medium to long term, moving beyond the traditional role of a commissioned service to become a more strategic partner for the Council, aligned to the new corporate plan priorities as these emerge.

13. Performance

In terms of overall performance (pre-COVID), Inspire provides a comprehensive and cost-effective library service. Libraries receive over 2.4 million visits per annum, issue 2.9 million loans, have 122 thousand active borrowers (nearly 15 per cent of the population) and 9.5 thousand children take part in the summer reading challenge. When compared with a national cohort of 122 councils, active borrowers and visits to the website are in the top quartile, book stock performs above average and physical visits are similar to the average, although dwell time has increased as the offer includes a varied programme of events, activities, learning and exhibitions. Arts Council England National Portfolio funding has been important here.

14. Library Network

While we recognise the strong commitment to provide a network of library buildings, we identified a potential tension between the number of sites, future budget pressures and need in new or expanding communities, in order to ensure fit for purpose library provision in the most accessible locations. Inspire has a track record in partnering, eg with district councils and the health services, and new opportunities for colocation and integration should continue to be explored as part of the forward strategy.

Key Recommendations

15. Position Inspire to contribute more to cross cutting agendas in the Council and to be proactive in having a voice among senior leaders, creating a strategic 'prospectus' of what can be offered by the service
16. Co-design the new vision and strategy for Inspire and its library service with Council partners, stakeholders, and communities
17. Proactively use the opportunity of the development of a new NCC corporate plan to create a golden thread between Council priorities in COVID-recovery and beyond and the new libraries strategy
18. Use Inspire board members more fully, drawing on their expertise, vision and advocacy, and connecting them more closely to the organisation
19. Explore best practice from other councils with senior leaders, the Inspire board and councillors
20. Library site colocation to be reviewed as communities develop and opportunities arise
21. Volunteering and member engagement – increase opportunities

Action Plan

22. An action plan has been developed to respond to the main recommendations of the review and allocated to key officers from the Council and Inspire – see Appendix 1

Other Options Considered

23. No other options were considered.

Reason for Recommendations

24. To enable the committee to exercise its delegated responsibility.

Statutory and Policy Implications

25. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

26. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) To inform Members of the outcomes of the LGA peer review of the library service.
- 2) To agree the action plan as outlined in Appendix 1.

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Constitutional Comments (LW 17/06/2021)

27. Communities Committee is the appropriate body to consider the content of the report.

Financial Comments (SES 16/06/2021)

28. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- Library Services Virtual Peer Challenge Inspire and Nottinghamshire County Council 1-2 February 2021. Local Government Association.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All.

Library Services - LGA Peer Challenge

Nottinghamshire County Council and Inspire

Action Plan

Key Recommendation / area of challenge	Actions
Recommendation 1: Position Inspire to contribute more to cross cutting agendas in the Council and to be proactive in having a voice among senior leaders, creating a strategic 'prospectus' of what can be offered by the service	<p>Develop an Inspire strategic prospectus in delivery of council priority outcomes alongside new council 2021 – 2026 plan</p> <p>Identify Inspire as strategic partner to deliver public health, adult social care, children's and regeneration outcomes</p> <p>Presentation to Members / CLT / Senior Managers / stakeholders</p>
Recommendation 2: Co-design the new vision and strategy for Inspire and its library service with Council partners, stakeholders and communities	<p>Develop and publish a new Libraries strategy in light of new council plan</p> <p>Policy committee approval autumn/winter 2021</p>
Recommendation 3: Proactively use the opportunity of the development of a new NCC corporate plan to create a golden thread between Council priorities in COVID-recovery and beyond and the new libraries strategy	<p>Reading and learning recovery tackling loneliness and isolation. upskilling people; health and care particularly with regard to prevention</p> <p>developing business / high street offer tackling social disadvantage and inequality</p>
Recommendation 4: Use Inspire Board Members more fully, drawing on their expertise, vision and advocacy, and connecting them more closely to the organisation	<p>Inspire board development and training</p> <p>Board away day 2021 to review</p> <p>Board member recruitment and election</p>
Recommendation 5: Explore best practice from other councils with senior leaders, the Inspire board and councillors	<p>Identify best practice and arrange information exchange and visits</p>
Recommendation 6: Library site colocation to be reviewed as communities develop and opportunities arise	<p>Ongoing consideration of colocations and partnering to ensure libraries are in the best locations. Mobile service to review route and stops.</p>
Recommendation 7: Volunteering and engagement – increase opportunities	<p>Launch community makers volunteering and membership engagement programme</p>