

## **Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday 22 November 2023**

### **Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service Performance 2022-2023**

#### **Recommendations**

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Notes the performance of the Libraries and Arts Service to support the delivery of Staffordshire County Council outcomes.
- b. Notes the refurbishment of library building projects and provides comment.
- c. Provides comment on the overall direction of travel for the Libraries and Arts Service.

#### **Local Member Interest:**

All members

#### **Report of Councillor Victoria Wilson Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture**

#### **Summary**

#### **What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?**

1. Between April 2022- March 2023 the Libraries and Arts Service focussed on recovering the physical service offer after a period of reduced service provision due to the pandemic.
2. During the pandemic the Libraries and Arts Service developed an innovative and engaging virtual offer attracting new audiences. During recovery it became increasingly important that the physical library offer evolved alongside the virtual library offer to ensure a service that is relevant to a wider range of Staffordshire residents.
3. Library Officers work innovatively and creatively and in partnership with organisations and other County Council services to invigorate the library offer and support Staffordshire County Council's vision to deliver an innovative, ambitious, and sustainable county where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy.

4. Library Officers are working with colleagues in Strategic Property to improve library buildings and through engagement with Staffordshire residents are working to refurbish and refresh libraries to reflect community need where funding allows.
5. The Committee are asked to note developments to the service and are invited to comment on the direction of travel for the Libraries and Arts Service.

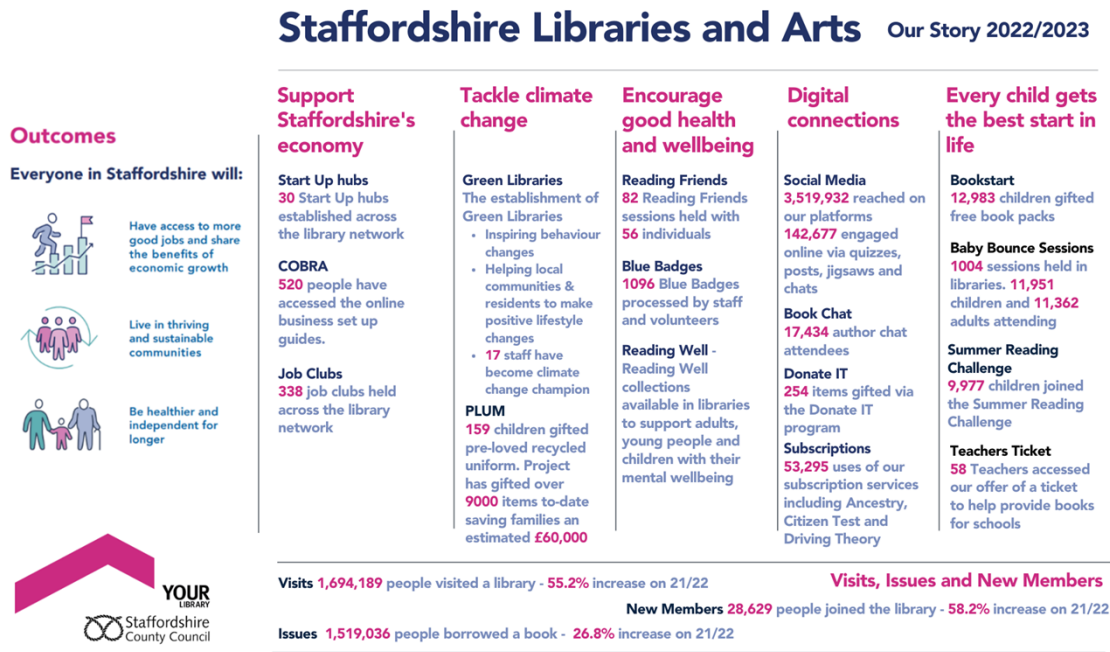
## **Report**

### **Section 1 - Background**

6. The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 gives the County Council a statutory duty to provide "a comprehensive and efficient library service". The Council is also required to ensure that facilities are available for the borrowing of or reference to books, other printed materials, recorded music and films, or sufficient number, range and quality to meet the requirements of adults and children. The Council must also encourage adults and children to make full use of library services and lend books and other printed materials free of charge to those who live, work or study in the area.
7. However, in Staffordshire our libraries are much more than a facility solely for books. They sit at the heart of our communities, providing a front door to the County Council. Connecting communities, opportunities... etc.
8. As part of Staffordshire County Council's statutory network there are 43 Libraries and 2 Mobile Libraries. 27 of the 43 libraries are managed by partners within the community. The Prison Library Service is externally funded.
9. Within Staffordshire the Library Service helps to connect communities, improve health and wellbeing, facilitate digital inclusion and promotes equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity. This is achieved through the delivery of four national Universal Library Offers: Health and Wellbeing; Reading; Culture and Creativity; Information and Digital. These are underpinned by two national Library Promises, the Children's Promise and the Print and Vision Impaired People's Promise. The Offers and Promises support Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service to deliver Staffordshire County Council's outcomes.

### **Section 2 - Performance**

10. Post pandemic, library performance has improved. The following infographic shows the increases in visits, book issues, and new members and highlights statistics from the key areas of work that support County Council outcomes.



## Section 3 - Key Workstreams Supporting County Council Outcomes

### Supporting Economic Growth

11. Our libraries are often the only publicly accessible building on the High Street and within communities. Staffordshire's libraries are the 'front door' of the County Council. Other County Council services access Staffordshire residents through 'drop-ins' in libraries, promotional material distributed from physical and mobile library buildings, news articles in the Staffordshire Libraries and Arts e-newsletter and through library social media. The Digital Infrastructure Team in Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Directorate are currently engaging with Staffordshire residents about the national analogue switch-off through libraries. Libraries are a community anchor and support regeneration by not only giving people a reason to visit town and village centres but by providing opportunities to learn new skills and find out information.

12. In 2021 Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service received a grant of £64,000 to establish Start-up Information Hubs in libraries in partnership with Business Enterprise Support over a 2-year period. This is an information awareness service for those who are unemployed,

economically inactive, or who have been affected economically by the pandemic. This service provides information and signposting for those investigating self-employment as an employment option. The County Council's Business Enterprise Team distribute information about business loans and other support through the Start-Up Information Hubs.

13. In July Barclays Bank signed a contract with the library service to hire a room at Wombourne Library and Community Centre, initially for 12 months, to provide advice to customers. The bank has reported that the advice sessions are very popular, and this saves people having to travel into Wolverhampton for their nearest branch.
14. Recently published research by economists at the University of Eastern England revealed that England's public libraries generate a value of at least £3.4 billion per year and a branch library typically provides £1 million in value annually. Using Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy spending data for the year 2021/22, this represents a return on investment of at least six times cost. [England's public libraries generate value every year \(uea.ac.uk\)](http://uea.ac.uk)

### **Tacking Climate Change**

15. Public libraries are the hubs of sustainability. Re-using and recycling books and providing information to communities to underpin their own climate action is at the core of the public libraries' green agenda.
16. Funded by Arts Council England the Green Libraries Partnership works in collaboration with the British Library, Libraries Connected (an organisation supporting public libraries) and Julie's Bicycle (a not-for-profit organisation mobilising the arts and culture to take action on the climate and ecological crisis). Through the Green Libraries Partnership Staffordshire Libraries and Arts service secured in 2022 £2,500 to support theme 5 of the County Council's Climate Change Action Plan, Changing Behaviours. This has resulted in an annual Staffordshire Green Libraries month in May. 92 activities were held in libraries across the county, and these ranged from green themed reading groups and green themed story times to making bird feeders, plant and seed sales and an eco-crochet session. One adult commented that the event they had attended was, "very informative. I will need to change some things I do at home." A parent commented that they thought that the family event they had attended "would help their children to develop a love of nature."
17. A partnership with County Council teams in Highways and Sustainability and Amey has resulted in 4 of the mobile library/transport vehicles using HVO fuel. This will effectively reduce library emissions by up to 90%.

18. Since 2021 Cannock Library has been working with the Salvation Army to support local families with recycling school uniforms. In 2022 this work extended to Stafford Library and both Cannock and Stafford Libraries are 'drop-off' points for families to donate unwanted school uniforms. Uniforms are sorted, washed, and ironed and given to families at Pre-Loved Uniform Markets. Since 2021 over 9,000 items have been gifted saving families an estimated value of £60,000.

## **Good Health and Wellbeing**

19. Staffordshire's libraries promote healthy living and provide self-management support. They are welcoming, warm spaces providing information and signposting. They offer a range of creative and social activities which engage and connect individuals and communities, combat loneliness and improve wellbeing. This helps to reduce health, social and economic inequalities.
20. Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service was one of 8 library services in the Country to receive funding (£9,999) from NHS Knowledge and Library Services to pilot work with Staffordshire residents on improving health literacy. Providing reliable easy-to-understand health information in accessible formats for patients and communities can help people make better decisions about their health and take an active part in planning their own care. Being equipped with greater knowledge can also have a huge impact on how people respond to treatment, recover from illness, and manage a long-term condition. Be Your Health has been designed by Library Development Officers in Burton and Newcastle to explore how young people access health information and to identify what information they require. Working with young people from The Voice project a toolkit of resources has been created and this will be launched in October to coincide with Mental Health Day. Staffordshire is the only project focussing on young people and the toolkit will be shared with public, health and school libraries nationally. The Library Service is also launching a Young Health Advocate volunteer role to support in sharing health information with peers and signposting.
21. As part of the work to develop the health literacy workstream in the national Universal Health and Wellbeing Library Offer 9 Health Ambassadors from library services across the country have been trained to deliver Health Literacy to frontline library staff, including one of our Library Development Officers.
22. Staffordshire Public Health have commissioned an external consultant to work with Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service to support the library service to enable Staffordshire residents to become more health literate. Nationally this work is of interest to the professional body, the Chartered

Institute of Library and Information Professionals as they develop training and resources for library staff of the future.

23. Men in Sheds is a partnership project with The Friends of Perton Library who successfully applied for £500 grant funding from Support Staffordshire to establish a Men in Sheds social group. This will provide an opportunity for men to socialise with each other at Perton Library, connect with their local community and will foster a sense of wellbeing in participants. The group will meet in mid-October for a 4-week funded woodwork course with Forest of Mercia. Any remaining budget will be used to support the group with tools/materials, and the group plan to ask for donations of tools.
24. Working with Staffordshire County Council Environment and Countryside Team the Libraries and Arts Service is 1 of 6 library services in the country to receive funding (£3,000) from Natural England for a Culture Nature Project. "Growing Connections" aims to increase community engagement with library gardens at Biddulph and Perton Libraries. A community-led programme of cultural activity that explores the potential use and benefits of both library gardens in bringing people together, improving connections to local green spaces and enhancing individual health and wellbeing. This project will empower residents to take ownership of their local environment, gain a deeper understanding of the importance of nature recovery and reduce climate anxiety by taking action.
25. Werrington Community Managed Library have developed their health offer to support the ageing community by securing funding for therapy lodges situated at the back of the library. These host a wide range of drop-ins and surgeries by health professionals. Two of their volunteers were awarded the national Library Health and Wellbeing Award this year, helping to raise the profile of Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service across the country.

## **Digital Connections**

26. When library buildings closed during Lockdown Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service quickly developed an online offer to help people stay connected to their community. As the physical offer has been recovered the Library Service has worked to create a hybrid offer and continues to engage new audiences through the digital offer.
27. We want to ensure our communities, library users, staff and volunteers have the best experience from the Staffordshire Libraries and Arts offer. The Library Service is working with the Digital Team to reshape the existing Libraries and Arts webpages and create a new dedicated library

service website with a single digital presence and one destination URL. Digital technology will enable the service to connect further with customers and Staffordshire residents, with a website that goes beyond the transactional to become an engaging digital space for all. The new website will include a 360-degree immersive tour of all static and mobile libraries to support our special educational needs offer. There will be instructional and informative videos that outline the library offer, and an engaging children's offer.

28. In early 2023 the Library Service launched the new library app. This provides instant access whilst 'on the go' to customer accounts, the library catalogue, information on nearest libraries, 'what's on' at your library, the ability to request books and renew books and the ability to connect to library social media – You Tube videos, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram accounts.
29. The Libraries and Arts Service continues to provide an extensive collection of e-books and e-audio books through the Borrowbox app and a wide range of e-magazines and e-comics through the Libby app. Online subscriptions to resources such as Driving Theory, Citizen Test, and COBRA support the development of thriving communities.
30. Library Service staff and volunteer IT Buddies help library users to access and navigate the internet. The Library Service works closely with Staffordshire County Council Adult Learning and Skills team who commission tutors to deliver short courses to help residents develop their digital skills. One library user commented, "I find the staff are knowledgeable and helpful, endlessly patient in unravelling the mysteries of using a computer and helping me to print out information."

### **Best Start**

31. Libraries have resumed their Baby Rhyme Time sessions and during 2022/23 1,004 sessions were held. These weekly free activities support the development of early speech, language and communication skills in babies and toddlers and provide an opportunity for parents and carers to meet others and make new friends, thus combating feelings of loneliness and isolation that new parents can often experience. Parents told library staff that they had missed attending these at the library during lockdown.
32. The national Summer Reading Challenge during 2022 was nearly at pre-COVID levels with 9,977 children participating and libraries supported this reader development initiative with a range of activities to encourage children to socialise with each other and discover reading for pleasure. The Local Government Association published a best practice case study on how the Library Service is using the Summer Reading Challenge to

support early literacy, speech, language and communication skills in Staffordshire children, [www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/staffordshire-county-council-supporting-covid-developmental-recovery-pre-school](http://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/staffordshire-county-council-supporting-covid-developmental-recovery-pre-school)

33. In 2022 the new Teacher’s Ticket was introduced to support school staff with teaching and learning in the classroom. 58 teachers have accessed this service and promotion of this new service continues when the Development Team of library officers work with schools and provide class visits to the library.

## Section 4 – Buildings

### 34. Burton Library

A successful submission to Arts Council England for Libraries Improvement Fund Round 2 provides funding to refresh the library offer at Burton Library. The focus is on widening audience reach and improving the ground floor of the library to create a multi-purpose space that will include a maker space, sensory areas and an improved audience area for events.

### 35. The Nicholson Institute, Leek Library

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council successful application to the Government’s Levelling Up Fund Programme to invest in the Nicholson Institute will see a refresh of Leek Library to create a more flexible space and deliver an offer that compliments the Foxlowe Arts Centre. Engagement with community groups, partners and stakeholders will form an integral part of this project to ensure local needs are reflected.

### 36. Tamworth Library

In June 2023 Tamworth Library re-opened after a reconfiguration and refurbishment of the library to accommodate Staffordshire County Council’s Adult and Social Care Teams. The library offer is available from the ground floor and the first floor of the library and provides a more open and flexible space with a contemporary feel. The children’s area includes sensory equipment in response to the growing need for community support for families with SEND. In the first month after opening a significant increase in use could be seen in comparison to the same month in July 2022.

July 2023 (in comparison with July 2022)	Visits +36.1%	Issues +15.6%	New Members +9.4%
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### 37. Wombourne Library

An application to Arts Council England for Libraries Improvement Fund Round 3 has been submitted. If successful this funding will enable the



reconfiguration and refurbishment of Wombourne Library to create a more flexible space to allow for groups to meet, activities and events; improved digital access; a more engaging children's area with sensory provision to support community need.

## **Section 5 - Next Steps**

38. Baroness Elizabeth Sanderson of Welton has been appointed by the Government to help develop a new strategy for public libraries. The strategy will focus on new ideas to improve library service provision and will help to formulate innovative new policy ideas. The strategy is due to be published in Autumn 2023 and will shape future public library service delivery.
39. Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service will continue to work with partners to sign-post to support and provide information and resources to improve digital connectivity, good health and wellbeing and build thriving communities and economies. The service will be the 'front door' for County Council services.
40. The library service will continue to develop the library offer based around the Universal Library Offers and Promises in section 1 and will continue to deliver a service to support Staffordshire County Council priorities.
41. The library service will continue to seek opportunities to improve library buildings and engage with local communities to ensure libraries meet the needs of local communities.

## **Link to Strategic Plan**

42. That everyone in Staffordshire will:
  - a. Have access to more good jobs and share the benefits of economic growth.
  - b. Live in thriving and sustainable communities.
  - c. Be healthier and independent for longer.

## **Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity**

43. Previous committee papers: Staffordshire Library Service 2020-2025, 17 January 2020 [Committee Report \(staffordshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.staffordshire.gov.uk)

## **Community Impact**

N/A

## List of Background Documents/Appendices

N/A

### Contact Details

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