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## **Ambition for Libraries Consultation**

### **Purpose**

For discussion and direction.

### **Summary**

Ambition for Libraries will determine how central and local government will work together, and with partners, to support thriving public libraries over the next four years within the context of a challenging fiscal climate and wider public service reform. It was developed by the LGA and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Leadership for Libraries Taskforce.

The consultation ran from March to 3 June. Views were collected through an online survey and a series of events held around the country. The LGA encouraged councils to respond to the consultation and hosted a well-attended roundtable for councillors on 1 June.

Kathy Settle, Chief Executive of the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce, will join the Board to give an overview of the consultation responses. This item is an opportunity for Members to set out their vision for Ambition for Libraries and how it can best support council library services.

### **Recommendation**

Members are invited to note the presentation and give any further steer in response to the issues raised.

### **Action**

To be taken forward by officers as directed by Members.

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## **Ambition for Libraries Consultation**

### **Background**

1. In March 2016 the LGA and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Leadership for Libraries Taskforce published a consultation document on the future of public libraries [Libraries Deliver: An Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021](#).
2. Ambition for Libraries will determine how central and local government will work together, and with partners, to support thriving public libraries over the next four years within the context of a challenging fiscal climate and wider public service reform.
3. The consultation, which ran from March to 3 June, was an opportunity to ensure that the [Taskforce](#) is focussed on the opportunities and challenges that are most important for councils.
4. The Leadership for Libraries Taskforce was set up in March 2015 following the publication of William Sieghart's [Independent Library Report for England](#) in December 2014.
5. The Taskforce is jointly accountable to LGA Members and Ministers. It is chaired by Paul Blantern, Chief Executive of Northamptonshire County Council. The Taskforce brings together partners including LGA, council chief executives, Arts Council England, The British Library, the BBC, the Society for Chief Librarians and Public Health England to support the sector-led transformation of public libraries.
6. One of Mr. Sieghart's recommendations was to publish a document that set out a shared vision between central government, local government and key partners for public libraries.
7. Taskforce achievements are reported in [six-monthly reports](#) to the LGA and Ministers. These include rolling out Wi-Fi to nearly every public library in England through a DCMS funded and Arts Council England managed project.

### **The Consultation**

8. The Ambition for Libraries consultation ran from March to 3 June. Views were collected through an online survey and a series of events held around the country. The LGA encouraged councils to respond to the consultation and hosted a well-attended roundtable for councillors on 1 June.
9. The consultation document sought views on the following themes:

**9.1 The policy context** – this section considered people's changing expectations, as well as wider context for local government and the legislative framework.

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**9.2 A vision for libraries** – views were sought on a vision for “a vibrant public library network for the 21<sup>st</sup> century that supports a strong, sustainable and democratic society that delivers a wide range of benefits to people, communities and the nation.”

**9.3 What libraries can achieve** – this section summarised evidence about how libraries contribute towards seven priorities: reading and literacy, digital literacy, health and wellbeing, economic growth, culture and creativity, communities and learning.

**9.4 How we can make this happen** – this section considered different delivery models and governance arrangements for libraries, continued support for libraries to adopt new ways of working, developing a positive public narrative for libraries and what an action plan might need to cover

10. The Taskforce team is currently analysing the feedback from the consultation and Kathy Settle, Chief Executive of the Taskforce, will present a summary to the Board.

## **Key Messages**

11. The LGA’s response to the Ambition for Libraries consultation is attached at **Annex A**.

12. As the joint accountable body for the Taskforce, the CTS Board has been heavily involved in steering the development of Ambition for Libraries. This included the Chair of the Board meeting the Culture Minister, the Chair and Chief Executive of the Taskforce briefing CTS Lead Members, the Taskforce leading a workshop at the LGA’s Culture, Tourism and Sport Conference and regular officer engagement.

13. Ambition is an opportunity to set out how national and local government will work with partners to respond to continued financial challenges and ensure libraries remain exciting and relevant destinations that drive footfall, help to create a climate of aspiration, contribute towards the achievement of local priorities and provide access to a range of public services.

14. Members have set out clear principles which they would like to underpin Ambition:

**14.1** The importance of recognising that libraries are a locally-led service with councillors’ democratic mandate making them best placed to work with communities to ensure libraries meet local need within available resources.

**14.2** The diversity of library delivery models is a great strength because what works for one community might not work for another.

**14.3** Acknowledgement of the acute funding challenges facing councils and the potential impact on library services, as well as opportunities from wider public service reform.

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- 14.4** Recognition of the innovation that councillors and their staff are already leading in the library sector and how libraries are contributing to local social and economic priorities.
- 14.5** The Taskforce can add value to existing activity by focussing on supporting the locally-led transformation of library services, in line with sector-led improvement.

**Next steps**

15. The LGA will continue to work closely with the Taskforce in developing the final Ambition document, which will be signed-off by Members and Ministers over the summer.

## **LGA Response: An Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021 Consultation June 2016**

### 1) About the Local Government Association (LGA)

1.1 The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We work with councils to support, promote and improve local government.

1.2 We are a politically-led, cross party organisation which works on behalf of councils to ensure local government has a strong, credible voice with national government. We aim to influence and set the political agenda on the issues that matter to councils so they are able to deliver local solutions to national problems.

### 2) Key Messages

2.1 Ambition for Libraries is an opportunity to set out how central and local government, through the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce, will support public libraries to thrive in a challenging fiscal context for councils and the public sector. We urge the Taskforce to focus on a small number of priorities that will make the biggest difference to improving libraries.

2.2 Ambition must recognise that libraries are a locally delivered service that will look different in different places, reflecting local need. Libraries are among the most valued and used of all council services. In 2014/15 councils invested £800 million in libraries in recognition of their contribution towards local social and economic priorities. However, this investment will come under increasing strain given the acute funding pressures councils face.

2.3 From offering computer coding clubs to small business start-up support and health advice, libraries are increasingly community hubs providing access to a range of services and information, as well as the most up to date written and digital offer. Councils are also embracing new library delivery models, such as co-locating with other services, sharing back office functions and setting up trusts, to improve efficiency and put the service on a more sustainable footing.

2.4 The scale of the funding pressures – especially the costs of caring for a growing older population – means that Ambition needs to be firmly focussed on supporting libraries to be efficient and valued assets that are well placed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by public service reform.

2.5 The Libraries Taskforce's support for councils must be taken forward in line with sector-led improvement, which local and central government have agreed is the most effective way to improve council services. It is vital that the Taskforce recognises the need for local flexibility in how councils access national support. Councillors would welcome the Taskforce focussing on knowledge sharing and good practice that supports locally-led service transformation.

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### 3) Further Information

3.1 We have structured our response according to the themes described in the consultation document. Case studies are attached at [Annex A](#).

### 4) Introduction and Context

4.1 The Ambition for Libraries consultation is happening at a pivotal moment for local government. The challenging fiscal climate and public service reform agenda are transforming the role of councils and therefore how all local services are provided.

4.2 Although local government received a 'flat-cash' settlement over the next four years, there are still significant challenges ahead for councils who will have to make savings to compensate for any additional cost pressures they face. These include costs arising from general inflation, cost pressures in the care sector and increases in demand for everyday services as the population grows. Many councils will have to make significant reductions to local services to account for financial reductions. This acutely challenging financial context, and the potential impact on libraries, needs to be more strongly recognised in Ambition.

4.3 Updating existing and developing new devolution deals, continued health and social care reform, and changes to local government funding, will all impact upon libraries. This important context for councils ought to be reinforced in the 'assumptions about the future' paragraph (3.3) as it will present opportunities and challenges for libraries which the Taskforce can support.

4.4 Recognition of this wider context will also ensure the document resonates with the most senior local decision makers. Ambition is an opportunity to raise the profile of libraries amongst council leaders and chief executives. This requires a punchy, evidence based document that focusses on a small number of priorities and shows how libraries can help councils to tackle the biggest challenges they face.

4.5 Linked to the above point, we suggest the core audience for Ambition is local government. While there are many others working with libraries and with an interest in libraries for whom Ambition will be valuable, its main purpose is to set out how the Taskforce will support libraries to improve and be sustainable in a challenging fiscal context. Multiple audiences and purposes will risk diluting the impact of the final document.

4.6 During the consultation phase, some have called for central government to define what constitutes a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service in the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act. The LGA strongly opposes this because what a local community wants from its library service will vary from place to place. As locally elected representatives, councillors have the democratic mandate to ensure that the library service meets community needs, within available resources. Given the challenging fiscal climate, there is the further risk that greater prescription will stifle local innovation and undermine innovations that have already taken place.

4.7 The consultation document is clear that Ambition is not a statement of government policy. It is important that there continues to be clarity on the status and ownership of Ambition. The final version will be a shared document between the LGA and Ministers. Of course Ministers might also choose to formally adopt all or elements of the document as government policy.

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4.8 It is right to put the needs of people who live, work or study in their area at the heart of Ambition. We also strongly agree that the Taskforce should make full use of existing research into why people value libraries.

#### 5) Vision

5.1 While local library services will have their own vision that reflects the local offer, we agree it is helpful to have a shared sector-wide vision which can be used by partners to raise awareness about the value of libraries.

5.2 The vision describes the current library offer. It could have greater impact if it was more forward looking and captured the ability of libraries to continuously evolve and meet changing needs.

5.3 We also suggest the vision needs to be clearer that libraries are locally-led. One of the many strengths of libraries is that they are firmly rooted in the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve.

#### 6) What libraries can achieve

6.1 This section presents a compelling and evidence based narrative on how libraries can help councils to tackle seven priorities: reading and literacy, digital literacy, health and wellbeing, economic growth, culture and creativity and communities. How these priorities are taken forward will vary between different places. There is also a good match with the Society of Chief Librarians's Universal Offers, which are already supporting greater collaboration and consistency across services, whilst retaining local distinctiveness.

6.2 We agree that the consultation document identifies the key policy challenges for councils and that libraries have a significant contribution to make. Within those seven priorities, the consultation responses will help us to further hone the Taskforce's focus, so that it identifies two or three areas where its capacity can make the biggest impact to supporting libraries. Our consultation with councillors particularly highlighted the importance of the health, economic growth and digital agendas.

6.3 Partnerships between libraries and local businesses are developing in more places, and not just cities. This could be more strongly referenced in the 'economic growth' section. Libraries can support businesses by providing access to start-up space, advice and resources. In turn, businesses can help to make libraries more viable by supporting local growth and increasing reach. We would like the Taskforce to support further knowledge sharing, building upon the experience of the Business and Intellectual Property Centres set up by The British Library.

6.4 We also suggest that the document could say more about how libraries can help councils to tackle social care challenges, the biggest funding pressure facing the sector. For example, libraries support independence by providing a safe place for older and vulnerable people to visit and help them to learn digital skills. Libraries can also host reminiscence activities and give service users and carers access to information on issues including care services, health and volunteering opportunities.

6.5 The importance of articulating the wider value of libraries is a key theme to emerge from the LGA and ACE's joint library leadership events for councillors. Councillors welcome being

able to draw upon case studies and evidence that supports the local investment case for libraries. As councils increasingly commission services to deliver health and wellbeing outcomes, it is important that library portfolio holders and managers can draw upon a robust evidence base in commissioning conversations.

6.6 While we agree on identifying a small number of indicators to track progress against the seven priorities, they must be within the Taskforce's remit to influence, strike a balance between ambition and achievability, be useful to councils in making decisions about their service, and not add to councils' data collection burden. For example, we suggest aiming to improve England's ranking for literacy in the OECD might be beyond the admirable ambition of the Taskforce because of the key role other factors, such as schools and the home environment, play in determining literacy levels. If the Taskforce wishes to suggest indicators that are not currently measured or collected centrally, then this must be agreed by local government and taken forward in line with the shared approach to sector-led improvement agreed with government.

## 7) Governance and delivery

7.1 A set of design principles could be a very useful tool for councils who are reviewing their library service. It is important they are developed by the sector, for the sector. At the moment, the consultation document states that the principles have been drafted "to inform the superintendence of public libraries as a network." As already highlighted, we do not think central government should mandate what a library service looks like. We would welcome further discussion on the design principles and how they might be used to support the sector-led transformation of libraries.

7.2 There is a risk that focussing discussion on structures shifts the debate away from the priority issues set out in *Ambition*. Actions to further strengthen leadership, workforce development, digital presence and communications, which could make a real difference to the customer experience, do not necessarily require structural changes.

7.3 With that in mind, the 'suggested model for service delivery' in section 4.2 needs to be substantially revised. Paragraph 4.2 should not attempt to describe a model for service delivery. This will necessarily vary from place to place and risks a narrow focus on structures. There are, however, a number of shared principles which could underpin the delivery of libraries and how decisions are taken. For example, locally-led, collaboration and sharing good practice. We strongly urge the Taskforce to re-frame section 4.2 along these lines.

7.4 Section 4.2 implies that the Taskforce has reviewed how public libraries are delivered in England and makes recommendations on the way forward. While we wholeheartedly agree that local government ought to remain accountable for public libraries, it is beyond the Taskforce's remit to open up this question for debate. The assumptions that follow - in particular, the review of national structures and organisations - need to be re-considered in the light of this.

7.5 We agree that the time limited nature of the Taskforce means it needs to work with national sector bodies such as ACE, SCL and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) on how best to support the sector beyond the lifetime of the Taskforce. However, the proposed review of national structures and organisations risks diverting the Taskforce's attention away from the issues that matter to frontline libraries and will make the most difference to the sustainability of the sector. It is also out of kilter with the

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otherwise welcome collaborative approach that is taken throughout the rest of the document. We strongly urge the Taskforce to re-consider this recommendation. If DCMS feels that there is benefit in commissioning an independent review, then it ought to be taken forward by Ministers, separately from the Taskforce.

7.6 We support what section 4.2 says about the Taskforce helping libraries to exploit opportunities from collaboration and harnessing the potential of acting together, when councils want to do this. It is entirely sensible that councils consider the implications of Combined Authorities and similar arrangements on the delivery models for library services and their footprint.

7.7 Public libraries do not yet feature in many devolution deals. However, as deals continue to develop and new ones are signed, we are likely to see more opportunities for local services. For example, the devolution of economic growth and skills funding offers opportunities for libraries to strengthen their role supporting new businesses and helping people to find jobs. Greater freedoms and flexibilities in the system overall will mean that councils are able to deliver more innovative funding and support to services such as libraries. The Taskforce could play a valuable role supporting libraries to engage in devolution conversations and sharing the lessons from this.

7.8 We support Ambition highlighting the importance of evidence based planning to decision making. However, the driver of the proposed voluntary mapping exercise must be the needs of councils, not to support the “active superintendence” of councils by central government. Councils have extensive experience of complex service transformations and we need to understand from the sector if there are any particular gaps or needs in relation to libraries which the Taskforce could support. It will be up to councils to choose whether or not they develop a Public Library Delivery Plan.

7.9 It is right to recognise that the localisation of local government funding will impact upon the future resources available for libraries. We suggest this is better reflected in the ‘context’ section rather than ‘governance and delivery’.

7.10 We are pleased that Ambition emphasises the importance of developing the library workforce. As more libraries co-locate with other services, library staff will increasingly need to be multi-skilled. This must be reflected in the library workforce’s professional training and development. The role of volunteers should also be considered more fully in this section, because it is a significant workforce issue. Volunteers have a hugely important role to play, but this needs to be carefully handled to ensure they are supported, and it will not be appropriate for all libraries.

## 8) New ways of working

8.1 Councils have a strong track record of adopting new ways of working across the services they lead. There are a range of delivery models and approaches for libraries which the LGA, ACE, the Libraries Taskforce and SCL share and support through our sector-led library improvement offer. These include co-location with other services, trusts, shared services and back office functions, contracting an external provider, commissioning libraries to deliver wider outcomes and involving communities in running libraries. Each of these are considered in the consultation document.

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8.2 Underpinning the new ways of working are partnerships between libraries and other council services, such as public health. Libraries are also forging wider partnerships with the public, private, and voluntary sectors to make more services available and increase the reach of libraries. For example, Citizens Advice and the police. Co-locating and working with a range of council and other services delivers further benefits to library users and helps make the service more sustainable.

8.3 A key role for the Taskforce is to further strengthen the culture of mutual support that exists amongst councils and their partners by seeking out and sharing the most innovative practice. It may also be the case that new opportunities and ideas emerge over the lifetime of Ambition.

8.4 The LGA is already supporting councils to adopt new ways of working for a range of council services. We can help ensure that learning from other council services is shared with libraries who are considering adopting similar approaches and that the learning from libraries is fed back into the LGA's wider support offer.

8.5 We also need to recognise that the current funding climate will make it increasingly difficult for councils to invest in taking forward new delivery models. Managing complex change requires appropriate political and managerial capacity and expertise. This highlights the importance of the Taskforce and its resources focussing on supporting the sector-led change process within libraries.

8.6 It is through strong local political leadership that libraries will be well placed to influence and take advantage of wider public service reform. For example, many libraries work in partnership with public health to increase access to information and advice. Over half a million people have been supported by the clinically validated [Reading Well](#) programmes which are offered in over 90 per cent of libraries.

8.7 We agree that in the event of council support for the expectation set and/or a voluntary accreditation, they must be developed as part of the Taskforce's sector-led improvement offer. The tools would need to be light touch, recognise the need for local flexibility and sit separately from DCMS's superintending role.

8.8 We fully support the emphasis on evidence-driven decision making underpinned by quality and timely data. The Taskforce is working with the LGA to explore opportunities to improve the library data we host on [LG Inform](#), the single online repository for local government improvement data. It is important that the proposed model basic data set is developed by the sector and with the LG Inform team. There may be resource implications that need to be considered.

8.9 We caution against the use of the phrase "fewer but better" because while some councillors have chosen this course of action, and we need to recognise the funding challenges facing councils, others have taken different decisions. Ambition must embrace diversity and should avoid recommending a single way forward to local government. The Taskforce has a valuable role to play sharing the learning from different approaches which reflect local need, geography and other circumstances.

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## 9) Marketing and communications

9.1 The Taskforce brings together an impressive range of national partners who have considerable public and media profile. We suggest the Taskforce leads a focussed marketing and communications plan, based around the key messages in the final Ambition document, with two aims:

- 1) To encourage a more positive national narrative on libraries that the Taskforce and partners can use for 'golden moments' and elsewhere.

9.2 The current national narrative does not reflect the many different ways libraries are adapting and innovating to meet local people's needs and we welcome efforts to improve branding and promotion. As the consultation document suggests, a shared positive narrative would include opportunities such as National Libraries Day and the Summer Reading Challenge. It could help to challenge stereo types about libraries and reach out to a wider audience.

9.3 We would welcome clarity on the resources available to support national campaign activity and further discussion on how this might relate to local promotion. We also suggest focussing on those aspects of the library offer which nearly everyone can expect to access thanks to the Universal Offers.

- 2) To raise awareness and secure buy-in to Ambition amongst local and national decision-makers.

9.4 We suggest the immediacy of the funding challenges facing libraries means that local decision-makers should initially be the main focus for communications activity that seeks to make the case for libraries, while recognising the opportunities that exist for influencing the wider public narrative.

## 10) Action Plan

10.1 We support a proportionate action plan that sets out how the Taskforce will work with councils to take forward the themes in the Ambition document. Accountability for the duration of the Taskforce should be through the six-monthly Taskforce reports to the LGA and Ministers, who will also sign-off the action plan.

10.2 The action plan should measure Ambition's progress against a small number of outcome focussed indicators on which the Taskforce is adding value over and above what individual organisations are already doing. The action plan does not need to reflect the totality of actions being led by Taskforce members, although there may be value in another lighter touch mechanism to capture this breadth of activity.

10.3 We need to recognise the time limited nature of the Taskforce (funding has been secured until 2020/21) and give early consideration to sustainable and proportionate arrangements for maintaining a shared central and local government focus on improving libraries.

10.4 As the wider context within which councils and their partners continues to change due to public service reform, devolution and funding pressures, Ambition will need to keep pace with the opportunities and challenges that that presents for libraries.

## 11) Background

11.1 The Leadership for Libraries Taskforce was set up in March 2015 following the publication of William Sieghart's [Independent Library Report for England](#) in December 2014.

11.2 The Taskforce is jointly accountable to LGA Members and Ministers. It is chaired by a council chief executive and brings together partners including LGA, council chief executives, Arts Council England, The British Library, the BBC, the Society for Chief Librarians and Public Health England to support the sector-led transformation of public libraries.

11.3 One of Mr. Sieghart's recommendations was to publish a document that set out a shared vision between central government, local government and key partners for public libraries. Taskforce achievements are reported in [six-monthly reports](#) to the LGA and Ministers.

11.4 The LGA hosted a roundtable for councillors on 1 June to discuss the Ambition consultation document and their feedback is reflected in our submission.