

## **Executive summary**

### **1 Background**

In April 2009 a strategic review of Slough's public library service was initiated with the express aim of setting out a clear direction for the service for the next 5 years and beyond. The review has considered all available options and potential models to re-design services.

It provides a strategic framework to deliver transformational improvement, learning from the best and setting out a course that will aim high and set new standards for innovation and value. Options are provided for elected Members, to enable them to decide on priorities and guide next steps for service improvement.

The review has taken a strategic view of the service and its development in the context of a realistic assessment of Council funding for the next few years. It is a given that the existing budget priorities should be delivered. There is scope for further efficiencies at the same time as delivering substantial service improvements in priority areas.

"I want to see libraries full of life, rather than silent and sombre. Attractive buildings, exuding a sense of joy – offering something unique and valuable right at the heart of the community ...

This is a real opportunity alongside more traditional forms of educational to fire people's imaginations and enthusiasm ...

A true celebration of local history, of local identity and, crucially, of local learning."

*Andy Burnham (as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport) announcing DCMS's Modernisation Review of English public libraries, October 2008*

### **2 Slough libraries**

Slough has a uniquely diverse and lively community. Its library service should both reflect and celebrate the community and add real value to it through bringing people together and creating opportunity for all.

Slough is one of the smallest library authorities in the country. It has a large central library, three community libraries, a mobile and housebound service and a book borrowing service in children's centres.

People living in Slough make good use of libraries. 51% of Slough residents used a public library in the past year, but not necessarily in Slough, comparing favourably with the national average of 49%. However, until recently visits

and issues have been decreasing. The service has a record of introducing new initiatives, but many are not sustained and are not delivering real improvement in customer service.

The cost of the service is high (£4.71 per visit), partly because the service is too small to achieve any economies of scale and partly because it has complex and proportionately costly management overheads.

### **3 Review aims**

The review was established to set out a strategic direction for the service with a 3-5 year perspective. This was in the context of the critical need for the service to engage fully in key strategic and corporate strategies as part of a joined up approach to improving access to services and opportunities for local people.

### **4 Vision for Slough libraries**

The following vision statement was agreed with the review Steering Group. It provides the context and framework for proposals to improve libraries in Slough.

Slough Libraries bring people together, celebrating the diversity and richness of Slough's community, raising people's aspirations, creating opportunity and nurturing skills and creativity. Through this they will be a force for change, making Slough an exciting and vibrant place to live and work.

### **5 The vision and value of libraries is not fully realised**

In order to realise this vision and fulfil their potential, it is critical that libraries communicate their value in terms of community outcomes, ensuring that they are at the centre of wider community strategies that enable private, public and voluntary sector partners to work together effectively to deliver shared outcomes for communities.

In this context, libraries have the potential to be enablers for simple, clear and joined up local services that are delivered dynamically in ways that meet people's changing needs when and where and how they need them.

The vision is primarily for Slough's library service, but fundamentally it is also a vision for community services, delivered with and through libraries.

In realising this vision, libraries will be vibrant places, reaching out to communities, places where everyone can feel welcome and comfortable and have a strong sense of local identity and ownership. A library is a place to learn, to meet others, to connect. It is a place where people can engage on their own terms to see and grasp opportunities to improve the quality of their lives. The outcome of service transformation should be a difference that every user will sense and feel the benefit of.

To be able to do this, the library service needs to:

- Put people at the centre of everything it does, empowering them and continuously re-shaping services to meet their needs
- Provide excellent customer service, challenging itself continuously to meet customer expectations
- Celebrate and promote diversity and Slough's unique culture
- Demand excellence in everything it does to provide the best quality services possible
- Work collaboratively and foster and build partnerships to deliver services in ways that help people access them
- Learn from and adopt best practice and set new standards
- Focus on delivering key priorities, driven by results
- Continuously challenge itself to deliver better value for money and maximise investment in customer service

## **6 Libraries are part of a bigger picture of community services**

Libraries have a unique value in bringing the global functions of their core information and learning role into a very specific community setting. The public library can sit at the heart of a sustainable community and be instrumental in connecting people to the wider world along with the promotion of a very local sense of place. This strategic review has focused on finding ways to enable Slough's public libraries to fulfil their potential as a catalyst to help realise the Sustainable Community vision and strategy for Slough.

## **7 Leadership and cultural issues must be resolved first to enable change**

The momentum required to ensure that the service moves forward and continuously improves can only be achieved through clear priorities and a focus on improvement. Clear and effective leadership is critical to provide a sense of direction and conditions for transformational change, and is needed at every level, from Members and senior officers and throughout the service.

There is no simple quick fix to achieve cultural change, but it requires clear priorities with clear roles linked to those priorities, and an openness to challenge and change.

There are many excellent staff within the service and the challenge is to connect the diverse range of individual skills and initiative with a focus on what is right and necessary for the service, defined by what is right for Slough's community.

This cultural shift from a service led to community led provision, working in partnership, is critical to ensuring that libraries remain relevant and vital assets capable of being a real force for change in communities.

## **8 The service can improve how it engages with and responds to community and customer needs**

Libraries attract 615,000 visits a year, from across the community in Slough. They are particularly effective in reaching those communities in greatest need, including BME communities and those who are not employed.

While there are a number of good initiatives, there is no systematic and consistent quality of engagement with communities. Analysis of needs and opportunities is poor and the resulting lack of focus inhibits the quality of service delivery and improvement.

As a community service, it is critical that libraries improve their engagement with and responsiveness to customers and the community.

### **9 Priorities are unclear and performance management is weak**

While a substantial amount of relevant information is collected, it is not being effectively and efficiently analysed or interpreted and is not used systematically to inform planning or target setting.

Overall, there is a clear lack of focus on delivery against priorities and a limited performance culture among the staff at all levels. Performance issues should be addressed as part of a transformation programme that establishes a positive change in ethos and a clear steer for the way forward. This should ensure that staff can feel engaged and empowered in terms of what is expected and what is needed for the service.

### **10 Opening hours and the quality of stock and other resource are priorities for improvement**

Analysis of customer and community responses indicates the following priorities for improvement, with the quality of opening hours and stock being particularly critical:

- Opening hours – especially out of office hours
- Books – quality of choice
- Learning facilities – access in libraries and clear route to other opportunities
- Computer and online facilities – range and up-to-dateness
- Buildings and environment – especially Central Library
- Priority user groups – older people, teenagers and migrant communities
- Improve satisfaction levels and customer service – quality of service
- Marketing and communications – awareness of services

### **11 There is potential to improve access to services in local communities**

The Learning Curve/Heart of Slough and Britwell regeneration opportunities should be used to ensure library provision is delivered as part of a mix of services tailored to meet community needs. Joined up delivery demands joined up working at every level, which in itself will be a powerful catalyst for improving customer services across the Council, breaking down service silos and designing services around customer needs.

“Mini libraries” in community centres would improve access for residents in areas of the borough that are currently poorly served. These should be provided as part of a broader service offer in a way that is convenient for people to use.

The mobile library offers poor value for money, costing over £100 per borrower per year for the public service. It is proposed that replacement of the mobile library would create an opportunity to re-invest in two new “mini libraries” and deliver a better and more cost effective service. The needs of current mobile library users would be met through the existing housebound service and other alternatives.

#### **12 Operational improvement and some cost saving can be achieved**

Just 53% of the budget (£1,469,000) is directly attributable to customer service. The focus for cost reduction should be on management and administration costs. Many processes can be simplified and streamlined to reduce costs and at the same time improve service delivery.

#### **13 There is an invest to save opportunity in the short-medium term**

An invest to save strategy is proposed which reduces process and back office costs and improves customer services (section 8.8). The net effect of this by 2013, discounting one-off capital investment costs for the Learning Curve, is a revenue saving of £350,000.

#### **14 Piecemeal changes can make improvements but will not build services fit for the future**

Many changes and improvements can and must be made quickly, in order to establish a strong momentum for reform. However, a significant transformation that embeds performance culture and generates opportunities for considerable investment and improvement through economies of scale can only be achieved through substantially increasing capacity for change.

The service lacks capacity to lead and implement transformational change and is not in a position to acquire it on the scale required. That capacity may be achieved by aligning the service with one or more strategic partners in a new service model. This fits closely with the Council's development as a commissioning body and has the potential also to unlock opportunities for further service improvement and efficiency.

It is critical that local libraries focus on identifying and meeting community needs. A strategic partnership model that helps support this through efficient systems and processes could help release frontline staff to focus on customers and also improve value for money.

#### **15 There is an opportunity now for transformational change to be delivered**

Alternative models for strategic partnership are available and could be the catalyst needed. The review has tested a number of alternative models to assess what value they can bring to library service transformation and communities in Slough.

Analysis in section 9 indicates that the two models with greatest potential to work effectively and add value are:

- Strategic partnership with another local authority

- Strategic partnership with a private sector provider

The local authority strategic partnership model is consistently the strongest available option. Potential benefits include:

- Ability to work quickly to accelerate transformation using established models and to be flexible to Slough's requirements.
- Ability to introduce established models of service planning, performance management and customer service delivery that have been proven in a local authority context.
- Additional partnership opportunities that complement those already in place, especially local relationships.
- Understanding and capacity to build a locally responsive service tailored to community needs in Slough.

The review identified that there are authorities who would potentially be interested in providing some or all library services in partnership with Slough Borough Council.

It is recommended that in order to achieve the best possible service transformation Slough Borough Council proceeds to advertise for expressions of interest to test the market for the local authority strategic partner model.