

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 17 July 2023

Wards: All

Subject: The role of Merton's Libraries as Community Hubs

Lead officer: Dan Jones – Executive Director of Environment, Civic Pride and Communities Department

Lead member: Councillor Caroline Cooper-Marbiah – Cabinet Member for Sport & Heritage

Contact officer: Anthony Hopkins – Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Service

Recommendations:

- A. For Cabinet to note the progress made with establishing Merton's libraries as community hubs.
 - B. For Cabinet to agree the direction of travel for Merton's libraries as community hubs and the kinds of services and partnerships that will be provided through them.
-

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. This report provides an overview of Merton's public library network and the role they play as community hubs in the borough.

1.2. Merton's network of 7 public libraries and a Heritage and Local Studies Centre, are well used and highly regarded by residents. Over 1.1 million physical visits are made to them each year and they are some of the most well used libraries in the country. Customer satisfaction is very high as measured via the recent Library Customer Survey (October 2022), with 100% of residents satisfied with their library service and 99% rating them as either excellent or very good.

1.3. The current operating model is based on a community hub model and hosts a range of services delivered by partners, with strong representation from the community via volunteering. Section 2 explains in more detail the current community hub offer and how this could be stretched over the next few years. All the proposals are an enhancement to the current offer and do not impact on the existing high-quality offering.

2 DETAILS

Merton's Libraries as Community Hubs

2.1. Merton has some of the most well used libraries in the country with very high customer satisfaction rates. Over 145,000 residents are library members, which equates to over 68% of residents, and 32% have used their library card at least once in the last year to either borrow a book, use the computer facilities, or use the libraries online services (*KPI SP08 – Active Usage*).

2.2. Over 650 events are delivered via libraries each month and support a range of interests that are described further in this report. The events are delivered in collaboration with community partners and volunteers.

2.3. The current Merton library operating model is routed in the community hub approach. The current offer has been summarised under the following 5 headings:

- Information and Digital
- Culture and Creativity
- Children's Services
- Health and Wellbeing
- Reading

2.4. An extensive opening hours offer is in place across the 7 libraries with 4 libraries recently increasing their opening hours via new self-access technology called Libraries Plus. Our libraries are now open for 448 hours per week, which is a 16% increase in opening hours prior to the pandemic. Unlike some other authorities Merton has maintained all its libraries over the last 10 years, improved the service offering and extended the opening hours at all of them.

Information and Digital

2.5. Merton libraries provide high quality information and digital support. Libraries enable individuals and communities to develop learning skills to find answers and to inform life choices. The offer helps children and adults to engage and feel safe online. It ensures resources and opportunities are accessible and embraces creative and innovative technology.

2.6. The service focusses its support on those most in need who potentially have limited access or knowledge of the Internet and other IT applications. In order to support residents, it provides a broad range of one to one and group IT support.

Cost of Living

2.7. During the current Cost of Living crisis libraries have been an invaluable resource both in providing warm spaces and as places of information, hosting a range of information for residents on how they can manage their budgets more effectively. Partnerships with services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Springfield Law Centre also mean that residents can get first-hand information and guidance from trusted organisations. An ongoing programme of Cost of Living events, drawing together a wide range of organisations, continues to be delivered.

IT Access

2.8. All of Merton's libraries provide residents with free access to computers with Internet access. This is delivered via a network of 147 computers. All sites provide free WiFi and on site training is provided for residents in digital skills via one to one and class sessions, delivered by volunteers and partners such as Merton Adult Learning.

Connecting Merton

2.9. Connecting Merton is the borough's very own computer equipment lending and training scheme and is open to any resident aged 18 years and over. The scheme not only provides good quality IT equipment such as laptops and tablets but advice,

guidance and training on how to get the equipment set up and how to get online safely. Library staff and volunteers support residents by providing training in person or via the telephone. Participants are also linked into a range of free IT learning courses provided by Merton Adult Learning and other providers. So far over 1,200 residents have been supported to get online with 100% of participants reporting improvements in their IT skills as a result of borrowing a device.

2.10. Connecting Merton has also been highlighted as an area of good practice in the recently published 'Digital Inclusion in London' report published by the London Office for Technology and Innovation (LOTI) on behalf of the Greater London Authority.

Employability, Skills and Training

2.11. Libraries provide a range of employability support services working with training providers and the Job Centre Plus. Examples include CV writing workshops, job clubs and other skills training. The use of library services is integral for a number of community based courses and in a more informal way through sessions such as one to one IT support and other activities delivered by partners and volunteers.

2.12. The service works closely with the council's Adult Learning service and provides venues for a number of their courses and collaborative work such as pathways onto courses for volunteers and coordinated family learning courses.

2.13. As part of the development of its assisted digital offer staff and volunteers have been trained in supporting customers with Universal Credit and other government services. Libraries play an important role in supporting customers with online council and other government services.

Business Support

2.14. Business start-up support and flexible office space is provided for residents via the Wimbletech / Workary offer at Wimbledon and Mitcham libraries. Since launching in 2014, Wimbletech has supported over 5,000 residents with affordable local space to help grow their businesses and work locally.

2.15. As part of the offer, a number of events are delivered to support members and their businesses to develop and grow with over 500 events being delivered so far. Providing this offer locally enables members to invest back into their local community and estimated member spend in Merton since launching is over £1,000,000, which goes directly into the local economy.

2.16. Over 200 jobs have been estimated to have been created as a result of the project and the value of these jobs is estimated at almost £4,000,000 to the local economy. It currently has over 150 resident members with a community digital platform recently launched.

Community Banking Services

2.17. To help remedy the loss of banking services from local branch closures Barclays provide a community banking offer via Merton's libraries. Barclays provides residents with the usual non-cash banking and management advice services and deliver free community services around digital skills and employability. Barclays also work with Merton libraries to enhance its offer to local schools, and are currently operating for 4 days a week across Mitcham, Pollards Hill and Colliers Wood libraries.

Online Services

2.18. The use of online services has increased significantly during the pandemic and the Library & Heritage Service has responded by developing its online platforms to cater for a range of online events for all ages. Usage levels continue to remain high and a new online platform for residents recently launched. All transactional services are available via the website and a free e-book service is available that has over 100,000 items available for residents to borrow and over 60,000 items were borrowed in 2022/23.

Merton Heritage Strategy

2.19. Merton's Heritage Strategy was refreshed in 2021 and is focussed around four objectives:

- Raise Merton's profile by increasing public access to the borough's unique and diverse cultural heritage;
- Safeguard the borough's varied heritage sites and resources, protecting and conserving them for the benefit of future generations;
- Ensure that Merton's heritage provision is inclusive by working collaboratively to widen public engagement and participation;
- To recognise the important contribution of social enterprise and secure ongoing funding and investment in Merton's heritage through partnership work, external funding and sponsorship.

2.20. The Heritage Service provides information and resources on the local area as well as displays and exhibitions. The annual Heritage Discovery Day is very popular and attracts over 1,000 visitors. Throughout the year a calendar of events is delivered to mark important local and national events.

2.21. Merton Memories is a unique web portal that hosts over 17,000 images of the borough online and enables residents to add content to the resource.

Culture and Creativity

2.22. Merton's libraries work with cultural providers to deliver a range of events and activities via libraries. This includes access to high quality arts and cultural activities. The offer celebrates diversity, promotes inclusivity, values identity and contributes to an active local cultural economy.

Merton Arts Space

2.23. Merton has two established Arts Spaces in Wimbledon and Mitcham libraries. These spaces enhance the cultural offer through libraries and have flexible lighting, sound and stage facilities to enable professional productions in community settings. A wide range of cultural events across different artistic disciplines has been delivered. A music recording studio has also been installed at Wimbledon Library and has supported residents to develop their song writing and music production skills along with producing high quality music and podcasts.

National Portfolio Organisation (NPO)

2.24. Merton's libraries have also recently been successful in applying to be a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) and will receive almost £360,000 in funding to invest directly into cultural activities and events. The funding will mean that a high-quality cultural offer can be delivered via libraries utilising professional performers. A

significant portion of the funding will be used to extend the cultural offer in the east of the borough and to attract audiences that have previously only experienced limited cultural opportunities. The funding will run for 3 years with the opportunity to reapply on an ongoing basis.

Library of Things

2.25. The Library of Things is an equipment loaning scheme that loans popular items that residents may not have the space or money to purchase for their homes. Examples of items loaned include garden equipment such as hedge trimmers along with things such as projectors, carpet cleaning machines and other home DIY equipment.

2.26. Evidence from the scheme shows a range of benefits. It enables residents to feel better connected with their community and reduces spend and waste on equipment with users more likely to repair or recycle items.

Tuned In

2.27. Tuned In launched in 2019 and is a project which aims to combat some of the issues of loneliness in the borough with funding from the Winter Pressures Fund. Tuned In works with professional musicians who facilitate fortnightly musical jam sessions at Merton Arts Space, Wimbledon library. The sessions share and develop musical skills and build knowledge, as well as helping individuals build social connections and friendship groups. They create an environment for people from all walks of life to come together and enjoy mutual support.

2.28. The project targets men, particularly those in the age group 50+, where loneliness is at its highest. However, the project is open and accessible to all. The sessions work on a drop-in basis and regularly see 30+ individuals attend.

2.29. The project works with several partners in the borough to help promote healthy lifestyles, including One You Merton, GLL, AFC Wimbledon and Fulham Football Club. They help raise awareness of the social and health benefits of organisations in Merton and this combined with the musical jam session aims to help reduce isolation, loneliness and build social connections and communities. Over 1,000 people have participated in Tuned In sessions. Participants are tracked through their participation and asked a range of questions on their health and wellbeing with good outcomes reported.

Children's Services

2.30. Merton's libraries welcome children from the very earliest months of life, helping parents and carers to support them as they grow and learn. Working with schools and other partners, libraries provide a range of activities, programmes and initiatives which introduce, extend and refresh the library experience for children.

Sensory Libraries

2.31. Via Arts Council funding sensory equipment has been installed at all libraries and a SEND (special educational needs and / or disabilities) stock and equipment offer is in place with trained staff and volunteers.

2.32. There is a dedicated resource library (Learn, Play, Grow Resource Library) with specialist communication technology, specially adapted toys and switches and story bag books, which can be borrowed free of charge and are used for activity sessions

Schools and Libraries Membership Scheme

2.33. Merton has a unique schools and libraries membership scheme that all school age children aged 5 - 14 are signed up to. The scheme is an invaluable way of promoting reading for pleasure amongst children and the improved life chances it brings. Merton has some of the highest usage rates of libraries amongst children and young people in the country.

Bookstart

2.34. Bookstart gives free books to every child in Merton at two key stages before school, as well as free packs for children with additional needs, tips and guidance on reading together, resources and activities, and much more. Bookstart aims to encourage a love of books, stories and rhymes in children from as young an age as possible.

Family Hubs

2.35. Merton's Family Hubs are places where families can get information, help and support from a range of important services. They will bring together staff working across a range of different services, including the council, health services and voluntary and community organisations.

2.36. They offer support from conception up until the age of 19, or 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. All of Merton's will be classified as Family Hubs.

Health and Wellbeing

2.37. Merton's libraries play an important and visible role as the 'High Street presence' of the council and play a vital role in supporting and signposting residents towards obtaining appropriate information and accessing council services.

2.38. Our seven libraries already host a range of groups and services that support our communities, including health and wellbeing services covering subjects such as healthy eating, sexual health, diabetes, mindfulness and smoking cessation. A year-round approach to promoting healthier lifestyles through libraries is in place and links in with national and local initiatives.

2.39. Collaboration has been strengthened with partners to provide better support to assist people in living healthier and happier lives. This has included the introduction of new standards of service to make our buildings more dementia and autism friendly whilst enhancing the information offer.

2.40. The service works collaboratively with Public Health, social care, health providers and Adult Learning colleagues to promote a range of initiatives to link in messages around good personal health.

Health and Wellbeing Zones

2.41. Through external funding Merton's libraries have made adaptations to the buildings and purchased new equipment to create a multi-sensory experience that enhances resident's digital, education and health outcomes. Each library has a designated Health & Wellbeing Zone.

2.42. As well as books and information the Health & Wellbeing zones provide facilities to assist residents to better manage their health including technology to support

relaxation like massage chairs and weight, height and blood pressure monitors that will record a resident's figures and load directly into a customer's GP records should they request this. Bounce pads provide access to a range of high quality and NHS approved apps to support health and wellbeing.

Be Well Hubs

2.43. Be Well Hubs help tackle the cause of mental ill-health, promote access to mental health services and support people in the community.

2.44. All our libraries are accredited Be Well Hubs. Organised by Citizens UK the hub's main purposes are to de-stigmatise mental health, to use community organising principles to build strong relationships with local health services, and to organise leaders to listen and take action on the barriers and systemic problems impacting mental health. They will report back on key themes and trends from their communities.

2.45. Be Well hubs are a key initiative of the South London Listens programme, launching in community organisations where members have had mental health training to become Be Well Champions. Through this training and ongoing supervision, the Champions are equipped to listen to people in the community, provide information, resources, and signposting to mental health support.

Volunteering

2.46. Merton has a sector leading volunteer initiative that sees over 750 residents contribute over 28,000 hours each year to their local library. Volunteers support in a range of different roles including meeting and greeting, IT support and events delivery and new roles continue to be developed.

Reading

2.47. Reading for pleasure is a key life skill and research by the National Literacy Trust demonstrates that children who develop a love of reading at an early age are likely to have better life outcomes. Reading and borrowing books remains the highest used customer channel provided by Merton's libraries with 69% of customers borrowing an item in the last year.

Reading Promotions and Campaigns

2.48. The Library & Heritage Service has a year-round programme of events and activities that link into key local and national initiatives. A significant proportion of the 650 events delivered each month in libraries support reading and literature.

2.49. An annual calendar of events and promotions is drawn together, and events are promoted widely through all available channels such as social media, the libraries e-newsletter, the libraries website and the libraries themselves and feed into corporate communications plans.

Library Connect

2.50. Library Connect is Merton's very own pop-up library solution. It is used in localities to drive up library usage and raise awareness of the offer. It is delivered predominantly in areas where customer usage is lower than average. The offer links into wider council initiatives such as Health on the High Street.

E-books Service

2.51. The Library Service's e-books offer has seen significant increases in usage during the pandemic as customers shifted to new digital solutions whilst library access was restricted. The service hosts a collection of over 100,000 titles and is continuing to invest in its e-books platform. Other forms of digital content, such as e-magazines and e-audio have also seen significant increases in usage and are continuing to increase even with library buildings now being fully reopened. During the pandemic an 84% increase was reported in the use of e-content and usage levels continue to increase.

Home Visits Library Service

2.52. For residents who cannot make it to a library for any reason a Home Visits Library Service is available that delivers books and other materials to a resident's home and can cater for all interests and preferences. During the pandemic this service was a vital lifeline to some residents who were shielding or unable to leave their homes with limited contact with other people. The service currently supports just under 200 residents and is undertaking a marketing campaign to further increase numbers.

Stretching the existing Library Offer

2.53. Following research and engagement with customers, officers and members the following areas have been identified as stretch areas for the existing community hub offer via libraries:

- Digital Maker Spaces
- Council meetings
- Staff touchdown space
- Hosting more partners and voluntary groups
- Increasing the heritage presence in libraries
- Community cafes
- Further developing the culture offer
- Extending the network and future proofing the existing network

Digital Maker Spaces

2.54. A makerspace is a physical location where people gather to co-create, share resources and knowledge, work on projects, network, and build. They help intermediate and advanced users develop their skills and creativity, particularly inspiring younger generations to engage with the STEM agenda - Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (or STEAM as it is now sometimes becoming referred to, by also including the Arts). Their activity promotes development of high-end technology skills needed for prosperity and social mobility. Makerspaces in libraries feature strongly in the UK Digital Strategy in recognition of their value and impact.

2.55. All libraries currently provide coding facilities and clubs to support residents to better understand this important subject. Merton Libraries have also recently been successful in applying for £74,000 from Arts Council England as part of their Libraries Improvement Fund (LIF) to install top of the range 3D printing and virtual reality

equipment in Mitcham Library to create the first borough digital maker space. Further work will be undertaken to stretch this offer across all libraries over the next few years.

Council / community meetings

2.56. Many of the borough's Community Forums are already held in libraries and there is a desire to further expand the amount of Council meetings held in libraries. This could include full Council and scrutiny meetings. The stretch would be to enable facilities for full Council meetings to take place at libraries where there is suitable space (e.g. Wimbledon and Mitcham) and to be able to provide facilities at all other libraries for smaller Council and community meetings to take place.

Staff touchdown space

2.57. With the increasing need for staff to work in a more mobile way libraries are an excellent space for Council staff to work. The IT infrastructure is already in place and some staff already use library space for meetings and work. Through the stretch offer the library service will seek to create designated office and private space for Council staff to undertake their duties where there is suitable space available.

Hosting more partners and voluntary groups

2.58. Over 60 community organisations already deliver services in libraries. Some organisations such as Wimbledon Bookfest and Attic Theatre Company also have their offices based in libraries and new services have recently been rolled out such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and Springfield Law Centre advice surgeries. It is proposed that the service will further engage with local community and voluntary organisations to maximise co-location and service delivery options where practical.

2.59. The meeting room offer will also be further promoted to community groups as a cost-effective alternative to some other options in the borough.

Increasing the heritage presence in libraries

2.60. Merton libraries will increase access for residents to the Merton Heritage & Local Studies collections via the library network including increasing the number of exhibitions and information available in them along with delivering more activities. The service will maximise digital access to the collections to further promote a deeper understanding for residents of their local area and to increase civic pride.

Community Cafes

2.61. There are two community cafes already established at Wimbledon and Colliers Wood libraries. As part of the stretch offer the service will seek to further expand the offer across all libraries where the cafes are commercially viable and there is suitable space available.

Further developing the cultural offer

2.62. Utilising the National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding the service will significantly increase its arts and culture offer via libraries and embed high quality arts and cultural events at all our libraries that respond to resident and cultural needs.

2.63. Separate business cases for all of the stretch offers will be produced where additional funds be required to implement them.

Extending the network and future proofing the existing offer

2.64. There is strong Cabinet commitment to retain and improve the existing library network with a commitment to looking at development opportunities where it will

improve access to community hub / library services. As part of this Cabinet have requested that officers continue to scope out opportunities for new sites to increase access for residents. Any proposals will be brought to Cabinet for consideration.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1. Merton has some of the most well used libraries in London with very high customer satisfaction rates (*source: CIPFA Public Library Statistics 2021/22*). This paper explores how libraries can be further embedded in the community. The paper summarises the existing and stretch offers. Therefore, the do nothing option is to maintain the offer summarised in section 2.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. Cross Council discussions have taken place regarding the proposals and input into the report has come from finance, properties, IT and facilities colleagues.

4.2. The report also draws in the feedback from over 1,600 customers who completed the Library Customer Survey in October 2022.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. The aim is to have all the stretch proposals regarding the community hub offer established by April 2026.

5.2. Timetables for investment will need to link into the annual budget setting plans. Some of the stretch offer proposals will require revenue and capital investment for them to happen. For any items included in the stretch community hub offer that require additional resources a separate business case will be developed. With regards to these items the request from Cabinet is to initially agree the direction of travel and for officers to then develop the plans further.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. The Library & Heritage Service has 7 libraries and a Heritage & Local Studies Centre based on the second floor of Morden Library. All libraries have either seen significant redevelopment works or new libraries have been built since 2005 apart from West Barnes Library.

6.2. With regards to West Barnes Library and following discussions with Network Rail on the impact of any potential Cross Rail 2 line in the Mostpur Park area, the redevelopment scheme that was approved by Cabinet in 2014 can progress should suitable funding be agreed. The proposals are linked into the Asset Strategy Review.

6.3. The Library & Heritage Service has a controllable budget of £2,216,150. The current library offer is benchmarked as being the most efficient of any London library service.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. The Council is required under section 7 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service for all persons who live, work or study in the area, and addressing the 'needs of adults and children'. Local authorities have a statutory duty to make provision for a library service but may decide on how this is to be done.

7.2. Certain aspects of the service must be provided for free including free lending of books, free access to information and free library membership. The proposals in this report will enhance the public library offer in the borough.

7.3. In drawing up and delivering their library strategies and plans, Councils should consider a number of legal obligations, including under:

- The Equality Act 2010 including the Public Sector Equality Duty
- Best Value Duty 2011 guidance
- Localism Act 2011
- The Human Rights Act 1998

7.4. Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) guidance encourages Councils considering changing their library service to inform the DCMS Libraries team about their proposals before public engagement or consultation. This helps provide early sight of proposals and assist DCMS in the superintendent role and giving the Council an opportunity to talk through its early thinking or proposals in order that the service adheres to the statutory obligations of both parties. Officers have confirmed there are no proposed changes to the existing library provision and the proposals in the report are all enhancements to the offer and will improve access for residents to library, Council and community services.

7.5. Library authorities should be able to demonstrate:

- Plans to consult with local communities alongside an assessment of their needs (including any projections of need).
- Consideration of a range of options (including alternative financing, governance or delivery models) to sustain library service provision in their area.
- A rigorous analysis and assessment of the potential impact of their proposals.

7.6. In coming to a decision about future library provision, DCMS, in its statutory role as Superintendent to government will expect the Council to act reasonably and rationally. A Council looking to introduce changes to their library service provision should consider a number of things, including the following.

- That proposals would continue to meet local needs.
- Strategic planning of any change so that there is a clear vision for the library service and what is intended to achieve and deliver, which reflects consideration of consultations and alternative strategies/changes arising out of consideration of the responses from local communities.

7.7. No procurement related legal implications arise from the recommendations in this report, however, should the need arise to procure any supplies, services or works,

this must be done in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and the Council's Contract Standing Orders.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. The development of the community hub offer will increase access for residents to vital services. Libraries play an important role in social cohesion and will enable more partner services to be delivered in the community.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. None identified for the purpose of this report.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. A separate risk register will be developed to incorporate the agreed actions.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

1. None included.

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None included.